

THIS IS IT

A Novel

By

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Prologue

We begin at the end - or at least, the **beginning** of the end...

Eastman Correctional Facility
Tupello
Present Day

“You.” It was beginning to sink in. He shook his head. “*You.*”

“Yes. Me.”

He sat motionless, trying to absorb the words. It felt as if this had been a long time coming. He searched his mind for a starting moment, the birth of disaster. There were distant memories – teenage power struggles and blood splashed over scorched sands. He realized now the point when everything was really set in motion and it felt like a bad joke.

From the start, the very beginning.

There was little energy left in him to fight anymore. He sat thinking it over, helpless. The answers - solving the riddle - offered no solace. He knew *how*, finally, but he didn't much care for *why*. It had all been in vain – everything done, everything achieved. He stared numbly through the thick Plexiglas separating them, the receiver held limply in the palm of his gaunt hand.

Facing the architect of his ruin, he felt little anger. His whole body was still, frozen in this instant. He'd fought for moments like this his entire life...now one was here and it was unbearable to face. A weak smile etched across his face.

This is it, he thought.

As the notion passed, melodic words filtered through the receiver, drifting hypnotically into his brain. Everything was becoming much clearer. His past lay unbridled in his mind's eye, a picture book of forgotten horror. It was enough, now. He stood up, turned and then —

I.

She be hauntin' me;

That girl in the light blue dress

Watch me slowly drown.

Chapter One

Where is the **real** beginning - when we meet? When our eyes first lock? Or is it a series of gestures, small yet significant...

Edge of Brinkmater Straights
Tupello
Three Years Ago

She stopped, unable to run any further. Drains gushed with water, rain pelting down so hard a haze gathered above the road. The mist wisped, rising upwards, fighting against the rain. She was so drenched her palms were wrinkly.

Shahina would be sick for days if she didn't get to the hotel and get dry soon. There wasn't time to be ill – too many things left to do. Trying to remember the way, Shahina figured it would be quicker if she cut through the alleyways. It wasn't an ideal situation but there wasn't any other choice. She headed down the dank alley to her right.

Pieces of rubbish swept against the walls; ripped election campaign posters hung in tattered clumps draped over the brickwork. VO E FOR M YOR LEE proclaimed strips of paper sagging off the wall. Around her, faded candy wrappers spiraled in small cyclones before falling limply to the ground.

A putrid smell hung in the air, somewhere between sulfur and sour milk. The rain didn't help – the odor was so pungent Shahina could almost taste it. It seemed like a cadaver, this whole place. She pressed her wrist against her mouth and nose, trying to block out the stench with her sleeve.

The road beneath her feet was potholed and rutted; several fat puddles had formed since the storm began. All was covered in shadows, aside from sporadic flashes of lightning. The only manmade brightness was a neon sign thirty feet from where she stood.

Shahina shivered as she neared the glowing logo, her arms pressed against her ribs. A crimson glare surrounded the sign, drowning the space around it. The neon traced the outline of a jug with beer sloshing out of it.

Maybe she'd made a mistake. Shahina looked down at her drenched clothes. Her top was see-through. Perhaps she didn't have to do this; there might be another way. Shahina shook her head. This would be quicker. She picked up her pace.

As she neared the bar, men stumbled into the alleyway, a belch of smoke escaping into the air. There were half a dozen of them, faces dappled and covered in a film of tacky sweat. The sulfur-milk smell muddled with new odors – must, ashtrays, and stale alcohol.

Shahina froze.

One noticed her; his washed out-face shifting into a sneer.

“Well now, what do we got here?”

Shahina didn't respond. He took unsteady steps towards her, still leering. The others stopped their banter and watched him.

Then they followed.

All six surrounded Shahina. The smallest one tilted his head down from her face to her top.

“You're mighty pretty for a whore,” he snorted.

The rest of them laughed as they edged forward, mouths slightly open, slightly turned up at the edges. Shahina faltered backwards into the darkness.

“Please. Leave me alone.”

“Ain't from 'round here, is you?”

The one who first approached her – the apparent leader – leaned out and grabbed a handful of her dark curly hair, yanking her head towards his face. The reek of tobacco invaded her nostrils.

“Don't worry, Kurt an' his boys know how to treat a girl right,” he jeered, unzipping his fly.

Shahina knocked his arm away and turned to run, almost slipping. She pelted a few steps through the puddles when she ran into a wall. Her legs buckled, sending her backwards. But Shahina didn't fall.

She hung in the air, suspended in looming shadow. Looking up at the thin strip of sky framed by high brick walls, her eyelashes flickered in the rain. Shahina pulled her head forward to look at what she'd run into. It wasn't a wall.

"Get behind me."

She did as he said. Shahina couldn't reach above his shoulder, so she peered from the side of his giant arm, watching the gang as their body language changed.

"Look, we don't want no trouble, y'hear? Just give her back," said Kurt, pulling his zip back up.

"Go home."

"Give us the bitch *now*. No-one's in there but one little barmaid," he gestured to the door behind him. "You're on your own, you fuckin' freak."

The others turned and hissed at him to be quiet, but it was too late.

"You're startin' to piss me off, so listen up. Go home. *Now*."

"You want that brown slut for yourself, that it? The Knight not gettin' any?" Kurt taunted, his gang unsure whether to laugh.

"I warned you."

"Look at it, the nigger an' the sand eater. Don't it break your fuckin' heart?" Kurt said, baring his teeth but moving backwards.

The alleyway turned pitch-black as the red glow from the sign suddenly disappeared. Shahina went to grab the Knight's shoulder but he was gone. There were abrupt sounds – bones shattering in the gloom, impatient screams.

"Getoffme, Getoffme you freak! Ohgodohgodohg--"

"I Goddamn warned you, didn't I? DIDN'T I?"

The echo of knuckles smashing down on flesh boomed in the shadows. There were loud thuds as men fell, whimpers as they recoiled on the ground beneath flailing fists. In the dim light Shahina could just make out one of the gang cowering under the Knight. Gargled noises filled the air, pleading voices and yet more punches, never-ending punches. Shahina couldn't take it anymore.

“Stop! Please, I beg of you. Stop.”

The Knight's large fist hung in midair. He looked down. The man was pleading, trying to speak through broken teeth and bloody saliva. No words came out, only indecipherable noises.

“You're everythin' that's wrong with America, Kurt.”

With that his knuckles came smashing down on Kurt's swollen temple, knocking him out cold. The only sounds left were beating rainfall and the Knight's breathing. It was over.

She sighed, feeling faint as lightning lit up the night sky.

A security bulb came on above the bar door. A woman stepped into the alley, keys rattling in her hand. She was wearing a short pleated skirt almost covered by her leather jacket, and blade-like high heels that forced her calves taut. Her keys stopped jangling when she looked out onto the street.

The entire gang was on the floor, writhing in the dirt. They were barely conscious, their faces bloody and their limbs limp. He stood in their midst with his fists balled hard, steam rising from his mask and shoulders. The waitress gasped.

“The Knight, holy shit!” she exclaimed, looking at the men by his feet. “Whoa! Creamed 'em real good, didn't ya?”

She moved over to one of them, giving him a short, hard kick in the crotch. He let out a raw groan.

“That's for grabbin' my ass all night.”

The waitress turned around. Shahina's hair was heavy with water and she shivered uncontrollably.

“Could you take a picture of us with my cell?” she thrust her phone towards Shahina's juddering frame.

“Don’t do photo calls,” replied the Knight dryly, his voice deep and husky.

“That’s a real shame, honey. You sure? How’s about an autograph?”

He didn’t reply. Detaching his cape, he walked over to Shahina and draped it around her. She tried to step away but fatigue made her relent. He picked her up gently, his arms beneath her knees and neck as he carried Shahina towards the end of the alleyway. She turned her head to look at his mask. It was a single plate of melded metal, dull and dirty and scratched. There were dents all over it, making it look pocked. She wondered if he was looking back at her; it was hard to tell.

“How did you find me?”

“Been trackin’ you.”

“I thought someone was following me.”

“Yeah. Pretty girl like you walkin’ around Brinkmater at night.” He shook his head. “Guess you won’t be makin’ that mistake again.”

“Hopefully not,” she smiled weakly.

“Milamor?”

She nodded before collapsing into his arm, nestling against him as tiredness finally took over.

“Hey, mister! What am I meant to do with these jerks?”

The Knight twisted around, the darkness almost engulfing him.

“Call the police, they’ll deal with it,” he shouted. “But don’t call the press. Never call the press.”

He took a few steps out onto the main street, hesitated, then turned back to the waitress.

“Oh, an’ be safe.”

The rain still hadn't stopped by the time they got to the Milamor. Standing in a side street facing the hotel's entrance, he gently shifted his arms so that her feet touched the ground. She handed him back his cape, surprised it was so heavy. She wondered why he wore something so unwieldy.

"Sure you feel okay?"

"Maybe not okay, but I feel much better."

"My pleasure. Mind tellin' me your name?"

"If you tell me yours," she said with a knowing smile.

They stood in the rain, laughing gently at her little joke.

"Shahina," she said finally.

The Knight's posture had changed; his limbs and shoulders seemed loose.

"Well, Shahina, the next time we meet I hope it'll be in better circumstances. Gotta be more careful – Tupello's a tough city, lotta desperate people."

"Are you one of them?"

"Huh?" he said, his lower lip dropping.

Shahina's eyes narrowed, her hands planted on her hips; the ordeal of not so long ago washed away.

"Down that alleyway you looked like a man who does not know when to stop."

"I got the job done."

"Is that justice? Is what you did *right*?" she pleaded to him, her voice fraught.

"More than what they had planned for you, that's damn sure." His voice was tense now, his jaw firmly set. "No-one died."

"This time. You were reckless. You beat those men to the point of death and you did it because you *wanted* to." She paused. "Or maybe you did it because you *needed* to."

He let out a wry laugh, shaking his head.

"You'd get along with my therapist."

“Hero with a therapist. Surely not a good sign?”

“You don’t know me so don’t judge me. You don’t know what I need or why I need it.”

Shahina sensed an opportunity to shift the conversation. She stepped closer towards him, offering him an inviting smile.

“Perhaps you need a savior?” she suggested.

His jaw remained set for a moment, but then he caved and smiled. He stepped closer to her, barely six inches between them.

“Perhaps,” the Knight said, delicately wiping rain from her face. She was surprised by how gentle he was, his hand carefully brushing against her skin.

“Is it not a really bad cliché to hit on me now?”

“I guess,” he laughed as his hand lingered on her face a while longer. “You shoulda worn a shaylah tonight, it woulda helped with the rain.”

Shahina’s smile dropped.

“I do not follow hijab – I am not religious. How do you know Islamic tradition?”

There was a flash of light from across the street. A man in an ill-fitting coat crouched slightly, snapping shots with a large lens camera. The Knight sighed, his hand falling sharply from her face. The flicker of the camera reflected in his mask.

“Paparazzi,” he said resignedly. “Barmaid didn’t listen. They’ll be all over Tupello by now, lookin’ for me. Damn.”

She turned to look across the road. The photographer was fiddling with his camera, twisting the lens to get the right focus.

“I wonder if you will be the hero or the villain this time,” she said, turning to the Knight.

He was gone. She looked for him through the gloom, but there was nothing. The photographer appeared just as mystified; he looked at her suspiciously before jumping into his car and driving off. She crossed over to the Milamor, rain still falling. That shaylah comment had thrown her. Regardless of what tomorrow's papers said, she knew now the reality was more complicated. Under cover of the hotel entrance, she shook the rain out of her pitch-black hair. Walking into the lobby, a discarded newspaper caught her attention.

NEW MENACE IN TOWN, the headline announced in big black letters.

Criminal mastermind on the rampage. People calling him the Reaper.

Tupello was starting to get interesting.

Chapter Two

Time passes always, pushing all that happens into the past. Still the past remains constant - in our minds, in our **blood**...

Mason Residence
Tupello
1991

Marshall sat cross-legged eating his breakfast in the living room as he watched the news. The television was small; Marshall always perched two feet from it, a round worn patch on the frayed carpet marking out his favorite spot. He liked catching the news before school – if he'd had a bad dream the night before, the news was like a sign telling him the nightmares had gone away.

The current item involved the impact of the Gulf War on the global economy. Good guys and bad guys and money. Marshall heard the faint sound of chopping behind him; he started eating his cereal quicker. His mom walked over holding a plate.

“Here you go,” she said, sliding banana slices into the cereal bowl.

“Mom, do I have to? I’m sick o’ all this fruit,” he replied.

“D’you like being short?”

“No,” Marshall said sulkily.

“Well, bit o’ fruit in yo’ cereal is gonna make you big an’ strong.”

He looked at the banana slices, using his spoon to toy with them.

“But do I have to have it *every* day?”

His mom huffed impatiently.

“You know that Michael Jordan?”

Marshall’s eyes lit up.

“Sure I know him, he’s the best! He’s taller than a skyscraper,” he beamed. “He can jump so high, he could touch the moon.”

“For real?” Mom said, stifling a laugh.

“No joke. He’s a real hero.”

“Course he is, he’s black.”

They both sat laughing as Marshall ate his cereal and banana pieces. On the TV screen a message flashed: there was a police chase going on in Tupello, in the middle of Brinkmater Straights. Suspected armed robbery.

“Bad people on the rise,” Mom said.

“What d’you mean?”

“More an’ more o’ them, day by day. Brinkmater’s a good neighborhood, or least it used to be. Now look what kinda people runnin’ round there,” she nodded at the car speeding across the screen. “This keeps up, we’re gonna need a guard dog.”

“I’ll take care o’ you, Mom.”

“I know you will, honey,” she stroked his tight curls. “But if yo’ gonna be lookin’ after me, we gotta work on yo’ sense of danger. Can’t have no old women sneakin’ up on you.”

“Huh?”

He turned around, then jumped. Standing behind them was Grandma, taking curlers out of her ash-white hair. She hadn’t made a noise.

“How’d you know she was there?” Marshall asked his Mom.

“Years o’ practice, boy. Years o’ practice,” she said.

“Michael Jordan ain’t the only one who got skills,” Grandma said.

“You mean the ability to nap any time o’ the day?”

“Careful there, Cynthia. Don’t be thinkin’ I won’t take yo’ pants down and spank yo’ ass,” Grandma said in a deadpan voice before cackling. “Now, Marshall. What’s this about heroes?”

Marshall opened his mouth to respond, but stopped when he saw the look on Grandma's face.

“Everybody’s got weakness, even the best o’ us. We all human.” Her lips curled into a grin as she lowered her voice, her face lightening. “D’you wanna hear a story?”

“Yeah!” Marshall beamed. Grandma had recently finished a community college course on mythology; anytime she learned something good she rushed back to tell him. He’d never heard tales like these before, they only got taught boring stuff at school. About dead people who no one cared about who weren’t even that interesting.

“Ever heard o’ Achilles?”

“No, I haven’t. Name sounds funny.”

“Boy, yo’ butt would be sliced in two if you’d said that to his face.”

Mom and Marshall looked up at Grandma. As his jaw dropped, Mom’s arms raised up so that her hands were planted onto her hips.

“You sure this is the right kind o’-”

“Don’t be stupid, Cynthia. He needs to hear this. It’s important for him to learn that heroes make mistakes too, that they ain’t perfect an’ they sure as hell ain’t always right.”

“Jeez, you gotta push it, ain’t you? He’s only ten, for Chrissakes. Let him have his heroes. God knows he needs a good, strong man to look up to. Yo’ always tryin’ to make him grow up so quick, I’m sick an’ tired of it.”

Grandma opened her mouth to reply but said nothing. Marshall got up, ran over and thumped his Mom in the leg.

“Ow, hey! Why’d you do that? You know yo’ not supposed to hit people?”

“You were mean, an’ I WANTED to hear about Achilles.”

“It’s okay, boy. Yo’ Momma’s right, shouldn’t be goin’ an’ tellin’ you tales like that. Michael Jordan’s a good man to look up to.” Grandma didn’t look him in the face as she spoke.

Marshall’s Mom rubbed her leg, shaking her head at them.

“Honestly, you two’re so much trouble together. If I wasn’t around, you’d be gettin’ up to no good. What am I gonna do with the pair o’ you?”

“Send ‘em both to boot camp, that’ll sort ‘em out.”

They heard Grandpa coming down the stairs long before he reached the bottom step. His knees cracked so much they sounded like bags of corn starting to pop. He shuffled over and kissed Grandma gently on the cheek.

“Mornin’, Grandpa,” said Marshall.

“Shame you missed the Gulf War, son. Maybe there’ll be another war soon. Hope so. That’d sort you out real good.” He measured his hand against Marshall’s head and frowned. “You gotta grow a bit, though.”

“Yo’ funny, Gramps,” Marshall said, giving his Grandpa a kiss.

“You sissy, boy? Masons are real men, we shake hands like real men. Or even better, gimme a salute.”

Grandpa stood tall, hand against brow as he waited for Marshall to follow suit.

“Would you cut it out, it’s not even eight o’ clock yet!” Mom demanded.

“Fine. Long as you know you spoil this kid rotten. How’s he gonna know discipline? Bad enough his daddy’s runnin’ off god-knows-where – good-for-nothin’-punk – without you goin’ out an’ buyin’ him new sneakers whenever he-”

“DAD!”

“Okay, Cynthia. Sorry. Jus’ makin’ my point is all.”

Marshall looked at his mom, unable to work out why she was so angry with Grandpa. He was grumpy, of course, but that was just how he was. Marshall and his sister Maddy sometimes called him Grump-pa behind his back.

“Okay, need to get Madeleine movin’ if we’re gonna get you two to school on time. Can you take out the trash for me?” she asked Grandma, who nodded. “An’ Dad, jus’ sit there an’ watch TV with Marshall, okay? No talk about you-know-what, spoil the surprise.”

“Hell, I’m sat down now. No way I’m gettin’ up for a good ten minutes anyways.”

Mom rushed up the stairs shouting for Madeleine while Grandma went out the front door. Marshall finished his breakfast, taking his bowl and spoon to the sink.

“What was that I heard you sayin’ about Michael Jordan, boy?”

“Nothin’ much, jus’ sayin’ how great he is.”

“I think this year could be their year, son. After what the Pistons done to them, they’re gonna be mighty fired up. An’ that Scotty Pippen, he’s some player.”

“Yeah, he’s okay. But he ain’t no Jordan.”

Grandpa smiled.

“Careful, son. Heroes, villains – world ain’t black an’ white like that. All muddled up, shades o’ gray. He’s good but he ain’t perfect.”

They sat watching the TV in silence for a while, Marshall fidgeting on the spot. He turned to Grandpa.

“Gramps, you said my dad was runnin’ around *God-knows-where*,” Marshall mimed his grandfather's voice. “So...he’s an athlete?”

“First, don’t blaspheme.”

“But you sa-”

Grandpa sighed in annoyance.

“I know it’s what *I* said, don’t mean *you* should. Yo’ better than that. An’ what I said about yo’ dad...wasn’t meant to be taken literally.”

Marshall frowned, scratching his temple.

“What does...lit-er-all-y mean?”

“It means when you say exactly what you mean. Like you an’ Jordan – you call him a god. I know you don’t mean that he really is a god, so I know that yo’-”

“-not sayin’ it literally. Got it, Grandpa.”

Marshall looked at him, nervous and expectant. Grandpa rubbed his brow, twisting slightly away from the boy.

“I’m sorry, son. I got no clue where yo’ dad is. He jus’ upped an’ left one day.”

Marshall turned back to the television for a moment, pondering something.

“Was it somethin’ I did?” he asked, still not facing Grandpa.

“Course not, son. Marshall, turn around.” He rested his hands on Marshall’s shoulders. “It had nothin’ to do with you. Yo’ dad...he wasn’t a good man.” He frowned, shaking his head slightly. “A coward. An’ bein’ a coward is the worst thing a man can be. Jordan ain’t a coward. I ain’t a coward. And you – definitely, definitely – yo’ not a coward. Us Masons ain’t cowards, are we?”

He ruffled his hand over Marshall’s Afro hair, which bounced back into place.

“No way are we cowards, Grandpa.”

“Good man,” he smiled, settling back down onto the well-worn sofa. Mom came running down the stairs, picking up her coat and heading for the door.

“Cynthia, where you goin’?”

“I-Maddy has a thing, a...I jus’ need to pop out to the store.”

“What? What’s up with Maddy?”

“She jus’ needs me to get her somethin’.” Mom’s eyebrows rose with every word.

“Huh? What’s a twelve year old girl need at this time in the...*oh*,” Grandpa said, not looking his daughter in the face.

“I’ll be back soon,” Mom said.

“You need a lift?”

“It’s jus’ round the corner, it’s fine. You look after Marshall.”

“Sure thing.”

Grandpa sat there watching the news, staring so intently that he seemed to be transfixed. Marshall looked at the screen, then back at Grandpa. He never watches the news, Marshall thought.

“Gramps?”

“Yes, son?” said Grandpa, not taking his gaze away from the TV.

“What does Maddy need at this time in the mornin’?”

“What?”

“The thing! What just went on!” he yelled impatiently, his eyes wide.

“Oh snap. Okay, Marshall. Bear with me here. I ain’t never done this before, never intended to, an’ hope damn well that this here is the last time I ever have to.”

“Do what?”

He looked at his grandson gravely, his hands twitching in his lap.

“Explain the ways o’ women to you.”

“Oh.”

“Women are tricky, you see,” he said in a voice filled with mystery, his arms gesticulating to get across some unspoken point. “Us men, we jus’ don’t really got the brains to work them out. But here it is: yo’ sister is going through a...change. It’s what every girl goes through before they turn into a young woman. Even so, it can be real upsettin’, so yo’ sister might be a little on edge right now.”

Marshall let out a huff.

“Great, like she ain’t bad enough already.”

“Now Marshall, you gotta go easy on Maddy. We all change as we grow up, you will too.”

“I thought you said it was jus’ -”

“Women, yes, but that’s jus’ *this* change. Yo’ gonna go through different ones to Maddy.”

“So what’s gonna happen to her?” He smiled. “Is she gonna get fat an’ covered in zits?”

“No,” Grandpa replied, chuckling at Marshall’s bluntness. “Well, maybe. But I think that’s got more to do with all o’ those chips she eats rather than anythin’ she’s goin’ through right now.”

“So...what is it, then?”

Grandpa paused, pondering how to answer. Marshall sat patiently, looking up to him for a response. Finally, Grandpa cleared his throat to speak.

“Well, it’s not really somethin’ you can see, like zits or a few extra pounds.”

“Don’t sound too bad.”

The front door opened as Mom and Grandma came rushing in.

“Thank God for that. Cynthia-”

“Not now, Dad. I’m a little busy.”

“I know, jus’ ... Marshall wants to know.”

“Know what?”

“He wants to...you know...*know*.” Panic etched across his face.

Cynthia stared blankly at him.

“Have you taken yo’ medication?”

“Don’t be stupid, Cynthia! He wants to know what’s goin’ on with Maddy!”

“What’s goin’ on with-” she stopped, looking down at the grocery bag. “Ohhh, right. Okay Marshall, I can’t tell you now...how about after school, that okay?”

“S’pose,” he said morosely. He was always left out of things, it wasn’t fair.

“Great,” his mom said, not paying attention to his reaction. “I’ll be ten minutes, which will make it – shoot! Twenty past eight. We’re gonna have to go like hell to get you kids to school on time.”

Mom and Grandma hurried upstairs, leaving Marshall and Grandpa to watch the TV. They sat there for a while as the news skipped from financial headlines to national weather forecasts. Then there was a story about a baseball mascot who was arrested for a breach of the peace.

“Marshall, ain’t it yo’ sports day next week?”

“Yeah, next Wednesday,” he replied in low tones.

His grandfather sat waiting for more; after a while, it was clear Marshall had finished elaborating.

“Lookin’ forward to it?”

“I guess.”

Grandpa turned to him, surprised.

“Only guess? I thought you loved sports.”

The boy let out a huff, tapping his legs in an agitated way. Grandpa was confused.

“I do, it’s jus’...nothin’.”

“What? What is it?”

“There’s this one race, everyone does it, but I...I can’t compete.”

Grandpa's nostrils flared.

“Why not, boy? What they stoppin’ you from doin’?”

“The father-son relay.”

It took a moment for the indignation on Grandpa's face to shift as realization dawned.

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Jus’ thought it’d be cool, that’s all.” He didn’t look at his grandfather.

“Well, let’s do it.”

“What?” Marshall said, glancing up at Grandpa.

“Let’s do it, you an’ me. Yo’ dad was no good even when he was around, wouldn’t have won no races his whole life on his own or with yo’ help. I’ll run with you.”

“But Gramps, what about yo’ knees?”

“What about them? Listen, I can get an injection from the doctor - it’ll help me for the race.”

“What kind o’ injection?”

“Don’t you worry about that, it’ll make me better is all. You run like the wind, give me a head start, an’ I’ll try my damndest not to come last, okay?”

“It don’t matter if we-”

“Okay?”

Marshall looked at Grandpa’s serious expression and decided not to protest any further.

“Okay, Gramps. Thanks.”

“Us Masons stick together. Real men make themselves counted. Don’t you ever forget that.”

“I won’t.”

Mom, Grandma and Madeleine came down the stairs. Grandpa stared at his wife as she flurried around, checking bags and picking up coats. Marshall looked over to his older sister. It looked like she had been crying.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Course she is, Marshall. You ready for school?” Mom demanded.

“Jus’ gotta go get my-”

“Goddammit, Marshall Mason! Go get it, now! We’re running out o’ time. Grandma, Maddy, go get in the car.”

The girl and her grandmother headed out the door.

“I’ll go get the engine started,” said Grandpa.

“Thanks, Dad.”

Marshall leaped up off the sofa, pushing against Grandpa’s knee as he did so. The old man winced, clutching his leg. Marshall didn’t notice; he was already up the stairs before Grandpa let out a loud gasp, sucking air through his teeth.

Four members of the family sat in the car, Mom twitching in the passenger seat next to Grandpa.

“Come on Marshall, it’s eight thirty-five!”

“I dropped my lunch box an’ all my lunch fell out,” he said, getting into the car.

“Marshall, you forgot to shut the damn front door! Go quickly!”

“Sorry, Mom.”

Marshall jumped out of the car and ran, not looking where he was going and knocking straight into the mailman. Letters and a lunch box went flying in the air as Marshall crashed to the ground.

“Watch it, son - you could’ve hurt yourself. You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry, mister.”

“That’s okay, just help me pick up these letters.”

“I-I...” He looked from the man to the car, unsure what to do.

The car horn shrieked abruptly. Mom wound the window down in violent, jerky motions.

“Marshall, for God’s sakes hurry up! Sir, I’m really sorry but we’re in a rush.”

“That’s okay Ma’am, I understand. Jus’ make sure your son is more careful. He’ll get hurt.”

“Oh, he’s gonna be mighty careful in future.”

Marshall apologized to the mailman once more before closing the front door. He jumped into the back of the car, sitting next to his big sister.

“Doofus,” she said.

Marshall replied by pulling his ears so they stuck out, and making himself cross-eyed. Then he stuck his tongue out.

“Ugh. Grandma, can I switch with you?” Maddy said, turning to her left side.

“Uh-uh, I can’t be without my window seat. Unless yo’ Mom wanna get out that front seat to switch with me?” she asked hopefully. Grandpa looked into the rear-view mirror and smiled at her.

“No,” Mom said shortly. “Now cut it out in the back.”

They were at a set of lights. Grandpa let out a grunt as the car finally came to a stop, well over the white line. Mom turned to face him, looking down at his leg and then back at his expression.

“Dad, you okay?”

“I’m fine, jus’ a little stiff – you know what it’s like in the mornin’.”

“Dad, I’ve been sayin’ for months now. You gotta get it sorted. Go speak to Dr. Saltzmann about surgery. You can’t keep havin’ those injections.”

“Nothin’ wrong with Corleone.”

“Damn it Dad, Cortisone! Cortisone, not Corleone. Promise me you’ll book a consultation soon as you can.”

“I’ll do it when I’m good an’ ready, Cynthia.”

She checked her watch before rattling her nails impatiently on the dashboard. The children started arguing in the back.

“Dad, can you put yo’ foot down a bit? The kids are gonna be late,” she said.

“Sure I can,” he said, frowning as he applied more pressure to the pedal.

“What’s the matter with you two?” she said, turning around.

“Mom, Maddy hasn’t got her seat belt on,” Marshall complained.

“So what, you little brat?” his sister replied.

“Maddy, don’t talk to yo’ brother like that!”

“Why do I gotta have my belt on if she don’t?”

Mom looked over at Grandma before turning back to Marshall.

“Because I say so, okay?”

“But that’s not fair, I-”

“Just be Goddamn quiet, Marshall! NOW!”

Everyone in the car was silent as it sped along, bumping over manholes. Cynthia maintained her stare for a moment before turning back. Marshall immediately grabbed Maddy's belt and tried to fasten it; she started screaming while they wrestled for control.

"Marshall, stop right this second!" Mom demanded.

"You should listen to yo' Mom now," Grandma added.

"Mom, make him stop, it hurts," Maddy pleaded.

Marshall continued tussling with his sister, furiously trying to put her belt on. His mom took her own seat belt off to reach over and slap Marshall's hand hard; he let go of the belt instantly.

"Fine," he snarled, "but I'm not gonna wear mine if she don't gotta wear hers."

Marshall's mom put her head in her hands and began to cry in frustration. Grandpa slammed his palm against the steering wheel.

"Marshall, boy. I'm warnin' you. Don't you *dare* take that belt off," he said gravely, looking into his grandson's eyes through the rear view mirror.

Marshall's hand, hovering threateningly over the release button, fell forward onto his lap. His grandfather held his gaze.

"Now we're gonna be quiet for the rest o' the-"

"DAD - LOOK OUT!" Cynthia screamed.

Grandpa turned to look ahead; they were speeding toward the red light at a cross section. Grimacing, he slammed his foot on the brake. They all bucked forward, Mom's face hitting the dashboard hard.

Maddy smashed through the windshield.

She landed with a leaden thump on the road thirty feet ahead of them, her neck and legs resting at strange angles. The car stopped sharply twenty feet beyond the red light, in the middle of the section.

"Ohmygodohmygod OH MY GOD! MADDY!" Mom screamed, blood pouring from her face.

Just as she unbuckled her belt to get out and help Madeleine, a car from the oncoming traffic smashed into her door. She was flung over to Grandpa's side as the two cars went into a spin, her head cracking against the window. Other cars swerved, trying to dodge the mangled wreckage that sat in the middle of the cross section. Marshall thought that maybe he saw one drive right over Maddy, just before everything shattered and drowned in black.

Marshall woke up with the smell of burnt tires filling his nostrils.

He was still in the car.

He turned and looked to his left; Maddy wasn't there but Grandma was. She sat there covered in blood, crying. Her left hand gripped the seat in front. "Grandma? You okay? What happened?"

Grandma jumped when he spoke. She smiled at him, although her eyes were full of tears.

"Oh, thank almighty god! Marshall, yo' alive! You okay?"

"Yeah," he replied. He felt okay, if a little sick in his stomach. "What happened?"

Her eyes dropped. Sirens wailed in the distance, several overlapping and coming from different directions. She stared into his eyes with an implacable determination.

"Marshall, don't look. Whatever you do, don't look."

"Look at what?"

"Keep lookin' at me. I'm beggin' you, son. Do not look."

Marshall maintained eye contact, unsure what she meant. Look at what, he thought again. In his peripheral vision, he was becoming aware of things – unnatural shapes and colors. Vivid crimson and cherry-pink splashed on mottled gray. He unbuckled his seat belt, triggering a thought. Things came back to him, things that happened not so long ago. Then he felt the urge, the urge for freedom. To see what should not be seen.

He looked.

Chapter Three

Can we truly make a difference? Or is any effort a temporary deviation, quickly forgotten...

Business District
Tupello
Three Years Ago

Birds sang as day began to break over the deserted city. He stood above it all, above even the morning sun. Watching. This was his favorite building – the J.J. Greenburg. It was a magnificent glimmering bastion in the heart of the business district, looming over the entire city.

There had been rumors the current CEO of the Greenburg Empire – Alan Greenburg, the late J.J.'s son – was considering relocating to Brinkmater. He thought it would be a shame; this building held such power, such authority. Nothing could escape his eyes from up here.

He breathed in as first light burst across the metropolis' jagged skyline. He felt at one with the city, alive with it. It was rare for him to savor such moments in daylight, and he was enjoying it.

A new sound caught his attention. It was mechanical, man-made, a noise out of keeping with the calm. When he started all this, it'd initially been difficult making out the direction of noises in the business district. Sound bounced and fractured unpredictably around the skyscrapers. He'd improved considerably since those earlier missions, but he still wasn't perfect. He kept his thoughts clear and his vision unfocused. His gaze fell on the mirrored glass that lined the main avenue.

He noticed a faint flash: reflected sunlight flickering off a moving object. Turning his head, he connected the sound with the object. It was a moped, probably delivering the day's newspapers. It looked like a smudge on the tarmac. Watching the tiny dot noisily making its way across town, he smiled. This is how legends are made, he thought.

Then he jumped.

Art Mausman was too sleepy to notice the bungee rope flapping above. By the time he looked up all he saw was the large cape, the metallic mask, the unnaturally fast descent.

His moped wobbled as he forgot to drive; regaining his senses, he pulled sharp on the brakes. The moped fought against the tarmac before skidding to a halt, directly facing the sidewalk. A stack of newspapers sprung loose and fell around two large boots. Art blinked. Then he rubbed his eyes.

"Hey, you're, you're..."

"That's right, kid."

"Is it really you?"

"Yeah, it's me."

Art looked up behind the Knight, craning his neck higher and higher. The J.J. Greenburg stretched up far into the sky. His head lowered down to the man in front of him, his mouth open. His dental braces shone in the morning light.

"Y-you came from..." Art's finger jabbed tentatively up.

"Yeah, I did."

"You can *do* that? You can *fly*?"

He pondered how to answer this. Truth or legend. Was it lying? He decided it didn't matter. Right or wrong, real or not, it was necessary. He needed an edge, something to spread fear throughout Brinkmater.

“I can do *anythin*’.”

“So you’re like – Superman, right?”

“Do I look white to you?”

For a second he panicked; he’d said the wrong thing. Bringing up race in front of an adoring fan wasn’t the best idea – especially if that fan was white.

“Not that there’s anythin’ wrong with bein’ white,” he added awkwardly.

Art smiled, seemingly oblivious to the slip up. The Knight leant down by his foot, gracefully sweeping up a newspaper and standing upright in one effortless motion.

“Can I take one of these?”

“Sure! Free of charge, for you.”

“It’s okay, I don’t mind payin’. You always ought to pay for things you take.”

“Could...could you autograph one for me?”

“Sorry,” he said, shaking his head. “Handwritin’ can be traced.”

“Oh, okay. I get it.” Art paused. “Wait!”

He fumbled around in his pants pocket, retrieving his cell phone. A hopeful smile spread across his face.

“You could...I mean, we could – something for YouTube? So my friends can see?”

“Hmm.” He was uncertain.

“Come on, just a ten second one. You can say your line.”

“Huh?”

“You know – your line! The one you always say before you disappear...”

“Oh, right. The line,” he paused. “Okay. But only ten seconds, no more.”

Art leapt off his moped, letting it crash to the ground. He stood next to the Knight, holding the cell phone out in front of them. He was working out how to fit both of them into the video, such was the height difference. Art finally resorted to standing on the tips of his toes. The Knight still loomed a whole foot over him. The teenager swept his greasy hair away from his face and pressed a button.

“Hey y’all, this is Art Mausman here,” he announced with bravado, “recording a message with Tupello’s own superhero! Here he is, the man, the legend – the Knight. So, it’s goodbye from me, and...”

“Goodbye from me,” he said.

There was a pause. Art stared at him expectantly, his spare hand motioning. The Knight nodded.

“Oh, an’ be safe.”

Art pressed another button to stop recording. Now more relaxed, he grinned as he planted a friendly jab on the Knight’s arm. Art creased up, blowing on his knuckles frantically. The Knight chuckled, his smile half-hidden behind the mask. Art cradled his hand, rubbing it.

“Jeez, you made of steel or something?”

“Unfortunately, no. That’s goin’ to the gym – an’ Kevlar.”

“Well, it’s a whole lotta pain from where I’m standing.”

The Knight laughed again, patting Art on the shoulder. Opening a compartment on his belt, he flicked some coins onto the remaining pile. He began to walk away, newspaper in hand.

“Keep the change,” he said, before stopping and turning back around. “Art – you be safe, okay?”

“Sure thing, man. Sure thing.”

He slipped into a narrow gap between two skyscrapers, away from the street. The Knight was feeling pleased with his work. Five crimes prevented last night, four more criminals caught fleeing.

It was actually a small number, but he knew what the real impact of the Knight was all about: fear. Crime rates continued to plummet – thirty per cent since the media picked up on him. He hoped the stunt with Art would help drive that up. Criminals didn't like uncertainty, the unknown. He had to make them think he was superhuman. It didn't matter if it was true or not; the type he was fighting always preyed on the weak, the defenseless. He had to be the opposite of that, a model of absolute strength. Besides, maybe they wouldn't run if they thought he could fly.

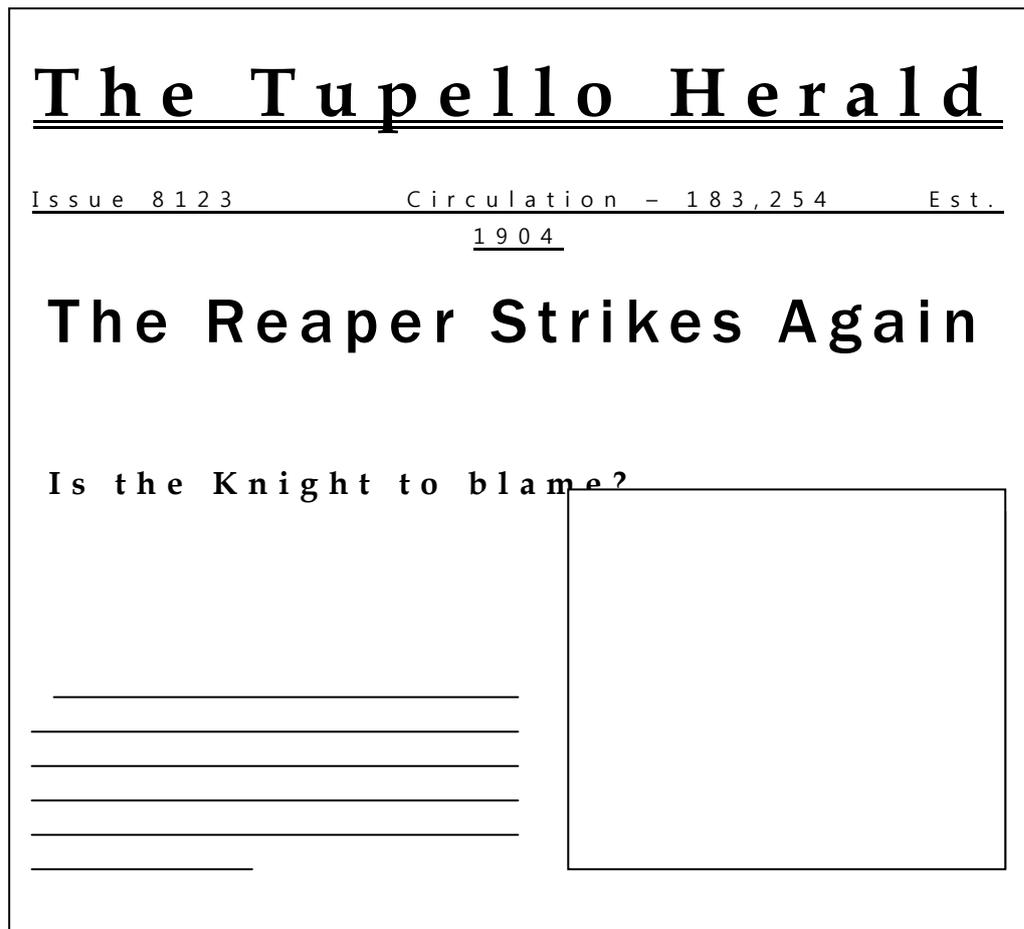
He stepped behind a large air conditioning unit and put his hand round the back, recovering the bag containing his clothes. This was one of his strategic drop-off spots; there were a number all over the city. The bags contained specific clothing – he didn't want to risk looking like a street punk in this buttoned up district, same way he didn't want to be wearing a suit in the Brinkmater slums. He unzipped the bag and got changed.

After straightening his mauve tie tight against the collar, he slung the bag over his shoulder and walked out of the constricted alley into the morning light. People were around now; businessmen and women making their way to work. The only thing that made him stand out was a large duffel bag. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to have an office job, doing something he didn't believe in. Feeling good about himself, he just needed to fix the fatigue clinging to his shoulders. It was threatening to climb up his neck and take a hold of his mind as he gazed distractedly at the blank faces passing by. I need a strong coffee, he thought.

After queuing for ten minutes, he got his drink. The seating area of the café was empty; every customer in front of him ordered 'to go'. He felt sorry for them, imagining a life with so little time a coffee couldn't be enjoyed at leisure. He said a mumbled thank you to the flustered waitress before stepping away from the counter.

Deciding to go upstairs and read the paper away from the line of increasingly impatient suits, he made his way up the wrought iron staircase. It was almost nine. As he turned the spiral, he shook his head wryly, watching the agitation in the queue increase with each passing second. There wasn't anyone upstairs.

Sat next to the large window overlooking the skyscrapers, he took a gulp of coffee; his eyes widened as the drink took instant effect. Unfolding the paper, he frowned.



“GODDAMMIT!”

He flung the paper at a window, scraping his chair against the varnished wooden floor. The dismembered tabloid fluttered to the ground. Pounding the table, he stood up. His legs felt shaky and light as if they were too full of energy.

That thirty per cent decrease seemed small to him now. In fact, it seemed like nothing, nothing at all. He had to do more, do better. He'd been fighting crime piecemeal. It was time to cripple it, cut off its head.

Time to find the Reaper, he thought.

Chapter Four

Ideals are rarely founded on thin air; inspiration
requires a hero's touch...

Mason Residence
Tupello
1994

“Marshall Mason, drag yo’ butt away from that TV right now! You hear me?”

“Jus’ a second, Grandma,” he replied, trailing off as the action on-screen sucked his attention back in.

“Fine, I’ll jus’ put the post in the bin - you don’t want it, you don’t need it.”

It took a while for the threat to register with Marshall. As soon as it did he scrambled desperately to his feet, waving a pleading hand at his grandmother.

“I’m here, I’m here! Hold on a second.”

She passed him a brown paper package fastened with purple string. As he took it she held on, forcing him to tug harder. Her left eyebrow raised, she finally allowed him the parcel. A loud tutting noise escaped her lips.

“You can read it once I’m done.”

“You gettin’ smart with me, boy?”

“Smart? Me?”

“Watch it. Don’t be thinkin’ I won’t take yo’ pants down an’ spank that sorry behind,” Grandma cackled.

He had to fight the urge to tear the brown paper apart. Even though the package would be devalued the second he opened it, he still treated it with care. Deserves respect, Marshall thought to himself as he pinched his fingers together to undo the small knot in the string. It wasn’t loosening, no matter how gently he tried to coax it. His forehead was starting to get hot when he felt a tap on his shoulder. Something cold and metallic rapped against his skin.

“Now who’s impatient?” Grandma said, scissors in hand.

“Thanks,” he said, turning back to the package. “You know, I woulda gotten it eventually.”

“Sssshhhh,” she said, shaking her head. “Too many young folk decidin’ to go struggle all by themselves. Why? What for? Got somethin’ they need to prove? Yo’ not gonna be one of them folk, Marshall – not while I’m around. We gonna stick together, you an’ me.”

He looked at her with gratitude as he cut the purple string. The brown paper slipped away, falling to the ground. Marshall stood staring at the front cover. It’s so shiny, he thought. Large yellow letters glistened, reflecting onto his forearms.

“What you got there?”

“New Icon comic. This one’s a special one – see how the front cover’s laminated?” he beamed.

“Uh-huh,” she said, squinting at the book through her spectacles.

“This’s a crossover, apparently there’s gonna be a huge fight between Icon an’ Superman.”

Grandma frowned.

“Superman’ll kick his big black butt, damn fool.”

“No he won’t. Not against Icon.”

“But that’s *Superman* yo’ talkin’ about, Marshall. No one can beat Superman, uh-uh. Everybody knows that.”

“But Icon is jus’ as good as him. They’re pretty much equal: same strength, same speed, both can fly – they’re neck an’ neck.”

Grandma looked intensely into his eyes. She held his left shoulder firmly.

“Then, they ain’t neck an’ neck, son. Icon’s gonna win.”

“What? I jus’ said they were-”

Grandma took the comic book and placed it on the worktop. She put her other hand on Marshall’s right shoulder, again looking him gravely in the eyes.

“Boy, what have I told you a million times before?”

Marshall huffed with embarrassment, looking around the room. He tried to shrug his shoulders but they were clamped under Grandma’s vice-like grip.

“*What* did I say?”

“You said,” he hesitated. “You said black man’s still gotta fight on his hands. That he’s gotta believe in himself more than others, ‘cause no-one’s gonna believe in him unless he makes them believe.”

“Exactly. Unless he makes them believe. *Makes* them. That’s what I said, an’ it’s true. You think Superman’s goin’ into this fight thinkin’ Icon’s same as him?”

“I dunno.”

“Marshall.”

“I guess not.”

“Course he ain’t. You gotta know that you’re gonna win, boy. Gotta believe, from the bottom of yo’ soul, that yo’ right. That yo’ the best, Marshall. ‘Cause everyone else is gonna go into a fight figurin’ yo’ gonna lose. We’re stronger than that, ain’t we?”

He looked up at her, into her soulful eyes. Something was there – beyond the moment, deeper. Shadows of memories repressed, nightmares hiding in the darkness. This was their bond, their link. The hurt ran through, stronger than either of them. It was born out of an almost ancient sense of suffering. Their pain was shared but magnified through united burden. There weren’t words, only feelings lurking under the surface.

Grandma didn’t blink, didn’t cry. Her eyes held the sadness up in front of him: bare, raw. The weight of his loss came flooding back, making him feel weak and guilty. Such moments were becoming rarer now years had passed. The past was shrouded and distant and he didn’t know whether that was such a good thing. He looked at her, lost. All he could do was nod tamely.

“Well if it ain’t Shorty! Dickweed, why you still in my way?”

“I didn’t see wh-”

He saw the punch coming. Noticed the movement start around the hip, travelling up towards the shoulder. Marshall had more than enough awareness and time to do something about it, to avoid it completely. All he did was flex his back outward so that Dwayne Bouvier’s fist didn’t connect properly with his midriff.

Dwayne wasn't stupid; he knew Marshall was play-acting the pain. He grabbed onto Marshall's collar for leverage, swinging his arm as hard and as far as he could into Marshall's gut.

Tears welled up in Marshall's eyes as he doubled over in agony. He didn't have long to focus on the burning sensation; Dwayne launched another punch upwards into Marshall's jaw. The force flung his head backwards, making him slide across the shiny linoleum floor of the corridor. Marshall lay completely still. Tiny dots laced his vision, an iron film covering his teeth.

He was hurt, he knew he had to be...but Marshall couldn't feel anything. He was numb to it. The only thing he felt was rage rushing up inside him, blind fury pulsing towards his fists. He lay looking at the ceiling, counting to ten. Let it go, he thought. Let it go, he said quietly to himself.

"Look at the sissy on his back! Like a damn cockroach," taunted Dwayne, his friends laughing with contempt.

Marshall lifted his head, resting on one elbow as he stared at them intently. He'd stopped counting.

"What's a matter, Shorty? You gonna sissy out like Jordan?"

Marshall flipped up onto his feet, using little movement doing so. He walked towards them, eyes focused on Dwayne.

"Jordan'll be back. An' when he is, he's gonna kick O' Neal's butt."

"Ha! You think His Airness still got the drop on the Shaq? He's yesterday's news. The past."

"Yo' wrong. Jordan went up against the best an' they were scared o' him. Jordan Rules, remember."

"So he went up against them. *Went* up against them. History. A distant memory. Now he's playin' Mickey Mouse baseball. What a loser."

"Look who's talkin'," Marshall said, turning and walking away.

He walked slowly, deliberately, trying to stop his fists from shaking. Marshall walked beyond the spot where he just lay splayed across the floor and then stopped. Something was yet to pass, he knew it. It wasn't over.

"You gonna go home an' cry to yo' momma?"

He knew it wasn't intentional; as he turned around the look on Dwayne's face said as much. The idiot merely forgot what had happened and blurted it out without thinking. But it was too late.

Marshall was right by them in an instant, swinging his bag at the light switches. Some of the lights went out, others left flickering.

"Where'd he g-phngg!"

In the flittering darkness, sounds echoed down the walls. Stifled smacking noises reverberated around the lockers. The sound of fists slapping into flesh. There were pleading voices, things connecting heavily with locker doors, scuffles against squeaky linoleum. Fractured noises continued to bounce down the hallway until there was only heavy breathing and one voice – muttering, pleading. Trying to force words through busted lips.

"Please, Marshall. Please?"

"Say it," Marshall barked, his voice dry and husky. He gripped Dwayne's collar tightly, his other fist raised in the air ready to strike.

"Come on, for th-"

"*Say it.*"

"Sorry. Okay? I'm sorry. Jus' leave me alone, please."

"An' what d'we think about Jordan?"

"I don't give two hoots what we think, Mister Mason! What the heck is going on here?"

The Principal stood by the light switches, shrouded in darkness. Flicking them back on, he gasped. "You two – in my office, NOW! The rest of you, go see the nurse."

Marshall sat on a rickety chair waiting outside Principal Roger's office. The shouting – that had gone on continuously for fifteen minutes – was clearly taking its toll on the Principal's voice. Any time he got angry, his throat squeaked under the strain. Dwayne hadn't said more than two words from what Marshall could hear. The office door swung open, the old brass handle rattling as Dwayne released it from his grip.

"And Dwayne?"

“Yes, Steve?” he replied, not turning to face the Principal.

“Keep in mind what I said, son.”

“Will do.”

Marshall got a sharp look from Dwayne. Great, he thought. There was going to be payback for this – and not just from the Principal.

“Marshall, can you come in now?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Close the door – thanks.”

Marshall sat facing the desk in a deep-seated leather chair. Its high armrests were awkward to lean on, so he folded his arms into his lap. The chair wasn't very wide but its depth meant it pushed against the back of Marshall's knees. Principal Rogers was a tall, slim man; his chair was a perfect fit. He interlocked his fingers, bouncing his hands on his knees. His head tilted slightly to one side as he sat looking at Marshall. He smiled. Marshall sighed. As he inhaled, he was overwhelmed by the smell of lemons.

“So. Marshall. Here we are.”

“I jus' want to say, Principal Rogers, how sorr-”

“Please. Marshall. Call me Steve.”

“Uh, okay then, sir.”

“Steve. I insist.”

“Okay.”

“But only, of course, in the course of this meeting. Strictly...here,” he said, unwinding his fingers and jabbing them indiscriminately at the air in the office as he said ‘here’.

He smiled again; the smile remained fixed on his face. Silence descended as the Principal sat grinning at him. Marshall gave in.

“Got it, Steve.”

A more natural smile spread over the Principal's face. He sprang to his feet, stroking the large oak desk distractedly as he headed towards the window. Peering outside, Principal Rogers held his hands behind his back. Marshall looked around. He could almost taste the lemons, the smell was so strong.

“People. Huh?”

“Sir? I mean, Steve?”

“People. People, son – they do such...strange things. It’s all part of their nature,” he said, dramatically planting a palm onto the window. “All part of their attempt to make...sense. Of this world.”

The Principal removed a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the smudges he’d just made on the windowpane.

Marshall sensed familiarity in this scenario, a pattern about to be repeated. He had undergone such attempts many times over. Always trying to bring him back into the fold, back into society. They never understood it. Impulse beyond reason or logic. It was in the feeling of being lost that he felt most at ease.

Principal Rogers placed his hand on Marshall’s shoulder a little too firmly. Marshall winced. The hand was quickly withdrawn.

“Making sense of things. Not...not easy. Is it, son?”

“No, sir-Steve.”

“Now. I’ve undertaken the new mandatory counseling training. The state educative panel introduced it last year. I’ve learned how to...*feel* your pain.”

“Okay,” replied Marshall.

“I see you’ve had several meetings with the school therapist. The school counselor. The psychologist. After, after...” he paused awkwardly. “After...‘the incident’.”

Marshall sighed.

“You mean the crash?”

Principal Rogers stepped back a little. He was staring at Marshall. Typical, Marshall thought. This was the way it always went.

“We had noticed an issue with authority before the, err...the crash. It was something we were hoping we could ease out. With gentle coercion. Then the tragic accident. No one should have to go through that. There’s always going to be tough times afterwards. Always. But we’re talking about three years ago. Since then, you’ve been quiet in class. Late with work. Getting into fights on a weekly basis. For three whole years. Let’s cut to the chase, shall we? I’ll tell you my problem with this.”

Marshall shrugged.

“My problem is...you’re not a bad kid. You’re not dumb. You hint at a sharp mind. Strong athlete, a sensitive young man. Everything you need to become a well-adjusted grown-up. A valid member of society. Someone who could make a difference – change this world for the better. At the minute, you’re on the edge. You push your luck much more and I won’t be able to help you – you’ll be just as bad as...as the Dwayne Bouviers of this world. And that’s the last thing you want to be.”

Marshall wanted to reply, “That punk ain’t so bad,” but didn’t.

“Sorry, sir.”

Principal Rogers glanced at Marshall, who noticed the wounded look too late.

“Steve! I’m sorry, St-”

“Look. Son. Let’s draw a line under this. Last chance, you hear? The only action I’m going to take is to call your grandmother and le-”

“No! Please si-Steve, please. I promise I’ll be good!”

“Sorry, Marshall. I have to make sure you’re on the straight and narrow. At home as well as school. Your whole future is at stake here. We need to get you back on track and as far away from Dwayne Bouvier as possible. I need your grandmother to help me with that. It won’t take a second.”

It’ll take much longer than that, Marshall thought. The Principal picked up the phone and dialed, drumming his fingers against the plastic front of the receiver as he waited for a response.

“Hello, Mrs. Mason? This is Principal Rogers. You can call me Steve. No, I insist. Steve...thanks. I think we should have...a little chat. It involves your grandson. No, nothing bad. Well, not *bad* bad - he’s in one piece – the other boys didn’t come out of it quite so well. Yes, a disciplinary matter if you will...Marshall, could you wait outside? Thanks.”

Marshall left the ghostly waft of citrus behind but kept the door ajar. He listened despondently to Principal Rogers listing all his misdemeanors. Dangerous patterns, social integration, psychological issues. It all spelled out one thing for Marshall. Trouble.

Marshall was sitting on the floor reading a comic book, rocking back and forth. Grandma looked over at him as she washed the vegetables.

“How’s the adventure goin’, Marshall?”

“It’s okay,” he mumbled into the pages.

“Icon beat Superman?”

“Different comic now, Grandma.”

“Oh,” her voice croaked as she turned back to the food.

Once the vegetables were clean, she began tenderizing the meat. It was a cheap cut, so she sprinkled lots of cayenne pepper over the meat to give it flavor.

“Marshall – come over here, please.”

“Do I have to?”

“I need yo’ help with somethin’.”

“Okay, jus’ give me a second.”

Grandma finished and the meat was tender. She stood holding the rolling pin, looking at her grandson. She flicked the pin up and down, the sound of intermittent banging ringing around the small house. Marshall stopped rocking, leaning in closer to read. The banging got louder, more frequent.

“Okay, Okay – I get it! Jeez,” Marshall snapped, pushing the comic away as he got up.

He skulked over to the kitchen, his shoulders hanging forward. Marshall stood next to Grandma, bouncing impatiently from one heel to the other. He waited for her to say something. She looked at him, then back at the meat. He huffed, which made her smile wryly.

“Marshall, can you cut the vegetables for me?”

“Why?”

“You got the quickest hands I ever seen,” she said with a bright smile.

“Okay,” he replied reluctantly, picking up a knife.

Marshall chopped the vegetables with alarming speed. The carrots were already done. Grandma turned to him.

“We need to talk.”

“Okay.”

“It’s about how you been since that fight in school.”

Marshall grumbled a response under his breath, shrugging his shoulders. Grandma noticed he was chopping the vegetables slower. He was really slamming down into them, pressing down against the chopping board.

“I know I got real mad - but you did bad, Marshall. I had to punish you for what you did. Can’t let a wrong go unpunished, Marshall. But since then, all you done is mope around, yo’ head in comics, watchin’ TV. Ain’t said two words to me these past few days.”

Marshall stopped chopping the vegetables and flicked the knife up, shifting his hand quickly into a downwards grip. Then he stabbed it into the chopping board, the tip gouging the wood. Grandma stared at the tip of the blade, the board breached. Marshall grunted as he pulled the knife out and placed it flat on the counter. He couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Marshall, I know it wasn’t yo’ fault that fight got started in the first place. But you kicked their asses real bad. Don’t you see? You got power, but you gotta use it the right way. If you ain’t careful, yo’ gonna end up jus’ like that Dwayne boy you been fightin’ with. No grandson o’ mine’s gonna end up a hoodlum. There are great things in store for you, Marshall – great things. Unlike that Dwayne. He’s gonna end up in the gutter.”

There were no words left in his head. He felt separated even from her. It was comforting, which surprised him. But it made a weird kind of sense. If he didn’t have any grounding, any sense of who he was, he could *be* anyone. He could do anything. It was all possible - and only ever possible - when he was absolutely lost. Marshall hugged Grandma; she pulled her arms tightly around him and squeezed.

“Yo’ gonna be the death o’ me, boy, I swear.”

“Sorry, Grandma.”

She drew her arms from behind his back and cradled his face in her hands. Her fingers’re so tough, he thought. There wasn’t much warmth in them. She kissed his forehead, pinching his ear lobes playfully.

“Yo’ a good kid, Marshall. Don’t ever forget that.”

“I’ll try.”

“No tryin’, son. Don’t forget is all.”

Marshall sat quietly in the living room going through exercises for his English homework. He had been struggling recently; they were covering Shakespeare's *Othello*. The focus of class discussions was Iago – and the exercise questions were virtually the same. The way he saw it, Othello was the real villain of the story. Marshall didn't write that down; good grades would help him stay out of the Principal's office. He looked up at the wall. Six o'clock. Grandma had been upstairs a long time.

"Marshall, what you up to?" she called from upstairs.

"Nothin' much, just finishin' my homework."

"How finished is finished?"

"Got one more question to answer – another ten minutes, maybe?"

"Can you do it in the mornin'?"

"I guess. Why?"

"Cause we have some place we gotta be tonight."

Marshall slammed his English book shut and raced upstairs. Grandma was in the bathroom putting the finishing touches to her makeup. She sensed her grandson's anticipation and grinned mischievously.

"Where? Where? Come on, tell me! Where we goin'?"

"Under yo' pillow."

Marshall sprinted to his room, almost falling over as the rug slipped under his feet. Once in his room he flung his top pillow across the room. There was a paper pouch with two tickets in it.

"Where we goin'?" he called out.

"Can't you read, boy?"

"Too excited – jus' tell me, please!"

Grandma took slow, sure steps to Marshall's room before leaning in. She clung to the frame of the door for support as she smiled at her grandson.

"We goin' to see Jordan."

Marshall dropped the tickets.

“Seriously?”

“Course, seriously!”

“Wow, this is awesome,” he said, hugging her. “Can we afford this?”

“It ain’t about affordin’, Marshall. If you believe in somethin’, you gotta follow it. If you believe in *someone*, gotta follow *them*.”

“But can we really aff...?”

“Heroes are precious, son. Don’t never forget that. People stick by heroes – always have, always will. It’s worth more than money, ‘cause it’s somethin’ money can’t buy. Money’s no question tonight, Marshall. We goin’ to see Jordan. Period.”

Marshall picked up the tickets and headed downstairs. Pulling his jacket from the coat stand, he held the door open for her as they walked out the front door.

“Thanks, Grandma.”

“Thanks nothin’, yo’ buyin’ the chili dogs.”

Marshall chuckled as he stepped out into the biting night air.

Chapter Five

When we face a challenge for the first time, is sheer strength of belief enough?

Brinkmater Straights Tupello Two and a Half Years Ago

Storm clouds formed a blanket over the sky; it had been raining incessantly for half an hour. The Knight crouched over a ledge high up, shadowed from the streetlight by a gargoyle. The beating rain soaked his cloak, weighing him down. His shoulders felt heavy and his legs tired. He moved slightly, shifting his weight from left to right. Now was the time to stay sharp, stay focused.

The Knight looked down at the alley below. There was his target, the reason he was here tonight. Shifting his weight back onto his left foot, he twitched a little as a girl walked up the alleyway towards the man. Her skirt was frayed and short and unflattering; she wore pinched leather boots over fishnet stockings. She took each step carefully – it was clear she hadn't mastered the art of walking in heels yet. The girl turned as she approached the target. The Knight shook his head. Layers of makeup couldn't hide her age.

Even at a distance, he could sense her fear. She was trying hard to mask it, lighting a cigarette while the target yelled in her face. It was the unnatural way she held it that gave her away; trying to hide her shaking hands. The target suddenly turned his shoulder away from her; the Knight gripped onto the gargoyle, springing his legs so he was up on his toes. It was no use – he was too far away. The guy's arm swung forward, his palm smashing into the prostitute's face with a short, sharp snap. Her nose gave way and blood gushed over her ruby lips. She dropped the cigarette and clutched her face, cowering away from the target as mascara-stained tears streamed down her painted cheeks.

“You broke my fuckin' nose! You son of a bitch, Jimmy, you sonofabitch!”

“Mahh, quit your whinin’, bitch – you had it comin’.”

“But – but what in hell am I gonna do now? I need my face. Shit! How am I gonna work off my debt without my face?”

“I hear kidneys go for a fair price,” Jimmy snorted.

“That’s not goddamn funny.”

“Whatever – just make sure you’re here with the money next Friday.”

“But, bu-”

“No buts, I don’t care an’ neither does the boss. He just wants his mo-”

The Knight crunched into Jimmy’s side, square between his hip and his ribs. The two of them lay sprawled across the surface of the alleyway. Jimmy started to move, shifting both arms to his left side. Before he could get up, the Knight launched a fierce punch into his exposed ribcage, grunting from the effort he put into it. Bones shattered. Unnatural noises bubbled from Jimmy’s throat; the Knight thought maybe he’d punctured Jimmy’s lung. He walked towards the prostitute, who edged out of the light and into the shadows.

“It’s okay, I won’t hurt you,” he said.

“Oh yeah, I believe you. You’re just a, a...” she stared at Jimmy’s pained breathing, “...you’re a fuckin’ superhero. Jesus, look what you did to poor Jimmy.”

The Knight laughed under his breath.

“You serious? Or did I get it wrong, an’ you jus’ tripped an’ fell onto his fist?”

She kept staring at Jimmy; he was over the shock now and shouting, muttering idle threats towards both of them.

“Now listen,” the Knight said to her, pulling something from his belt. “Take this medical card to the hospital an’ get your nose fixed. It only has a small amount of insurance on it, so keep it until it runs out.”

“But that’s not my name,” she said, looking at the card.

“Go to the Perry Moore Emergency Center on Forty-One East, they got a high turnover an’ don’t ask too many questions. Here’s twenty bucks for the cab. Go.”

She wobbled on her heels as she hurried away, holding the card and money in one hand and her shattered nose in the other. Jimmy was still mumbling curses, writhing around in the puddles as he clutched his side. The Knight walked over to him slowly.

“Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy.”

“Live it up, f-freak. Your days are...are numbered. He’s onto y-you.”

The Knight laughed nonchalantly. He lowered himself onto his knees and grabbed Jimmy by his collar. He sensed fear. Good, he thought.

“That so, Jimmy? An’ who would *he* be?”

“You think I’m gonna-gonna fold that easy? What d’you take me...for?”

Not scared of me then, he thought. The Knight let out a sigh. He pushed Jimmy’s hands from his side and placed his palm on Jimmy’s injured ribs. Then he pressed down, flicking shards of broken bone under his thumb. Jimmy tried to scream but couldn’t. High-pitched squeals escaped his mouth as his hands clenched at the dirt, his body convulsing awkwardly in small spasms.

“I’m not one for *foldin’* people, Jimmy. I’m more in the business of *breakin’*. Now tell me.”

Jimmy was breathing heavily, his eyes blinking quickly as rain continued to fall. He shook his head. The Knight got a tight grip of his collar with his left hand as he drew close to Jimmy’s face.

“You wanna die? You wanna die here, in the gutter? I’ll crush you, leave you out here. Be mornin’ before anyone finds you. A slow death, Jimmy. Only gonna get more painful.”

“No, I w-won’t, can’t. Can’t, I c-can’t. You don’t under...understand. No...”

The Knight’s right fist swung down just below Jimmy’s eye. His cheekbone caved, leaving a visible dent. Blood streamed across his cheek, rain washing it past his ear and dripping onto the ground. The Knight hesitated for a moment, watching as Jimmy’s blood mingled with filthy puddle water. His mind was overcome with gut-wrenching questions: What am I? If Jimmy wasn’t a criminal, what would this be?

He felt weak in his arms and legs; he knew he was losing control of that tension, that edge. What the criminals feared. Jimmy looked up at him, blood running over one side of his face. He smiled. Only faintly, only briefly, but it was enough.

The Knight knew what it meant - failure, defeat. Weakness. I am not Marshall Mason, he told himself. He shook his head to clear it. I am the Knight. I am the Knight. I am the Knight. He let go of Jimmy's collar and clenched tightly around his chin. Jimmy's jaw felt fragile in the palm of his hand. No more games, he said to himself. He yanked Jimmy's head up hard towards his face, barely an inch between them as the Knight's shoulders shook.

“TELL ME NOW! TELL ME! I WILL KILL YOU, JIMMY! I’LL END YOU RIGHT HERE, I SWEAR! TELL ME WHO HE IS! TELL ME!”

Jimmy didn't move his mouth, didn't even blink. The Knight's eyes narrowed; there was only one thing left to do. He slowly raised his other hand high in the air, balling it into a tight fist above Jimmy's face. The Knight was breathing hard and fast, the rain pattering against the metal of his mask. Steam rose from his shoulders and head, illuminated against the darkness of the night sky. His shoulder jutted forward just as Jimmy put his hand up.

“WAIT!”

The Knight released him, letting him slump back into the filth of the alley.

“Wait,” Jimmy pleaded.

“Tell me,” he replied as he lowered his hand, his breathing still shaky.

“I can't just tell you who he is – he'd kill my family. You gotta understand. My pants pocket – left side. He asks, you stole it from me.”

The Knight felt like he couldn't do it, couldn't persist; this incident alone was a step too far. Jimmy had taken it right to the edge. A loyal soldier out of a whole legion. The Knight was just one man. But there wasn't anyone else, and besides, he was in too deep to turn back. He bent down and pulled a scrap of paper from Jimmy's pocket. Unfolding it, he glanced at it quickly before the raindrops made the ink run.

110 Brinkmater Ave.
0200, Thurs
Left side, BLUE DOOR:

CODE word - DANTE -

- **The Reaper** -

“Thanks, Jimmy.”

“Remember, you stole it from me! Remember!”

“I will. Not that it’ll matter when I’m done with him.”

He would have given anything for it to be anywhere other than the Avenue. After calling an ambulance for Jimmy, he’d changed and gone home, slept restlessly all day. Now here he was, perched high in the seat of hell. Everyone knew Brinkmater Avenue was the most derelict street in the whole city. In the middle of the Straights, it was a grimy artery running through the filthiest part of town. The few streetlights still working flickered intermittently. Rusted cars with no windows were parked down either side of the road, propped up by bricks. Walls were a strange grey color where layers of graffiti had merged and bled into each other; endless motifs drowning into one another.

The Knight crouched on the flat roof of a dilapidated Victorian townhouse. He had been checking out 110 Brinkmater for half an hour now. No one entered or left, all was quiet since he set up. Everything was in place for a quiet entrance; a top-level window was completely broken. It was also at a lower level than the ceiling he was standing on – perfect for using a grapple hook and sliding across. He just needed some noise before he rappelled over there. It was a quiet night in Brinkmater.

It was fifteen minutes before he heard another sound. A couple of drunks coming down Grossman Boulevard. They were shouting, but he had to wait until they were closer. He readied the rope and grapple hook.

Looking at how basic the hook was, he smiled. He didn't care how cheap it was, it worked just fine. While the two guys were yelling about some girl, he drove a metal stake deep in between two roof tiles. This was the anchor point, the thing that was going to support his weight across the drop. The Knight tugged it – it seemed secure enough.

The pair was closer now. As they walked past the building, one became quieter. Dropping suddenly to his knees, he began to retch loudly in the middle of the street. Perfect. The Knight swung the hook a few times before throwing it towards the opposite building. It bounced awkwardly and fell off; he pulled it up quickly so it didn't swing back into the wall below.

The drunk finished throwing up, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. He and his friend started to walk down the street again. The one that didn't throw up noticed specks of vomit on his shoes. He turned and pushed the other drunk to the ground, yelling abuse at him. The one who'd just vomited got up and pushed him back. Slurred insults were traded, arms were swung. The Knight smiled. They were so drunk they hadn't landed a single punch. He threw the grapple a second time.

Now the hook took, latching between two tiles behind the lead gutter pipe. Tightening the rope around the metal stake by his feet, he readied himself. The Knight took out a large, chunky V-shaped piece of metal from his belt. Moving towards the edge, he sat down. His legs dangled over the sheer drop. He placed the metallic piece over the rope and held either side with his hands. He slipped off the edge, the rope dipping slightly before tightening. As the two drunks continued swinging and missing, the Knight slid precariously across the gap.

He was halfway across when he heard a crunching noise; the stake on the roof he'd just left was giving way. He lent his legs up in the air, desperate to go quicker. He was just about to reach the frame of the window when the stake snapped.

His weight combined with the grapple hook wedged in the roof above him to create a pendulum effect; the gentle entrance he'd prepared for suddenly became a heavy fall.

The wood floor groaned abnormally beneath him as he slapped down onto it. The Knight lay in a crumpled heap trying to regain his breath. Damn, he thought. He began to pull himself up when something made him stop.

The room filled with a mixture of whining noises and low, bellowing sounds. He got to his feet very slowly, very carefully. The noises churning around the room shifted directly under his feet. He felt the vibrations change, the wood now screaming through the soles of his boots.

The floor collapsed.

When the Knight awoke, there was a strong smell of smoke. Wherever he was, he wasn't on level ground. Rolling over, he gasped. Above his head, he could see the ceiling. The ceiling to the entire building, six floors up. Through a giant hole punched out of splintered wood. The hole he'd created, the hole he'd fallen through.

While he was trying to get to his feet, the floor moved. It crossed his mind that this wasn't the ground floor, that he had further to fall. He couldn't steady himself – it shifted whenever he did. He leant to one side and looked at what was beneath him.

Piled high were mattresses, clothes, cardboard boxes, the debris of a dozen tramps heaped seven feet high. He shook his head in disbelief. His relief became panic when his sense of smell registered. The mountain of garbage was on fire.

“Tell me, freak – you heard o' Dante's Inferno?”

The Knight looked up as flames licked through gaps in the stack beneath his feet. He saw a man – about his age, his height – wearing a skullcap with a black bandana wrapped across his nose and mouth. Skeleton teeth grinning across the fabric. This was it, who he'd been waiting for. The man who'd been ruining all his good work these last few months. The man who'd taken over Brinkmater by force and made it his own kingdom.

This was the Reaper.

“Can we chat about books later?” The Knight said. “I'm a little busy.”

“Who you gonna save if you can't save yo'self?”

The Knight pulled his cloak tight around his body, crossing his arms over his chest and lying down. He rolled down the slope, over the flames and onto the ground.

“I’m impressed! Bein’ saved by yo’ cape ain’t quite what I was talkin’ about.”

“Time to shut you the hell up,” The Knight raged, fists clenched as he got to his feet.

The Reaper was gone. The Knight looked through the smoke, but couldn’t see him.

“What d’you take me for, jus’ some street level punk? D’you even know who yo’ playin’ with?” came a shout from the dark.

The Knight looked up; he couldn’t see how he had gotten there through all the smoke, but the direction of his voice was unmistakable.

“I know where you are. High ground don’t mean nothin’.”

“Smart as well as inflammable – Tupello *is* saved!”

He couldn’t be sure, but it sounded like the Reaper was on the move. The Knight knew he was out in the open here, but he couldn’t do much else. There was no grounding in all the smoke and he was in unfamiliar territory. He had to stay put and get his bearings. Behind him, the crack and hiss of the fire grew louder. The Knight took a sharp hit to the kidney. He fell to the floor, bending to his knees. A heavy, throaty laugh bellowed behind him. From the impact, he was certain of one thing.

“Only cowards use knuckle dusters,” the Knight growled through gritted teeth.

“Sorry? Coward? *Coward?* Was that *you* sneakin’ through the top window, breakin’ into *my* house? I guess you didn’t sneak too much, though. You got as much panache as one o’ those corn-fed, dumbass, *white boy* superheroes.”

“This ain’t no comic book.”

“Sure, sure,” he let out a snort. “You even looked at yo’self? What is that, a mask? A goddamn cape? Only thing you got missin’ is an archrival, you know, the bad guy. I would put myself forward, but seein’ as you ain’t never gonna beat me, I can’t be it. So maybe I’ll jus’ put you outta yo’ misery an’ kill yo’ sorry ass right now.”

The Knight was still reeling from the kidney punch when the Reaper slashed across his chest. Thank God for Kevlar, the Knight thought. He pretended to be wounded, slumping to the ground and clutching his chest. The pouches did their trick; fake blood oozed from the cut, one layer of Kevlar above his actual skin.

“You know the interestin’ thing about you, Knight?”

He shook his head, still feigning injury.

“We call you freak. Not hero, not vigilante – *freak*. An’ you like it. You may pretend like you don’t, but deep down you know it fits. It’s what you are. Jus’ one shade away from becomin’ one o’ us. We know you better than anyone else. Like brothers o’ the night.”

“You can think what you w-”

“I *know*,” he said, grabbing the Knight by the neck. He juggled the knife in his other hand. “You think there’s a vast space between you an’ me? It’s jus’ a thin line, that’s all. You wanna know what that line really is? The real difference?”

“The line between us is, you’re a cheap-ass thug with a stupid name.”

“It ain’t a name, it’s a brand. Brand o’ fear, that’s what I am. But back to what I was sayin’. That line between us – it’s a profit margin. Yo’ poor as hell an’ I’m the goddamn king o’ this town. That’s the difference. An’ callin’ me on my name, seriously? Don’t even get me started on yo’ name. The Knight? Yo’ a disgrace to black folk everywhere, you know that? But then, you probably get off on bein’ the white man’s bitch. Figure yo’ fine with a bit of good ol’ racial profilin’.”

“Comin’ from a thief an’ a murderer. What you think gives black folk a bigger problem, my name or you makin’ this city a livin’ hell?”

“Careful, that’s slander right there. *Alleged* murderer is the phrase yo’ lookin’ for. After all, you can’t *keep* what you can’t *prove*.”

The Knight tensed.

“What?”

“What’s a matter, freak? Had enough o’ philosophy 101? It killin’ time already?”

“It can’t be...”

The Reaper threw a savage blow into his midriff.

“Course it is!” he screamed manically.

The Knight doubled up. The Reaper grabbed him by the throat, putting the knife down on the floor as he drew closer.

“No future for you here, freak. You wanna hear somethin’ interestin’? There’s always been crime. Always. Before you. Before police. Before civilization, even. If I were to put my last dollar on one fact, it’d be this: crime’ll last forever.”

The Knight pulled at the Reaper’s hands, but he was too strong.

“The proof? Look at my empire – sure, it ain’t the most glamorous, don’t matter though. I got *power*. What you got, Superboy? Yo’ alone. No-one wants you, no-one even asked for you or yo’ help. Half the city thinks yo’ worse than me. People are jus’ as likely to spit on you as thank you. Anyone spit on me is gonna get their tongue cut out. I got all the cards, all the play. You got nothin’. Yo’ on a dead-cert losin’ streak.”

The Reaper squeezed harder.

“That’s crime, baby. It ain’t pretty but it sure does pay. But you downright broke, an’ you owe me big for all the inconvenience you been causin’ me. So I’m actually gonna do you a favor an’ settle the debt. Gonna slit yo’ throat – right here, right now.”

The Knight tried to fight his grip but he’d lost too much energy. Think different to him, he thought. Think better. The Reaper began to laugh as he sensed his adversary’s desperation.

“Dante’s Inferno – you landed on a fire, for god’s sake. Think that was a coincidence? See, I’m a great believer in fate. You an’ me, we were destined to be who we are. But if yo’ smart enough, you can shape that fate. An’ if yo’ a genius – like me – it’s as good as in yo’ pocket. This, what’s happenin’ now; Jimmy an’ that whore in the alley. You really think that jus’ *happened*? You think *you* were in control?

“It was all set up. Every little bit. By *me*. For *you*. See, line between us may be fine, but I care deeply about that line. It’s my money, after all. Money it costs me to keep the entire police department off my back is a hell of a lot less than what you’ve cost me.”

“I’ll cost you more than jus’ money.”

“Hah! There it is, that pizzazz. *That’s* what I’m talking about, man - you got that edgy vibe. That dark mood, it’s why the media lap you up. Here I am, about to paint the ceiling red – you bein’ the paint tin – an’ you still can’t resist. Like anythin’ you say means jackshit. Some people would find it annoyin’, but I like it. Well, I *did*. Personally, I feel humbled. I’m gonna slaughter Tupello’s own superhero like a dirty mutt.”

“Shame your idea’s flawed. Maybe you ain’t so genius after all.”

“Fuck you talkin’ about, man? I’m gonna kill you, dawg! This is it, showtime!”

The Reaper reached down to grab his knife but it wasn’t there. The Knight smashed down on his gripping arm, forcing it to fold. With the extra leverage, he plunged the blade deep into the Reaper’s right leg.

A sharp scream echoed around the walls and out of the broken windows along with billowing smoke. The Knight took his chance and pulled down the bandana. He flinched. There was barely any nose left; lips and gums were badly receded. Two painful looking holes and large exposed teeth dominated his face. All over there was raw pink tinged around the edges of his features. It was a ravaged mess, much less a face.

The Knight couldn’t believe it. Damn coke, he thought.

“Fuck! ARRRRRGGGHHH! You fuckin’ stabbed me! You can’t do that, you can’t do that!” the Reaper yelled, trying to control his breathing. The fury in his eyes was palpable as he glared at the Knight. “Phhh-Phhh. It’s over now, freak. I ain’t just gonna kill you, I’m gonna *haunt* you. Phhh. Yo’ in for a life of motherfuckin’ pain from now on, you hear! Dead man walkin’, freak! I’m gonna mess you up. I’m gonna grind you into dust, no-one’s gonna even remember you, phhh, phhh --”

The Knight pushed him to one side and limped towards the front door. He turned and looked at the Reaper, who was writhing awkwardly on the floor. Trying to get at him, clawing at the ground. He’d never seen anything like it; the Reaper was grimacing, spit flying from his mouth as he tried to crawl towards the Knight.

It hadn’t gone the way he’d expected it to, and it didn’t feel like things were going to get any better. He stepped into the frame of the doorway. The Reaper kept clawing towards him, eyes filled with intense hatred. The Knight propped himself up, barely able to look at the man desperately trying to get him.

“If I have to, I *will* kill you. Please don’t make me,” he said, before hobbling away into the night.

Chapter Six

Judgment and justification often go hand in hand - **too late** for anything to change...

Log Cabin Brownley Creek Two and a Half Years Ago

The snow continued to fall outside. Getting up off the large leather armchair, he moved over to the fireplace. Small pieces of coal fizzled, sent spitting into the air by smoky oak logs. He stared blankly into the fire, mesmerized by flickering flames. Sipping a whiskey, he felt the ice jangle against his lips. He placed the glass on the mantelpiece.

A picture grabbed his attention. The frame was a simple design, silver with no pattern. He held it at its edges, careful not to smudge the shiny metal.

He sighed and put the photo back on the mantelpiece. Another glug of alcohol, a pause, and then he moved over to the phone. Picking it up, he hesitated before dialing the number. When someone finally answered, he shifted awkwardly.

“Err...hello. Is your...mother there?”

He stood drumming his foot against the oak floor as he waited. The hand of his unused arm fell neatly against the small of his back. Someone else answered the phone – a woman this time.

“Suzie! Suzie, please don’t hang up. I was just ringing to see – well, to see how you were...right...right. Good. And the kids? Was that, err, Duncan? He sounds so grown up...I understand. Young family – always hectic. There was one thing I wanted to ask you first...have you heard from your mother? I know, too much history... I know, but I just wanted to...I just want to know if she’s okay...right. Please tell her I asked, okay? And Suzie, I want you to know...know that I lo...Suzie?”

He put the receiver down. Picking up the half-empty whiskey bottle from the coffee table, he wandered over to the fireplace and filled his glass to the top. Screwing the cap on the bottle, he felt something brush slightly against his back. Air. He placed the bottle heavily on the mantelpiece, hoping the noise would force a reaction. It didn't.

"At least have the good grace to shut the door after you. You'll let the cold in."

Gulping the whiskey down with a grimace, he once again stared into the fire. The embers were burning a bloodshot orange now. Opaque yellow flames flickered languidly around charred logs. It was a good fire. The latch clicked; the front door was closed.

"So, here we are. It's time, I guess. Don't suppose it hurts to ask," he spoke into the fire. "Who do you work for? Who are you?"

There were a series of barely perceptible creaks behind him – old oak beams bending slightly. Light on their feet – a professional. Maybe it'll be quick, he thought.

"What's the matter, lost your tongue? Who are you?"

"The past."

He grimaced.

"Ha, the past, that's...that's poetic. I have a lot of that, you understand. So what part of my history are you?"

The creaking stopped; his heart was pounding. He held air in his lungs, trying to anticipate what would come next. His lip trembled as he stood waiting, then it happened. The moment.

Hot breath on his ear lobe.

"The only past that matters."

With that came the dark, not quickly as he had imagined - a fading, gradual blackness. He slipped slowly to his knees, his eyes glazing over as the yellows and oranges of the fire merged into a watery muddle. The heat of the fire faded from his cheeks, his memory hazing as everything washed away into calm reverie.

"Wake up."

He heard words in the darkness, felt heat on his face. He opened his eyes. His vision was blurred. His cheek burnt as if he'd been slapped hard.

“W-what’s happening?”

“You thought it would end quickly?”

The heat from his cheek was still increasing, swiftly turning into pain. Colors and shapes began to solidify as his vision recovered. A strange smell reminded him of something.

“You d-drugged me?”

“Of course.”

“W-why?”

“I need answers. Answers which only you can provide. I seek justice.”

“Well, that’s pretty d-dumb of you,” he was struggling with the pain. “Now I know what’s coming, you’re not going t-to get anything from me. You just l-lost your bargaining...p-power.”

“What is coming? What makes you think it has not already begun?”

He could make out a dark blur heading towards him, towards his cheek. He closed his eyes as it made contact with his face. The first sensation was near-numbness – it felt almost cold against his skin. He knew what this meant. He opened his eyes, his right one watering as smoke wafted up. He screamed as the realization hit him – the smell. A burning log, pressed into his skin, destroying his cheek.

“I thought it was a lesson learnt in childhood. Never play with fire, General.”

The log was pulled slowly, tortuously from his face. Skin stuck to its bark, tearing off his cheekbone. The brief relief of being spared the heat was swiftly followed by pain swirling around his head, pulling his thoughts directly towards his cheek. He began to cry.

“I am a fair person. If you give me what I want, I will not make your death last beyond sunrise.”

“How is that f-fair?”

“Come, General. We both know what kind of man you are. What you have witnessed, what you have ordered in the name of ‘democracy’. You dare ask questions of fairness? You already know the answer. This is the very least you deserve.”

The General looked over at the visitor. This is it, he thought.

“M-maybe you’re right. What do you...w-want to know?”

“The words.”

“Words? What w-words?”

“The *words*, General.”

A photo was thrust in front of him.

“N-no, you can’t-”

“Cannot? I *cannot*? Too many times people have begged you for mercy. Did you once yield? And yet still you have the arrogance to say that *I cannot*?”

“He’s dangerous. S-seriously, there’re th-things he can do. T-t-terrible things. You don’t understand. That man is b-beyond darkness, trust me. I made him what he is. You don’t know w-what he’s c-capable of.”

“I am only too aware of his capabilities, General. Give me the words. We are six hours from sunrise. If the six hours are up and I do not have the words, I will leave and kill your daughter. Then your grandchildren. Then your wife. I will bring their scalps to you. Then I will make you *suffer*.”

“P-please. I can’t, I won’t. Leave them out of this. I c-can’t tell you. I have caused enough s-suffering.”

“Ha,” without mirth. “Finally. An admission of guilt. Many years too late, I am afraid. The courtesy of asking politely is over. I will have the words from you before I depart. Your loved ones will die and then I will rip you apart, piece by piece. The last thing I will take is your tongue.”

The visitor went over to the fire and picked up a poker that was resting by the grille. Rolling its tip in the embers, the stranger stood waiting. The General watched as the poker was pulled from the flames and brought towards him. Tempted to close his eyes, he decided not to. This is hell, he thought. This is what I deserve. He watched as the poker was pushed slowly into his left thigh.

“Long nngg-night ahead,” he gasped through gritted teeth as he watched snow drift across the windowpane.

The visitor opened a belt pouch and withdrew a serrated knife.

Chapter Seven

The past is something we always face in the end - a meeting whose consequences are **never** predictable...

The Edge of Brinkmater Straights Tupello Two Years Ago

He cursed as his feet slipped on the sludge-covered roof. Taking a moment, he listened. It was quiet apart from a gentle breeze that swirled around him, lifting the edges of his heavy cape in small billows. Everything about the night felt still, calm. He surveyed the horizon. It was time – he had to be in the right position. A church bell tolled in the distance, distorted slightly by the wind. The Knight pushed off carefully, wary of sliding again. He gained pace, pushing up to a controlled sprint. Then he jumped off the rooftop.

Judging distances was a skill he'd had to learn; the consequences for missing were a long drop and an extended stay in the hospital...or even worse, the morgue. Still, it *had* been a learning curve – he'd almost broken his arm slipping and falling onto a fire ladder about a year ago. It was a lucky escape that he only suffered cracked ribs and severe bruising. He told Grandma it was from falling out of bed; she wasn't convinced. Then there was his last encounter with the Reaper, messing up his landing and falling several floors down. Not all his injuries could be explained away by a simple domestic accident. He claimed he'd been mugged. Luckily, the cops of Tupello didn't care too much about a black guy getting beaten up.

Six months of patch-up recovery work had gotten him to this point and he was determined not to screw it up on the small things. He rolled quietly onto the next roof, skidding slightly. Damn sludge, he thought. The cloak would have to be washed tomorrow once Grandma had gone to bed. One more roof left to go and he would finally be in place. As the church bell struck twelve, he leapt onto the next building.

As he walked to the center of the rooftop, he panicked. What if he doesn't follow me? There was a heavy crash behind him, followed by loudly whispered curses.

"Real subtle. Hurt yourself?"

"What d'you care?" snapped the Reaper, brushing his arms as he got up.

"I don't want an unfair advantage."

"Ha! You, advantage? Only thing goin' for you is the distance between us right now. Yo' a dead man."

"Right," he said, his eyes looking down at the Reaper's advancing feet.

"Oh, I forgot. You can fly! Yo' invincible! What a joke. Papers buy it, not me. You, the guy who says 'this ain't no comic book', runnin' around tryin' so hard to make them think yo' more than jus' a man. Seems to me you decide to follow things only when they suit you. At least I got a moral compass – it's pointin' south. Yo' a whole other animal. Yo' the real menace round here."

"Only person I'm a menace to is you. I'm gonna take you down. Right here, right now. This ends tonight."

The Reaper stopped three feet away.

"I don't think so – see I'm bankin' on the fact yo' gonna get yo' ass handed to you. I'm not the only one in town who wants to see you gone."

"So now it's you an' your gangbangers. You don't scare me an' neither do they."

"I figured that," the Reaper said, eyeing the Knight up and down. "To be honest, I don't really know what can scare a guy wearin' a metal mask an' a cape."

"There ain't nothin'."

"That's a little cheesy...but I like it. Seein' as we're actually doin' this shit, how's about we take off our masks? It's not like you ain't seen my pretty face before."

He slowly pulled the black cloth from his face, slithering off like a hideous veil. Goddamn, the Knight thought. The Reaper's face was even more eroded than last time. Part of him felt like it couldn't just be cocaine, that it had to be some kind of disease.

"Yo' turn, freak. Don't be shy now..."

The Knight let out a small sigh.

"Fine," he said, undoing the latch clips tucked under the metal. "I don't see what this achieves, to b--"

A heavy iron bar swung down onto his left forearm. The bone split in two. He fell to his knees, his mask held in place only by his right hand. He felt a wave of nausea as he stared at his broken arm, his hand sagging limply.

“See? I’m a standup guy really. When you think about it. Yeah, that was a pretty shitty thing to do, but here’s the rub. You *knew* I was gonna do it.”

“I goddamn didn’t! Jesus,” the Knight said as he shifted his left arm instinctively towards his ribs. He propped the broken part on his thigh.

“Well, you shoulda. I mean, I’m me. What else am I gonna do, observe etiquette with you? Queensbury rules, all that shit? This is exactly the crap I’m talkin’ about. I do what I do. Mister Consistency. You jus’ don’t have it in you. You never look ahead o’ the curve an’ do what’s gotta be done. I’m all out to kill you an’ you don’t even take me for the kinda guy to chop you down when yo’ back’s turned. That’s fatal, freak. Gotta have eyes on the back of yo’ head. The thing you least expect always happens when you ain’t ready for it. Everyone knows that. Like Batman an’ the Joker – order an’ chaos, light an’ dark. Idiot an’ genius.”

“This...ain’t...a...comic book,” the Knight said through clenched teeth.

“True, very true. I mean, when did you see Superman takin’ a timeout with a smashed up arm? This may not be a comic book, but it don’t mean there ain’t some truths that apply in both places. Yo’ here, tryin’ to stop me. But in some ways, you ain’t.”

“What the...hell are you...talkin’ about?”

“You ain’t really here for me. Somethin’ else drivin’ you. I get that. My reasons are obvious. Logical. Cash. Power. Couldn’t do it the right way, or least the white way, so I do it *this* way. All this Reaper crap’s part of the deal. People give up a lot quicker if they think yo’ crazy. But you...yo’ chasin’ me for other reasons. Might be logical to you, might not be. Maybe you don’t even know why you do it, m-”

“Course I...know why I...do it. Keep people...like you off...the streets.”

“Hahaha,” he laughed without humor. “Nice. Very superhero. That’s *what* you do, or at least in my case, what you try to do. It ain’t *why* you do it. So you really don’t know? Wow. I underestimated you. You really are fucked up.”

“I...know...myself.”

“Sure you do,” he said sarcastically, leaning closer. “Yo’ secret’s safe with me.”

The Knight snapped his shoulder back, using a small but explosive amount of force to smash his metal-coated glove into the Reaper's cheekbone. He wanted his eye socket to swell up, make his vision watery to even the fight up a little. The Reaper's cheek crumpled inward like a crushed can as he fell backwards onto the sludge.

"I don't g-got no...secrets."

"Sonofabitch," he growled through clenched teeth. "Says the man in the mask."

"That's jus' for protection. Not that I...need it from you," The Knight stood up, still holding his arm close to his ribs. "This is...it. It's over."

"It...phh...it ain't never over," he replied. "You can't *keep* what you can't *prove*."

"Don't you...ever s-stop sayin' that crap? What the h-hell does it...mean, anyways?"

"It means, *freak*, that all things bein' equal, you have to constantly measure yo' own worth. Phh. If you can't show who you are, you can't say that's who you are."

"Huh," the Knight said, surprised. "Why c-can't you jus'...say that?"

"You don't get it? Phh. I'm gangsta, baby. The real deal. Lord o' all this here, all o' Brinkmater. There's things I gotta be - enigmatic, charismatic, downright crazy-ass. If I gotta explain everythin' I say, that ain't cool. That ain't smart. Like, this right here is a case in point. Phh. If I were to say to you - what comes around goes around - it'd be too obvious, right?"

"W-what's obvious about...that?"

The Reaper plunged a knife blade deep into the Knight's thigh. He gasped sharply, letting out a hollow scream. The Reaper laughed cheerfully, his eye closing up as the swelling got worse.

"An' guess what else? I ain't the kinda man thinks we're all born...phh...equal. Some of us," he leaned in closer, whispering, "*me*, we're better than the rest...*you*."

His right arm swung out in a tight arc. The Knight saw the flash of a reflection in the Reaper's hand too late to do anything about it. The blade slashed down his right arm, tearing his clothes from shoulder to elbow. Blood seeped over the material, cascading like unfurled ribbon across his arm. The Knight became unsteady on his feet; he was completely unprepared for the savage uppercut the Reaper unleashed into his midriff. Followed by another, and another. Seven blows later and the Knight could barely breathe. The Reaper grabbed him by the shoulders and threw him across the roof. There was a heavy crack as he travelled a few feet on the sludge.

"*Now* this is it. When *I* say it is. This ends now," the Reaper said as he walked across.

Speeding up to a jog, he launched a vicious kick into the Knight's ribs. Frustrated by the armor plates, he kicked him over so that he was lying on his back. The Knight was struggling for breath; even his mask couldn't hide the trouble he was in. I'm losin', he thought.

"It's time for me to show you who the real deal is in this town," the Reaper said, "but first, I wanna see how low-down ugly you is."

Crouching down, he began to undo the Knight's mask. He tried to fight him off, pulling on his wrists to stop him. Can't let him know, he kept repeating in his head. The Reaper pressed his fingers into the cut on his arm. The Knight's hoarse voice cracked with pain. The Reaper undid his mask and held it up in his hands like a treasured prize. After inspecting it, he tossed it aside and looked at the man lying beneath him.

"It can't be..."

His eyes were wide, the whites of his eyes seeming to bulge out of his skull. The Reaper's arms shook, his shoulders rigid and bunched. His cell phone rang. Ignoring it, he raised a boot up to knee level stamped down on the Knight's face. The Knight's head crunched against the tarry surface of the concrete roof. The Reaper lifted his foot again and plunged down with all his weight. Then another and another.

"YOU CAN'T BE HIM! YOU CAN'T BE!"

Tears were streaming down the Reaper's cheeks as he raised his boot for a fifth time. His foot hung in the air before dropping to the ground by the Knight's ear. His fingers, balled tightly into fists, now extended out, trembling uncontrollably. He leant down and grabbed the Knight's limp body by the shoulders, dragging him to the edge of the building. The Reaper pulled his head closer.

“You don’t belong here, man. Yo’ my past. You hear me? My past. It’s time for you to go back there. Yo’ history.”

His cell phone ringtone played out once more. He hesitated for a second then he threw the Knight over the edge.

Shahina was drinking a green tea in the deserted hotel lobby when her cell began vibrating on the table in front of her. She took a couple more sips before answering.

“Anything to report?”

“No, ma’am. Afraid not. What would you like me to do?”

“Bring the car around the front. We will just have to wait.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Just as she hung up the phone, there was a muffled crashing noise outside. Then more crashes, all in quick succession, all getting slightly louder. Seven crashes passed before one final, leaden thump. Going to the window, she saw a crumpled heap on the pavement.

The Knight.

He seemed to be lying on something. She rushed outside.

“What happened?” she asked the doorman.

“Never seen anything like it. He...he fell out of the sky.”

He leant down to check his pulse. “He’s breathing at least. I called an ambulance. He’s one lucky guy.”

She stared at the Knight. Blood seeped from his head, chest, and arms; both his legs looked broken.

“How exactly is he lucky?”

“We have seven canopy covers from this floor to the roof. Purely decorative, you see. Looks like every single one broke his fall.”

Shahina noticed the wrecked canopies under the Knight. Taking out her cell phone from her bag, she made a call.

“Where are you with the car? We need to move quickly. Now. We are going to Dr. Barnen.”

She stepped towards the Knight, who was lying face down. She went to turn him onto his side, but the doorman stopped her.

“You could hurt him if you move him. I saw a show once.”

“He could die lying like that.” She spat the words out.

The doorman hesitated, so she turned the Knight over. They both gasped. His face was caved in in places, crushed in others. Every part of it seriously damaged. The swelling shocked most of all; his face had ballooned into a series of grotesque purple lumps. Whoever he was, he would probably be unrecognizable even to friends and family.

“You think *all* that was done by the canopies?” the doorman asked.

“It must have been,” she said firmly. “Of course it was the canopies.”

A sleek black car with tinted windows came to a grinding halt outside the hotel. A tall man in a plain suit got out of the driver’s door.

“Ma’am.”

“Put him in the back.”

The man nodded and pulled the Knight over to the car. Opening the back door, he shifted the unconscious man as carefully as possible.

“Hey! You can’t do that! An ambulance is on its way. I called it. He needs a hospital.”

“There is no need to worry. I am his friend. You do realize he is the Knight?”

“Oh my god...are you serious? I had no idea. I mean, of course – the cape and all. It’s just...we’re on the edge of Brinkmater Straights, and all kind of loonies come out of there. Plus he doesn’t have his mask. Is he going to live?”

“I will make sure of it. But now you understand he cannot go to a public hospital – think about the consequences of such a thing. We are taking him to my personal physician; he will have the best of care, I assure you.”

The doorman nodded. She smiled at him and turned towards the car. She could hear sirens in the distance as she got into the back.

“Hold on one second. Open my window.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He pressed a button on the car console that made the electric window wind down. Shahina poked her head out of the car.

“Thank you for your help. What is your name?”

“Roger.”

“Thank you, Roger. I have good contacts at the Herald, if you want to send in your photographs.”

“Photos...what photos?”

Her cell phone rang; she pulled her head back into the car and took the call.

“Do not apologize,” was the last thing the doorman heard her say as the car sped off into the cool night. Looking up at the crumpled remains of broken canopies and down at the bloodied entrance, he smiled. He took out his cell phone and started taking pictures.

Chapter Eight

Standing at a crossroads, the decision lying ahead can feel tortuous or liberating...

Brinkmater Straights
Tupello
2001

“What happened, Big G?”

“Dunno, man. We split after the guy pulled a shotgun.”

“Shit. Any news from Marshall?”

They both shook their heads. Dwayne sucked air through his teeth. Looking around at the disheveled apartment they hung out in, Dwayne sighed. He swept the piled junk off the coffee table and began cutting up lines of coke on the glass center. The other two exchanged a glance.

“So...what’s the plan, Dwayne?” asked Devlin.

“What do you mean?” he asked, snorting the first line.

“I mean, we got a man down. What are we gonna do?”

“Marshall’s a big boy, he can handle himself.”

Big G shook his head. He walked up and thumped the table, scattering the carefully cut lines.

“That ain’t good enough! We need to do somethin’.”

Dwayne rose slowly, looking Big G in the eye. He didn’t blink once, the razor blade dancing between his fingers. Minutes passed with neither man moving an inch. Dwayne smiled, the tension easing into nervous relief. He patted the larger man on the shoulder. Big G’s expression didn’t change.

“We’re in this together, right?”

“Yeah. Whatever, Dwayne.”

“Well, we shouldn’t rush around makin’ anythin’ worse, should we? Taylor an’ Wink still doin’ their thing, should be here any minute now. We’re stronger in numbers – gotta wait for them before we go chargin’ in. Do it as a *team*.”

Big G and Devlin nodded without enthusiasm.

Dwayne turned and swept the coke back into a pile before chopping it up again. Someone banged on the door.

“Let them in,” Dwayne ordered.

In came Taylor and Wink, both out of breath. Wink’s patch was missing; Dwayne couldn’t stop looking at the bullet wound that cut across his eye socket. It was an ugly scar, pink and raw against Wink’s dark skin. Dwayne bent down and took in another line, wiping up the excess and rubbing it into his gums.

“Sssh-hit, sh-it! G-Goddamn. God...damn!”

“What is it, Taylor?”

“We-was-set-set up, man. They w-was gonna-blow us a-away.”

“How’d you get out?”

“The guy who was doin’ the deal – Joey? He p-pulled this piece out from under-under the table, an’ went ‘click’. It’s like a goddamn m-movie, except it’s jus’ a click. He goes again. ‘Click’. So we slam the t-table into Joey, throw our chairs at the others an’ run like hell outta there.”

“You guys *ran* from Schwartz Avenue?” asked Devlin.

They nodded, Wink more emphatically. Taylor’s arms were shaking. Dwayne moved over to the kitchen, where he opened a cupboard and removed a large tin box. Pulling the lid off, Dwayne walked over and handed Taylor a freshly rolled joint.

“Th-thanks, man.”

“You earned it.”

“*Now* what we gonna do, Dwayne? Tell them.”

“Come on guys, look at the state they’re in. What are we gonna do with them like this?”

“Do w-what?”

“It’s nothin’, Wink.”

“It ain’t nothin’, Dwayne!” Big G turned to Taylor and Wink. “Marshall got stuck in the store, the owner pulled a shotgun. We dunno what went down.”

“Yo’ shittin’ me, goddamn!”

“Calm down everyone, yeah? It’s not like there’s much we can do. If he got caught, he’s caught. If he got shot, he’s shot.”

“How can you say that, man? What if it was one o’ us? Damn, if Leon were here we’d be sortin’ someth-”

“Yeah, well guess what – Leon *ain’t* here anymore,” said Dwayne sharply.

“He’s got a point, though. Would this shit have happened if we had a leader? Someone with a plan, like Leon before he got sent down?” stated Big G.

“We *had* a plan.”

“Yeah, Dwayne, but look what happened. Wink sorted out the deal in Schwartz, you an’ Marshall planned the robbery. Spread ourselves thin because we don’t got the bigger picture.”

“I suppose you got a point. Maybe it coulda gone down better. Okay, fine. We’ll pick a leader.”

Dwayne’s lips turned up at the corners. He stood watching the others.

“I put myself forward,” he said after a while. “Any other suggestions?”

They all looked up at him, then at each other. No-one said anything. They stood watching him.

“Right. Well, in that case I wou-”

Marshall crashed through the front door, almost knocking the still-gasping Taylor over. The rest of them smiled. Everyone went over to give him a hug, except Dwayne. Marshall smiled broadly, relief washing out of him. He held his hand up so he could pause for a moment. Marshall wiped his brow with his forearm. His t-shirt was drenched in so much sweat only his shoulders remained dry.

“Shit, man. What went down?” asked Taylor, taking a puff on his spliff.

“Valerii pulled a piece on me, a shotgun. Almost got me as well.”

“Goddamn, how’d you get away?”

“Ran like hell, that’s all. He blew the door off tryin’ to nail me, sonofabitch.”

“Jeez,” sighed Wink.

“Wow, Marshall. That’s one great story,” said Dwayne. “Really somethin’. But we got more important things goin’ on. Now we’re all here, it’s official. I’m gang leader now.”

“Hold on,” Wink quickly replied. “Jus’ hold on there. Marshall’s back now.”

“An’?”

“An’, when you said if we got any suggestions, he wasn’t here. Now he *is*, Dwayne. So we should do it again.”

“Says who, bitch?” jeered Dwayne, edging towards Wink. Marshall held him back.

“Easy, man. Take it easy. It don’t matter, it’s cool. I’m not fussed.”

Dwayne’s jaw jutted almost uncontrollably, his fingers twitching.

“No! Yo’ right, Wink. Fair’s fair. We take a vote. I still put myself forward. Anyone wanna challenge me?”

“Yeah,” said Wink.

Dwayne smiled.

“Really, Wink? You wanna go up against *me*?”

“Nah, man. Not me. I vote Marshall.”

For a moment Dwayne’s face was completely blank, except his eyes.

“Fine. Taylor, buddy?”

“Um,” Taylor hesitated, dragging on his joint. He looked at it, then back at Dwayne. “Yeah, you, man. Whatever.”

“Right. Big G? Who’s it gonna be, my man?”

“Marshall,” he said without hesitation.

“An’ how about you, Devlin? What you gonna do, huh?” he barked.

“Dunno, man. I dunno.”

“What’s so fuckin’ difficult?”

“I dunno, it’s a tough decision. I dunno what t-”

“Quit stallin’ an’ make a fuckin’ choice, you useless piece o’ shit.”

Everyone but Marshall stared at the ground. He looked over towards Dwayne, on his own at the other end of the room. The only noise in the dingy room was the gentle hum of cars rushing by outside. Marshall's jaw was set, his stance readied. He remained as silent as the others did.

"Fine, man. You. You happy now? Shit," muttered Devlin quietly, visibly shaken.

"Yes! Three-two, I knew it!"

Dwayne punched the air before leaning down to take a celebratory line up his nostril. As he snorted the powder, the others stayed motionless. Big G took a step forward.

"We ain't done yet."

"What? What the fuck are you talkin' about?"

"Marshall ain't voted."

Dwayne looked up at Big G, then at Marshall. His fists were clenched. He moved back down towards the coffee table and took a line. Then another. And another. Inhaling sharply, once he was finished blood trickled from his right nostril. It fell in small droplets from his upper lip, intermingling with the remnants of cocaine on the glass surface. Dwayne didn't seem to notice. He got up and walked over to Marshall. He moved up so close their noses almost touched. His pupils were huge black orbs, his lips caked in smeared blood.

"Come on then, champ. Let's go for it. Go on, you got the balls? You gonna come up against me? You actually think you got what it takes to beat me?"

"If I voted for me," Marshall said, looking him straight in the eyes, "we'd *share* power."

Dwayne stood staring for a moment and then turned back towards the battered coffee table. He reached underneath and pulled out a gun. Aiming it directly at Marshall's chest, he stepped towards him. The rest of the gang moved back except Marshall. He pursed his lips slightly, managing to maintain eye contact. The gun was shaking in Dwayne's hand.

"Power? POWER? The fuck you know about power, fool? Got the power to stop bullets? Got the power to cheat death?"

"Havin' a g-gun," Marshall said, wavering slightly, "don't give you power."

“Oh, got us a philosopher here! Actin’ like the big man, like you got what it takes. You think I forgot the kid I used to rag on at school? The punk you used to be, some white-ass Jordan lovin’ bitch? I know you. I *know* you. All talk, no action. You know what I say, leader? You wanna hear what I say to a worthless bitch like you?”

“Fine. What you sayin’, Dwayne?”

“You can’t *keep* what you can’t *prove*.”

Marshall’s eyes flickered. He paused, looking from the barrel of the gun to Dwayne’s manic eyes. All the gang members stood there, helplessly watching. The drone of cars passing by continued. Marshall stepped back, away from Dwayne and the gang and into the silhouetted frame of the doorway.

“This ain’t me,” he said, before turning and walking out of the door.

Dwayne started laughing.

“There’s yo’ leader! Watch him go! What a hero. I *knew* it,” he sneered, waving the gun around at the others. “Right, now we got all that shit out the way, it’s down to business.”

“Dwayne, can’t we jus’ rest fo-”

“Shut the fuck up! I’m talkin’. And it’s *boss*, now. Okay?”

“Sure, boss,” replied Devlin meekly.

“Look at us, runnin’ around like a bunch o’ chumps. We need to get organized. We need to get serious. It’s gonna be hard work at the start, but it’ll be worth it.”

“So what’s the plan, boss?”

Dwayne smiled. There was a vibrating noise by the coffee table. It was his cell phone. He picked it up and read the text message:

THANX 4 THE HEADS UP. U GOT UR BOYS BK & I STILL GOT MY STASH. GOOD DOIN BIZNIZ WIV U. DNT 4GET – KEEP UR END OF THE BARGAIN UP AN I WONT TELL UR GANG U SNITCHED ON LEON. JOEY.

He deleted the text.

“Who’s that from, boss?”

“No-one. Here’s what we’re gonna do next. We’re gonna kill that sonofabitch Joey, an’ we’re gonna take his stash jus’ like we originally planned.”

“But he almost killed us last time! We was jus’ lucky he hadn’t loaded his damn shotgun.”

“I’m leader now. I got a gut instinct about this. Let’s get rid o’ that motherfucker an’ get ourselves some new turf.”

The gang looked at each other, then back at Dwayne. No-one said no.

Cars sped by late for work. Marshall waited outside the house for a while to catch his breath. He’d run all the way home. Once his breath was back, he opened the door. The TV was on, the volume cranked up loud; Grandma was on the phone in an alcove at the back of the kitchen. Marshall snuck behind a worktop so she wouldn’t see him. On the television screen, a councilor called Lee was ranting about crime in the city. About teenage gangs and what he was going to do about it. Marshall sat, listening to both the television and Grandma.

“No, No, you jus’ don’t get it, do you? I know there’s money for all that, but I don’t wanna spend it on me, you hear? ‘Cause I know it ain’t gonna get no better if there’s no cure. Treatment? Treatment ain’t a cure, that much I do know. Well o’ course I know what’ll happen in the end – same thing that always happens at the end, right? Look, that money is for my grandson – whatever he needs it for, that’s what. So I’m not interested in yo’ offer, state-of-the-art as it may be. Now excuse me, I got things to do.”

Grandma put the phone down and began to sob, clutching the worktop for support. Even though she thought she was alone, it was controlled crying. She shook herself out of it.

“Right, gotta call around to find Marshall. That boy’ll be the death o’ me.”

She opened a couple of drawers before slamming them shut. The image on the television changed abruptly. BREAKING NEWS flashed across the bottom of the screen.

“Damn address book’s upstairs,” she said before heading up to her room.

Marshall sat motionless, dazed by what his ears and eyes were telling him. He struggled to get his head around it all. Was she dying? What was going on? He edged nearer to the TV. He sat inches away, transfixed by the bizarre image. Is this a movie? he thought.

The news presenter broke down in tears.

Over and over again, a large ball of orange light engulfed the middle of the screen before disappearing as black smoke billowed. Planes had hit the towers, they were saying. It wasn't an accident, they were saying. Words flashed on the screen in bold red letters:

AMERICA UNDER ATTACK

Marshall stared at the words, horror and awe filling his mind. A sense of dreadful wonder, of the unimaginable happening in the real world. This, him leaving the gang, whatever was happening to Grandma.

It all felt important, defining. A point when lines are drawn. You can't keep what you can't prove, Dwayne had said. Time to prove somethin', Marshall thought. He got up and went to find Grandma to tell her his decision; he was going to do whatever his country needed him to do, whatever was required to fix this. Marshall made his way upstairs. On the TV, the first tower crumbled like a sandcastle swept by the tide.

Chapter Nine

With a fight there are always victims, even if at first they are not obvious. And with victims, **consequences...**

Akeldama Restaurant
Tupello
One and a Half Years Ago

“Alan, I have to say – what an *amazing* place,” the fat woman in fur gushed.

“True, Valerie. But why call it Akeldama, Alan? You do know the meaning, don’t you?”

Alan Greenburg laughed politely.

“I liked the sound of it,” he teased.

“Well, I think it’s a beautiful name,” Valerie chimed in. “Where’s Linda?”

Alan smiled.

“She’s at home – feeling a little under the weather.”

“That’s a shame,” she said, trying her best to be sincere. “If only our resident superhero was around to fix ailments.”

“He wasn’t a superhero,” the man next to her said indignantly. “He had no powers. It’s all ju-”

“Did you not read that account from the paperboy, Tobias?” She seemed aggravated by his tone. “*He* said the Knight could fly. *He* saw him swoop down from a skyscraper.”

“A cheap parlor trick, obviously.” Tobias twitched, annoyed. “The man was all show and it was inevitably going to end in tragedy for someone.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily say that,” replied Alan. “At least he was doing something.”

“No, Alan. *You’re* doing something, with your plans to regenerate Brinkmater Straights. *You’re* doing something, with your community programs. This guy, he was just adding to the problem, not helping solve it.”

Alan took a long, considered sip of his red wine. Only one type of red was available in Akeldama; a vintage Italian that didn’t leave much change from a hundred dollars.

“It sounds like you disagree with his methods.”

“What’s not to disagree with? He brain-damaged a guy down an alleyway not two years ago! How can you say that is right?”

Alan looked at Tobias, then out of the large window at the night. It seemed the whole city was obsessed with the Knight; the media couldn’t get enough of him. Alan hadn’t been on the front pages for a while now. For some reason that felt like a welcome relief.

“Of course it isn’t right. It never will be. But isn’t it what’s needed?”

“I don’t get you.”

“This name, Akeldama. I was being a little playful when I said it was chosen merely because it sounded good. Look at all these people, sat thinking they’re eating somewhere really exotic. Somewhere sophisticated. *Akeldama*. As if the name makes them more attractive by association.” He didn’t look at Valerie. “You know what it means, don’t you?”

“Field of blood,” Tobias replied matter-of-factly.

Valerie, halfway through chewing a slither of rare filet mignon, dramatically held a handkerchief to her mouth. She gagged a little then got up, waddling quickly to the bathroom. The two men paused for a second - watching her awkward, showy departure. They turned back to their conversation.

“Why would you call a restaurant Akeldama?”

“It comes from Judas, the place where he is said to have died.”

“And? Don’t be cryptic, Alan. Everyone knows you’re the smartest guy in the city, there’s no need to make me feel small.”

He thought about making the point that he wasn’t just the smartest person in the city, but one of the smartest in the country. He let it go; some things were more important. It was the little choices that made a man’s fate.

“Well, have you ever thought of what *Judas* sacrificed? Jesus died for the good of all humanity. It couldn’t have happened without Judas’ betrayal, which Jesus knew about *before* it happened.”

“That means...?”

“One, there was nothing Judas could do – his destiny was set in stone. You can’t blame a man for doing something he was always destined to do. Two, Judas damned himself to save humanity. You can’t blame a guy for doing what needs to be done, either.”

“Now steady on, Alan, you can’t say that.”

Alan was annoyed. He hated it when people reacted instantly without thinking things through. It was like eating without chewing, just wolfing it down. You’d never get the flavor.

“Yes I can,” he said firmly. “If Jesus’ death saved humanity from itself, and Judas’ betrayal was absolutely necessary for the crucifixion to happen, then Judas helped save us all.”

“And you think this guy was like Judas? And you’re...sponsoring him, with this restaurant.”

“No, I’m not sponsoring him. And yes, it’s a poor analogy, I’ll admit. But it’s true, he was damning himself to make this city a better place. Just look at the crime figures. Half of what they once were while he was in action and now they’re on the rise again since his disappearance. I’ve had this dream of rebuilding Brinkmater for years. It hasn’t been possible – until now. Until the Knight showed up.”

Valerie returned to the table, a little pale. She didn’t make eye contact with either of them. Alan gave her an apologetic smile.

“But if he’s Judas, who’s Jesus? You?”

“Ha, no. He hasn’t betrayed me, Tobias, he betrayed his place in society. There is no Jesus in this metaphor. He stepped away from society, pushed us away, so that he can save us from ourselves.”

“So,” Valerie spoke up, “sounds like you’re trying your hardest to quash the rumors?”

“What rumors?”

He knew what was coming.

“Hot gossip says *you* were the Knight. That you had to step away for a while to sort out some business concerns. You’ve got to admit, there is something of the Bruce Wayne about you. Rich, handsome, philanthropic, intelligent.”

A day hadn’t passed since the vigilante’s arrival that there hadn’t been a joke in the boardroom. It was one of those rumors that got worse regardless of what he did.

“Bruce Wayne wasn’t married,” Alan smiled. “And I’d say I’m at least ten years too old to be running around at night.”

“That’s the best you can do?” Tobias laughed. “You’re definitely him.”

“Maybe in another life. But no, I’m not. He did things his way, and I’m doing them mine. I just hope he didn’t get deterred by all this criticism flying his way. Man puts his neck on the line like that, he needs some support. Akeldama, in a very small way, shows I was on his side – even if he didn’t know it. I for one hope he comes back, because we need someone like him.”

Alan felt his cell phone vibrating in his pocket.

“Excuse me,” he said as he left the table.

“*Definitely* him,” Valerie and Tobias nodded in unison as they laughed.

“What? Who is this? Is this a joke? What did you...no. I will not give in to...Linda? Linda? What’s she saying? What have you done to her? If you hurt her, I’ll...wait. WAIT!”

He stood, staring silently at the cell. The entire restaurant was hushed, frozen. Watching him.

“Alan, honey. What is it?” Valerie grabbed his arm.

He looked at her hand as if he’d never been touched, noiseless horror etched on his face.

“He’s got Linda. He’s asking for money, or he’s going to-to...kill her.”

“Who? Who’s got her?”

She jolted a little as his gaze moved from her hand to her eyes.

“The Reaper.”

“Oh,” was all she could reply.

Chapter Ten

Sometimes it is best to breathe, to take time. Because all growth - physical or otherwise - requires waiting...

Dr. Barnen's Medical Facility
Tupello
One and a Half Years Ago

“Good morning, sleepy head.”

Marshall strained his eyes as light flooded into the room. He inhaled deeply to wake himself up, but the intensely clean fragrance had become sickening to him. He looked through flickering lids at the haze of brightness to his right, trying to make out shapes. The curves of a silhouetted figure by the window were familiar.

“Hey, Shahina.”

“How are you feeling? Did you get a good night's rest?”

“Sure, I feel okay – a little hungry, though.”

She studied him. He couldn't work out what she was thinking; her expression was always so carefully guarded.

“You look better. Arms and legs okay?”

“Yeah, like I said – no aches, no pains.”

“Excellent,” she replied, lunging forward and punching him in the stomach.

Marshall instinctively tensed, but the blow still winded him. He creased over, groaning. It was more shock than anything; he didn't think Shahina was capable of having violent thoughts, let alone real acts of aggression.

“Why the hell did you do that?”

Shahina stood smiling at him, her delicate hands placed on her hips. He'd been surprised at just how hard her punch was. The technique had to have been perfect because she didn't weigh enough to get much power behind it.

“Doctor Barnen has been discussing with me a serious issue about your rehabilitation.”

“What’s that, not enough punches in the mornin’?”

She laughed. He didn’t.

“You are all healed up – breaks, bruises, everything. All in good shape, ready to leave.”

“Maybe you coulda told me that without jabbin’ me in the gut?”

“The doctor also explained that, because of your extensive injuries and lengthy rehabilitation, muscle loss has been quite extensive. Having been here for six months, there remains rebuilding work to be done.”

“Hey, what are you sayin’, I’m in fine sh-”

She held a hand up to cut him short. Marshall stopped speaking.

“Since you were, say, seventeen, what is the longest period of time you went without training?”

“What do you mean by trainin’?”

“Weights, running, sports, press-ups – that sort of thing. Intensive exercise.”

Marshall sat in bed, her point dawning on him. This was the way it often went. He’d said to himself – two months after his near-death fight with the Reaper – that he should know this, accept the fact. It was difficult allowing the idea that someone was always going to be smarter, quicker.

“Okay, I take your point. I’m used to bein’ in shape, at least in better shape than this.”

“And when you go back onto the streets, you need to be at your optimum. Stronger, faster and sharper than you ever were.”

“Why?”

“Because you have to go back and finish the job.”

“What job, exactly?”

“You must kill the Reaper.”

“What?” he asked, struggling to keep up with her as she marched down the well-lit hallway.

She got to a large set of double-doors and pushed them open.

“Whoa,” he said, stopping in his tracks.

It was a gym unlike any he’d ever seen. Sparring pits, climbing frames a hundred feet high, mock building facades with plunging drops between them. All this and an entire open floor in the middle with thirty gym machines which – judging from the brushed steel effect – were custom made. Marshall couldn’t believe it. He was used to making do with a skipping rope and doing reps lifting the couch.

“Is this...is this for me? How’d you...”

“Not your concern, Marshall. My family has money, and this is merely a fraction of my inheritance. You will need all of this and more.”

“More? Shahina, no. I jus’ can’t accept your money like this.”

“You can, you will and you must. This is not a gift between two friends, you see. I am supporting your ideal, your mission. I mean, look at the state of this!”

She held up something familiar. He felt a pang of shame as he recognized it; an item painfully out of place in this modern facility. It was his old grapple hook, the one he used to get across rooftops. It was bent in the middle.

“How’d you get that?”

“Not important. What is important is the fact it is broken. What happened?”

“It wasn’t really the equipment, there’s some real bad roofin’ in Brinkmater...”

“What happened?”

“I fell.”

Her eyes narrowed. Marshall felt like a schoolboy again, being interrogated for fighting.

“And that was it? Nothing worse happened?”

“I-I landed in a buildin’, an’ then the floor collapsed.”

“So you fell, then fell again? How far?”

He didn’t want to answer. There’d been so much work to make it all appear seamless, to give the Knight a mystique of power that was impossible. Revealing his screw-ups made him feel amateurish, stupid.

“Don’t know. Six, maybe seven floors.”

She gasped, although she didn’t seem entirely surprised.

“How did you survive?”

“Mattresses an’ clothes, tramps’ stuff piled high. It was a trap, anyway. Reaper knew what I’d do. Had it all organized.”

He thought he saw pity in her eyes. He knew what she was thinking; that he wasn’t smart enough for this, that the Reaper had the muscle *and* the brains to outdo him every time. That he was going to fail and he was going to die because he just wasn’t good enough.

“*This*,” she shook the ramshackle harness, “will not do. It cannot be relied upon. You need equipment that can help you, even save you. The Knight is a saviour of the poor; this does not mean he has to *be* poor. I will provide you with new materials. Things that are useful, things that will aid you rather than almost get you killed.”

“Shahina, I can’t thank you enough fo-”

“*This*,” she said as she stepped forward and patted his soft stomach, “will also not do. You were good when you first went out, but you were not great. Not your fault, of course – we can only do things with what we have. I give you my support, and that is why you are going to reach the next level.”

He looked at her, and then at the gym. It was incredible. His whole life, only one person had given him this much support – his grandmother. Even she couldn’t offer him this. An edge, an unexpected opportunity. He remembered what Shahina had said.

“But-but you want me to kill the Reaper? Actually *kill* him?”

“I do not *want* you to kill him. I abhor violence, I have from a young age. But there is a line between what one prefers to do, and what one knows is the right thing to do.”

“I can’t. Killin’ ain’t right. I did enough in Iraq to know that much.”

Her eyes widened as he said it; he’d upset her. It was a stupid thing to say; he’d long ago guessed from her accent that she was of Iraqi descent. His own eyes filled with regret.

“Marshall,” she touched his cheek softly, “how do you think this will end? Can a jail hold this man, can you imprison his influence, his ideals? As long as you hold to the idea that he and you can both live, the only outcome will be your death.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. Look at your last two encounters. Six long months it has taken you to recover, and you still need at least another two months to get back to the same level. He will not stop, he will not rest. The power of ruling Brinkmater is in his grasp and there is only one threat to that: you. He knows this, and he will do the only thing possible to guarantee you cannot take his empire. The Reaper will kill you, Marshall. I do not want to see that happen.”

He looked into her glassy, wide eyes. Was this right? He didn’t know. It didn’t *feel* right, but he couldn’t rely on that. One thing he knew was true – the Reaper would stop at nothing to see him dead. He couldn’t continue to be the Knight and leave this unfinished.

“So what’s next?”

“We work you into the ground,” she smiled. “You start today, Marshall.”

She gestured towards the gargantuan gym hall. Where to start? He figured it out quickly. Marshall ventured towards the punching bag.

There were six months of frustration and nightmares to vent.

Chapter Eleven

We can find **power** in many forms - as long as we are willing to look at things from a different perspective...

Outside Mayor Lee's HQ
Tupello
Fifteen Months Ago

It was a sunny day but it wasn't warm. Shahina stood staring at the gleaming windows of Mayor Lee's office. A man in a suit walked up to her, stopping one step behind.

"Ma'am?"

"How is the training going? Is he ready?"

"Unlike anything I've ever seen. He's just so quick. He layed Nacal out cold."

"Nacal? Really?"

"I know – unbelievable, right? The man's a machine. He's not just ready. When Mason gets on the street, he's going to tear it apart."

"Good. One extra thing..."

"Yes, ma'am?"

She turned and grabbed him by the throat. Although he was almost a foot taller than her, the grip forced him down so that he was looking up to her.

"If you ever mention his name in public again, your services will be terminated with immediate effect. People are listening and we cannot have his identity found out. You are expendable, he is not. Am I clear?"

"Y-yes, ma'am," he squealed, clamoring at his neck after she released him.

"I do not accept failure. This is justice, nothing less. We cannot falter, not even a little. Please understand – this means everything."

"I do. I do, ma'am."

"Good. What time is the meeting with the Mayor?"

“Two. It starts in a couple of minutes.”

“Then I shall wait for fifteen.”

“Why?”

“Because there is power in everything.”

He smiled. They stood in silence waiting for the minutes to pass. After a while – and with complete economy of movement – Shahina walked confidently into the headquarters.

“I-I just think that we shouldn’t be listening to this woman – we d-don’t know who...who she is, a-after all...”

“Siegel, did I ask for your brainless comments?”

“S-sorry, sir.”

“Good god, man. Don’t be so sniveling. Grow a backbone. Haven’t you learnt anything from me? Look at the polls. I’m down in minorities. After you hired that black guy, ten per cent of African-Americans flipped over to me. This...,” he stared down at a paper on his desk. “This Shahina, she can win me a few more immigrant votes.”

“But aren’t y-you worried about losing c-control?”

“Do I look like a man who isn’t in control?”

The Mayor stood up, his heavy six foot frame dominating the room. Despite a paunch, the majority of his bulk was in his arms and chest. His face was covered with a full beard, dark brown like his hair but with flecks of ginger and grey.

“Now listen to me, Siegel. You are not a real man. You’re barely slime, with all your whining and whimpering. There are leaders in this world and there are followers. Only the leaders are special, important. You, Siegel, are a *follower*.”

Siegel’s right leg twinged.

“Now, where the hell is she? Did you tell her to be here at two?”

“I d-did.”

“You’re sure? Absolutely certain?”

Siegel hesitated.

“P-pretty s-sure.”

“For god’s sake, Siegel. You are so fucking useless I get a hernia just looking at you. How am I meant to do this if my dimwit assistant can’t even arrange a simple meeting? What point is there in having you around when you’re so goddamn stupid?”

Siegel’s cheeks went red. He rose up shakily, staring intently at the Mayor.

“Well if...if you f-feel THAT way...MAYBE I SHOULD J-JUST...JUST...”

The door opened. Shahina walked in, her stride somehow perfectly synchronized with the motion of the door. Both men turned, entranced by the elegance of her movement.

“Gentlemen,” she said demurely.

“Ah...ah, you must be,” the Mayor glanced down at the paper again. “Shahina, right?”

“Yes, and it is very important that you remember my name from now on. Am I clear?”

The Mayor sat down, nodding his head instinctively. There was a pause as both men stared at her. Siegel’s mouth was open. The Mayor rubbed his beard.

“You’re a little late, Shahina.”

“Nonsense.”

He opened his mouth to correct her, but no words came out.

“We need to talk about your campaign.”

“Thanks, but we’ve got it all under control.”

“And the Knight?”

“Guy was bringing crime figures down every day. Now he’s gone and they’re on the up again. He stays away, he’s not a problem. He comes back, crime goes down. If the cops catch him, great. I can’t lose either way.”

“He is dangerous.”

“I thought your paper was suppor-”

“I do not have editorial control over the Herald,” she said faultlessly. “But what I can do is help you with him.”

“How?”

“I have a great deal more influence in this city than you are aware of, Mayor Lee.”

“Well, thank you, but we have it covered. The Knight really isn’t that much of an issue anymore. It’s the Reaper we have to worry about.”

“That can change very quickly, you understand.”

“I’m sorry...who’s the veteran here? I appreciate your concern, but I’ve been around the blocks more than a few times. Reaper’s the issue, believe me. He’s kidnapped the wife of the most powerful guy in the city, for crying out loud. If you can’t see I’m right, then this campaign – I – don’t need your help.”

“You will. When you have changed your mind, contact me. I am the only one that can help your campaign recover enough to beat Mr. Kean.”

The Mayor stared blankly at her.

“But-but I’m ahead!”

“Things change.”

He scanned her face, but it was a picture of calm and conviction.

“Gentlemen, my time is precious, so I am afraid I must depart. See you both soon. Goodbye, Siegel.”

She placed a hand gently on Siegel’s shoulder before leaving as gracefully as she’d entered. They sat staring at the door, the expressions on each man’s face markedly different. The Mayor turned his furrowed brow towards his assistant, keeping his eyes on the door.

“Siegel, I want you to find out every damn thing you can about that woman. There’s something not quite right...she’s too perfect. No-one’s that sure of themselves, not even me. There’s an agenda here, I can smell it. Something definitely fishy, I’m telling you. Siegel? Siegel, for crying out loud. Are you listening to me, you cretin?”

His gaze shifted to Siegel, who was still facing the door. His hand was perched limply where she had touched his shoulder. The Mayor picked up a stapler and threw it at his head.

“S-sorry, sir.”

However, his apology lacked conviction. Siegel sat with his eyes glazed over, staring longingly at the half-open door.

Chapter Twelve

The road ahead is settled only by **our own doing**. Our actions lay the path out in front of our feet, no matter where that leads us...

Al Qa'kaa Square
Al Iskanteriyah
2005

The center of Al Iskanteriyah stood deserted except for a group of men in army gear. Soaked from the downpour pummeling the town, their khaki uniform darkened to a washed-out brown color. Their limbs were twitchy; they kept glancing over their shoulders. The soldier at the front looked up towards the high tower on the other side of the square. There was no movement up there. He let out a groan.

“Second unit, move forward, ready for the signal. We hold for radio contact from Mason. This’ll be a quick one, nice and easy. Travis, anything?”

“Not yet, Sergeant.”

“Keep sharp, soldier.”

They approached the town hall quietly, taking the route west behind a row of old cars. Heavy rain pinged off their guns.

“Last time this kinda assault went down in the rain, whole bunch o’ guys got blown to bits,” whispered Travis to the soldier in front of him.

“Oh yeah? Thought you were green.”

“Been in the pit six months. Spent time in Fallujah. You know, Redwater Bridge and all that?”

“Fallujah ain’t nothin’, man. Right here is where the heat’s at. Fallujah, sheez!”

“Keep it down, you two. We’ve got to be ready to move when Mason gives us the sign,” barked the sergeant.

The unit went quiet. Two soldiers in the middle of the group exchanged a look.

“You sure this is a good idea, Sergeant? Remember the last time Mason scouted a target...”

“I remember, Elroy. I remember *real* good. You want that kind of trouble right here, under our noses?”

They all shook their heads emphatically.

“No, didn’t think so. Every team has its challenges and ours is Mason. Maybe he’ll come good this time. And Elroy?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Don’t ever question me again. I make the orders around here, got it?”

Elroy gave him a sharp salute. They all maintained position, staring at the tower. There was nothing. The waiting was beginning to show, only the rain keeping weariness from taking over their eyes. The sergeant noted this and muttered a curse. He made a small hand signal, urging them forward. They moved from behind the cars, out into the open. The front door of the hall stood just a few paces away.

A violent explosion roared from inside the hall, knocking the sergeant off his feet. He flailed around in the mud trying to haul himself up. Gunfire echoed out of the hall and around the square; the unit froze, unprepared and unguarded. It sounded like a full-blown battle had erupted inside. Terrible wailing screams were audible over the sound of bullets and blasts. The sergeant propped himself up in the mud with his elbows, unable to gain purchase on the wet floor.

The door opened.

“Second unit, fire at w-”

The first bullets dug into his chest and throat, knocking him backwards. Travis lunged sideways to get a better sight of the gunman, but lost his footing. The Iraqi fired, cutting Travis down with hits to the stomach and legs. The remaining members of second unit retreated, attempting to use the cars as a shield once more. As the vehicles were peppered with shots, glass and shards of metal flew everywhere, lashing into the soldiers. Throttled cries merged with the drumming rainfall; blood mingled with water in puddles of rutted mud.

The barrage coming from the Iraqi entrance suddenly skewed upwards. The gunman fell awkwardly to the floor. Mason was stood grimacing behind him; he held a large knife dripping with blood. After stabbing the blade into the wooden door, he wiped the blood on his khaki pants. Then he walked over to second unit, explosions still rumbling in the town hall behind him.

“Marshall, get the fuck down! They’re still in there!”

“It’s all good, Elroy.” He nodded back to the building, smiling. “Trip wires I set on my way through. Got most o’ those suckers already.”

“Way through? *Way through?* What the hell happened to radio contact?”

“It was broken. Couldn’t use it.”

“And? Why didn’t you come and fucking tell us? We had no goddamn cover, we had nothing. We weren’t ready.”

“Well, I...I-”

In the moment Marshall hesitated, he looked around the square. There was blood everywhere – splattered on cars, forming puddles on the ground. The new guy was screaming incessantly; something had cleaved his ear clean off. Holy Shit, Marshall thought. He knew he had to do something. Anything, just to make it better. To make it right.

“Listen, we need to get these guys back. Samson, you do a head count.”

“Fuck you, Marshall. This is your fault. Who are you to give orders?”

“It ain’t an order, man. But if I do it, yo’ gonna have to check the hall for survivors. Jus’ be careful with the trip mines I set, yeah?”

Samson glared at him.

“Fine, I’ll stay here.”

“Right. We’re gonna have to trek back to Camp Kalsa.”

“What? Why?”

“Radio’s down.”

“Great, that’s just goddamn great,” muttered Elroy.

Marshall moved back into the building. Treading carefully, he could see all the mines had been tripped. Twitching corpses and charred remains littered the rooms. As far as he could see, there were no survivors, just countless bodies and pieces of bodies. He didn't feel so heroic now, not in this chaos. There was only cold isolation as he walked amongst the stains of death.

The odor of burnt lead mixed with that of spilt blood and it was starting to make him feel sick. Marshall needed a distraction, something to help him cope. He tried to remember home, back in Tupello. The rich smell of Grandma's pies invaded his mind; warm cherries wedged in thick, sweet pastry. Closing his eyes, he wished he could go back. Into the past, to happier times, when there wasn't something wrong with Grandma. Before he got all tangled up with Dwayne and then the army. A time when his future stretched out in front of him untarnished. He was still daydreaming when the sound of something metallic caught his attention. He looked down.

A grenade was rolling towards his feet.

Adrenaline took over as he sprinted into the mezzanine. Throwing his gun to one side, he dived behind a corpse. He had just enough time to prop the corpse up. The explosion sent shards of glass, rubble and shattered ceramic tiles everywhere; Marshall strained against the force of the shrapnel digging into the body he was holding up. Rolling it back over, the acrid smell of burnt flesh invaded his nostrils.

Marshall creased up, holding his ears. They felt like they were on fire. He couldn't hear anything except for a high, constant whine that wrecked his brain. His senses turned upside down. The screeching noise felt like it was taking over his face. Marshall tried to concentrate, tried to listen for anything other than the screech. He could make out the slight rustle of fire underneath the high pitch sound.

And, very faintly, he noticed a sound. Something being dragged.

Marshall looked up but didn't get a chance to react. He barely even heard the gunshot. As he hit the wall, he exhaled sharply; he tried not to, but the impact forced the air from his lungs. He knew that this release of breath would be followed shortly by a second shot, the one that would kill him. The Iraqi in front of him looked far too young – eighteen at most. Yet his eyes held a tremendous weight, like the burden of war had seeped into them. As he moved closer, Marshall glanced down. The dragging noise.

Oh Jesus, he thought. His leg.

It was mangled, the trouser leg covered in blood. Marshall looked again into those deadened young eyes. The Iraqi boy raised his handgun again, aiming this time at Marshall's head instead of his Kevlar-covered chest. Click, Marshall barely heard.

Nothing. This time there was no bullet. Marshall tried to sigh in relief but couldn't. It felt like his chest was cracked in two.

The young Iraqi tried again, the same hollow ping sounding out. He discarded the gun, clearly frustrated as he hobbled away to look around for another to use. He found one.

It was Marshall's rifle.

Picking it up, he took the safety off and swiveled around. He heaved sideways violently; Marshall smashed into him. Both fell to the floor, the rifle dropping a few feet away. Before either of them could get up, Marshall launched a series of jabs into the Iraqi's ribs. The boy wailed. The ribs felt soft as his punches connected; they were already broken before he landed the first blow.

Getting slowly to his feet, he stared at the Iraqi in front of him. Gotta be no more than eighteen. The boy was desperately fighting for breath, scrambling on the rubble. Marshall figured his punches had pushed the broken ribs inward and one or more had punctured the lung; the boy looked like he couldn't get any air at all. Broken beyond repair. It was too much to watch. Almost in tears, Marshall shook his head before staggering out of the mezzanine towards the square. He got to the door and stopped.

Marshall clenched his fists as he turned back towards the fallen Iraqi. The boy was the last fading remnant of life in the hall. Marshall stared into the flames of the fire starting to consume the building. He ain't gonna make it, he thought. He'll die slow. Leaning down to pick up his rifle, he aimed directly at the Iraqi's forehead. Mouthing a silent 'sorry', he squeezed the trigger. A strange clicking noise rattled inside the barrel, the trigger not pulling back all the way.

It was broken.

Throwing the gun to one side, he hesitated. He tried to think of Grandma, of Tupello, of why he was even in Iraq, but it was impossible. The young boy's squawking attempts at breathing kept him in the here and now. A few moments passed before he spat into the fire. Ain't no way to die, he thought.

He looked for large pieces of rubble, something big enough to do the job. He found a giant slab of brick, but couldn't lift it; his energy was almost spent. The knife flashed in his head, offering him an alternative. But it was lodged in the door, all the way at the front of the building. By the time he got back, the path wouldn't be clear and the Iraqi be would consumed by the fire.

Shaking his head, Marshall knew what had to be done. Kneeling down with legs either side of the Iraqi's ribs, he took a few slow breaths to compose himself.

Marshall began to apply gentle pressure around his neck, using both hands. The Iraqi squirmed feebly, issuing gargled, rasping pleas. He quickly tightened his grip; Marshall didn't want to cause any more suffering than was necessary. The young man underneath him refused to give up his ineffectual struggle, throwing his arms around desperately. Please, jus' let go, please, Marshall thought.

Impatient and scared that doubt would overcome him, Marshall squeezed as hard as he could. Shock filled the Iraqi's eyes as one last sensation passed over him; an intense pain rose sharply from his throat to smother his features as his larynx snapped. The breathing stopped. The fight was over.

Marshall flopped forward exhausted, sobbing uncontrollably. He held his hands up to his face; he had been gripping so tightly they had cramped up. Pulling them down to his sides, he caught a glimpse of the cross and chain hanging from his neck.

A birthday present from his Grandma.

He remembered why he had come here in the first place; why doing terrible things was sometimes necessary. Times like these needed heroes, and that was why he signed up in the first place. He had to kill people to save people, it was that simple. Composing himself, he sat back up. The fire slowly spread around him, cocooned away from the incessant rain. Something caught his eye.

Looking down at the Iraqi, he noticed that in the struggle his shirt had become loose around the neck. Ohmygod, he thought. There was a white strap over the shoulder, under the top. Pulling the t-shirt to one side, what he saw was unmistakable. It was a bra.

He'd murdered a girl with his bare hands. A girl who was eighteen at most. Jumping up, Marshall stumbled from the wrecked mezzanine, clamping his hand over his mouth. Once outside, he threw up violently.

What have I done? he asked himself. There were no answers, only a nagging feeling that made him want to collapse and give up. It felt like the end. Raising his bloodshot eyes, he looked towards the cars. Only the lifeless bodies of second unit remained, battered by the rain. A wasteland of his own making. He was alone, all alone with none but the dead.

By the time Marshall returned to FOB Kalsa the rain had dissipated and the sky was tinged red from the setting sun. He had trekked from the east, which meant he was coming through the digs of first unit. He would have to go past the hill where central command stood to reach his own tent.

Marshall approached the living quarters slowly.

Soldiers stared as he hobbled by – he was an absolute mess. His once khaki-colored combats were ripped by shrapnel, caked in dirt and dried blood. One of the soldiers walked over to Marshall. It was Elroy. He charged over, smashing Marshall across the face. It was a heavy blow, yet Marshall barely moved. There was no flicker of anger or pain. Up on the hill, a man turned his attention toward the two men. Elroy took another swipe; again, no response from Marshall.

“You sonofabitch! You fuck! You got the sergeant killed. You coulda got us all killed!”

“Soldier!” shouted the man on the hill.

“Yes, General?”

“What the hell is going on?”

“Well, see Marsh-”

“Come over here, son,” he said more calmly, noticing the other soldiers staring. “No need cause a scene.”

The soldier sloped up towards the General. Marshall stayed planted to the spot in a stupor. The General couldn't take his eyes off him.

“Go on, son. What's your beef with that man?”

“We're second unit, sir. He was the scout for our ambush mission this morning, except he fuc- he screwed up real bad, sir.”

“Yes, second unit. Took heavy losses from what I gather. Sergeant Timms was a good man - real shame. What did this guy do, exactly?” he asked, nodding at Marshall.

“He ditched his post and went straight in, sir.”

His stare shifted from Marshall to Elroy.

“What?”

“He took on the insurgents head on. He didn’t scout like he was meant to - he attacked them on his own, sir.”

The General tapped his fingers against his bottom lip. Elroy stood waiting for a response. The General looked back at Marshall, standing alone in the middle of the first unit camp. He hadn’t moved an inch.

“Why? Why’d he do it?”

“Said his radio wasn’t working.”

“Okay, but he should have gotten back to the commanding officer before doing anything. A busted radio doesn’t make you do what he did, soldier. What I mean is – why go solo? Is he crazy? A suicide risk?”

“Only to everyone else, sir. He’s been with our unit seven months. Before him, we’d lost one guy. Since he showed up, we’re three men down and four men maimed.”

“So he’s reckless, then?”

“If you ask me, sir,” said the soldier, “he thinks he’s some sort of hero.”

“Well, son, war can do strange things to men. Changes their perceptions, you know. Though you and I may see differently, I’ve no doubt there are those who’d see him as an All-American hero.”

“If that’s the case, sir, then with all due respect – our country’s going straight to hell.”

The General smiled.

“We’re already here, soldier. The more time I spend fighting the more I think we’ve got it all wrong. When was the last time we weren’t waging war? Inflicting it on our young men, robbing them of their vitality and their lives?”

Elroy’s eyes flickered.

“These Iraqi scumbags got it coming to them, sir.”

“Hmm, quite,” the General muttered, instantly uninterested. “Go about your business, soldier.”

The soldier snapped off a smart salute before marching down the hill. He eyeballed Marshall as he passed. Marshall didn’t even seem to notice. Once Elroy was gone, something grabbed his focus.

He tried to fight it.

Yet his eyes – little by little, with grim inevitability – turned towards the man on the hill. As the General waved for him to come up, Marshall looked down at the ground despondently.

It felt like another of those defining moments, the last of which he’d felt years ago when the towers came crashing down and fate propelled him into a different world. It didn’t feel so good this time, knowing the consequences of what happened before.

Yet he was strangely buoyed by this beckoning. He’d already been through hell today, walked through courtyards of mutilated bodies and charred remains. He convinced himself that this was rock bottom, that it couldn’t get any worse from here on in.

Marshall offered a weary salute to the General, who smiled appreciatively at the attempt. He looked intently at Marshall, not just into his eyes. His arms, his legs, even the way he stood, how far apart his feet were. Finally, he looked into Marshall’s eyes again.

“Damn stupid what you did, soldier.”

“Yeah,” mumbled Marshall.

“Probably going to face a court-martial for that, son.”

“Yeah.”

“That would be a shame in my eyes. Real shame. How tall are you?”

The General looked like he already knew the answer.

“About six two, give or take.”

“Weight?”

“Not sure, really.”

“Well, you look in good shape to me – so that won’t be a problem. Tell me...why’d you join the army?”

“9/11.”

The General sighed.

“You and every other son of a gun here. Don’t play stupid, son, you know that’s not what I’m asking. Why did *you* join the army? What motivated you personally to come here?”

Marshall hesitated. This was a battle in itself and Marshall felt like he was being outmaneuvered. Pursing his lips, he decided to wave the white flag. There was no energy left in him for fighting.

“I joined the army ‘cause...’cause I wanted to make a difference. My grandma’s sick – she wouldn’t tell me, but I knew. Yo’ family’s important. An’ when I saw what happened in New York on the TV, I saw an opportunity. To make her proud. I guess I wanted to be the kind o’ man people look up to,” he paused. “For her.”

“I’m sure you are, son. I’m sure you are. Except...now we have a problem. You aren’t going to get out of this situation clean. Not without my help.”

“Yo’ help?”

“Yes, my help. Tell me – you still want to be a hero? A hero for your grandmother?”

It felt like a stupid question to Marshall – he’d strangled a teenage girl only hours ago. There was too much blood on his hands, saturating into his skin, into his own bloodstream.

There could be no washing away of his sins; the things he had done would last forever. Being a hero was impossible. And yet a faint mist of hope clung to him. Maybe the General could help.

“Yeah, I wanna put it right. Do the right thing.”

“Good,” he smiled, “I’m glad you said that. What I’m offering you is a chance to work covertly. And when I say covertly, I mean top, top secret. It’ll be a group of six, including you. You will be our top man. You will liaise only with me. You’ll be on your own – the team of five will be separate from you. Sound good?”

“Yeah, as long as when I leave here my record’s clean.”

“It will be, I promise. Now I know it must seem fast, but we need to get you through conditioning training as soon as possible. It’ll take three months to get you in top shape and battle-ready.”

“Conditionin’ trainin’?”

“We are going to make you better than the rest. The things you’ll be able to do, you wouldn’t believe. You’re going to help end this war. We are going to turn you into our ultimate weapon, son.”

Marshall looked uncertain, his eyes wavering between the General and the ground. The officer patted Marshall gently on the back as he led him up to the army truck, smiling warmly at him.

“What’s your name, soldier?”

“Marshall Mason.”

“Well, Marshall – where you from?”

“Tupello born an’ bred.”

“That’s a hell of a city,” the General said, a little too quickly. “Been there once or twice. You know, where I come from, we tend to call our superiors ‘sir’.”

“Point taken,” Marshall smiled, a little more relaxed. “Where you from, sir?”

The General looked up into the fading light of the foreign sky. He turned to Marshall, his dark skin tainted with streaky patterns of spilt blood.

“I’m from Brownley Creek, son. Got a nice cabin up there, where the air’s fresh. That’s where I intend to see out the rest of my days, just me and my family. That is, if Uncle Sam ever stops picking fights.”

Both men laughed at the joke, men of war together. It was a dark humor that reduced all the terrible things they had seen and done, diminishing their sins.

“Where did you learn to speak like that?”

Marshall turned to him.

“I got no idea what yo’ talkin’ about.”

The General smiled.

“Not a problem. There aren’t going to be any more problems for you, son. We’re going to fix you.”

Marshall began looking forward to his chance at redemption as he climbed into the truck. Maybe he *could* make good all his mistakes. Surely helping to end the war would be a good thing? The truck sped off as the sun fell from the edge of the horizon, plunging the harsh landscape into icy darkness.

Chapter Thirteen

Choices define who we are, or what we end up becoming - a good man? A hero? A monster?

Greenburg Tower
Tupello
Fourteen Months Ago

Taylor strained his eyes as he labored out of the elevator and across the empty office. There were only two sources of brightness – one came from a bulky red candle burning on the desk by the window, the other from outside – pallid moonlight dominating the clear night sky. The Reaper stood by the large window staring out. A clanging noise echoed behind him. He turned around, shaking his head.

“Yo’ so goddamn clumsy, Taylor.”

“Sorry, boss – tripped. It expensive or somethin’?”

“It’ll cost *you* a lot if you keep droppin’ it.”

Taylor gawped at the crate he had just lumbered up to the office, finally noticing letters etched on the side. GRENADES. He stepped back. The Reaper shook his head again then paused. There was a noise, a gentle ‘ding’. The elevator opened and out came two muscular men carrying large containers. The elevator doors closed once more as it descended to the ground floor.

“Put ‘em by the grenades. *Carefully*,” he added, glaring at Taylor.

“Sure thing, boss.”

They put them down. There was a bang behind them, coming from a box.

The box moved.

Frantic spasms rocked it left and right. The two gang members looked at each other, then back at the box.

“How long we stayin’ here for, boss? Ain’t that guy gonna want his office?” asked Taylor.

“What, you don’t like the view from the thirty-second floor? Greenburg’s meant to be movin’ in next month. Shiny new HQ, a symbol of a new, brighter Brinkmater,” he sneered as he spoke. “But I don’t think it’s gonna happen.”

“Why not?”

“I think Mister Greenburg’s had a change o’ heart since his wife went missin’.”

A muffled yell came from the box. The Reaper grinned.

“What we gonna do with her, boss?”

“Whatever you want. She’s good as dead anyway.”

His cell phone vibrated on the battered desk. Picking it up, he answered the call.

“Give me back my wife.”

“What, no ‘please’? An’ I thought you was educated an’ all. Where’s my money, bitch?”

“What? I gave you the money, I gave you everything you asked for. Why are you doing this?”

“Brinkmater’s mine, old man. You think you can jus’ waltz in an’ take it away from me? The Knight didn’t slow me down, sure as hell gonna make sure no white man gets in my way.”

“Is that what this is about? Jesus! You’ve kidnapped my wife because I’m redeveloping Brinkmater?”

“Destroyin’ it, that’s what. Tearin’ at its heart, its soul. Jus’ ‘cause it’s gotta dark heart, a dark soul, don’t mean you can come down here an’ rip it apart.”

“Now listen, you son of a bitch. I don’t care about the money, I don’t even care about Brinkmater as long as you bring back my wife unharmed. You think you’re the king of this town? Fine, have it if you want it. But I swear, if you or any of your gangbangers hurt my wife in any way, the only thing you will know for the rest of your life is pain.”

The line went dead. Almost straight after, his phone vibrated again; it was a text:

**WATCH OUT – HE IS
COMING FOR YOU.**

The Reaper tapped the desk with his fingers.

“Taylor, we got a guy on Greenburg, ain’t we?”

“Yeah, boss. Why, you want me to call an’ get an update?”

“No, it’s fine. He woulda called if there’d been anythin’ to report. I jus’...got a weird text, that’s all. It’s nothin’.”

A whirring noise caught his attention; the elevator was coming back up. He looked over at the other two gang members.

“Did either o’ you press a button before you got out?”

“No, boss.”

“Nope.”

“Yo’ absolutely certain?”

They nodded. The lift sound pinged again, but the door didn’t open. The three gang members looked at him, waiting for orders. He thumped his desk, melted wax spilling in drops over the wood.

“You two. Go check.”

“What about Taylor?”

“Just go do it. *Now.*”

They walked over to the elevator, every so often looking back towards the Reaper. He waved his hand dismissively. When they reached the door one of them tentatively pressed the ‘open’ button and stepped back immediately. The doors slowly separated.

It was empty.

The two men entered gingerly. They began looking around the confined space, checking and prodding panels for any kind of device or trick.

“Hey boss, doesn’t look like there’s anything in here,” one said. They both looked up. “Oh, wait – there’s somethin’ up here, I don’t kn-”

The doors closed. Taylor glanced nervously at his boss. The Reaper came out from behind his desk, edging towards the elevator. There was a sharp bang inside, followed by several smaller noises. He thought he could make out his two henchmen shouting, maybe even screaming; it was difficult to hear their voices over incessant crashes.

Then it fell silent.

The Reaper was right by the door, his arms tense. Taylor edged back behind the desk, by the window and as far away from the elevator as possible.

“Boss, what the hell is goin’ on?”

“I dunno, Taylor. Someone’s fuckin’ with me, an’ I don’t like it.”

“But-but, who? Who w-would do this?”

“Don’t know. But whoever they are, they’re a dead man,” he said as the lift doors opened.

His two gang members were lying down, blood spattered across large mirrors inside the elevator. They were badly beaten but still breathing. The Reaper stared at the mess, so confined and yet so brutal. He looked up. The ceiling latch was open.

“Sonofabitch escaped.”

“Escaped? W-w-where?”

“Dunno, but I’m gonna find him an’ I’m gonna kill him real slow,” he said, turning round to Taylor with a steely glare.

The large window behind Taylor smashed into tiny shards, raining down on him. A ghost came bursting in from the night, silhouetted by the giant moon. Before he could react, Taylor was pulled out and thrown flailing into the cool air. His hurried screams quickly vanished; seconds later, there was a faint thud. The figure at the window didn’t look back, his eyes focused intently on the Reaper.

“An’ we only just relocated! Man, how am I gonna claim this on expenses? ‘A thousand bucks, visit from the Knight’ – ain’t sure my accountant’s gonna be happy with that.”

“Enough of the games, Dwayne. This ends tonight.”

“Oh, we jus’ gettin’ started, *freak*.”

“You can’t hide behind the mask forever. Neither can I. We are who we are.”

“Says the dead man. I ain’t hidin’ – never have, never will. Guess I gotta kill you again – this time for good.”

The two men stared at each other, twenty paces apart. The only noise was the wind sweeping in from the broken window. There was a ‘ding’ behind the Reaper as the elevator descended with his unconscious gang members still inside.

“So what you gonna do? You think you can do it, freak - kill me?”

“If I have to.”

“If you have to. Don’t sound too heroic to me,” he said, moving over to the crates.

The Knight stayed still, his eyes not shifting from the Reaper’s. He didn’t seem to notice the muted pleas coming from the box on the other side of the room. The Reaper bent down and opened one of the crates.

“You hear that, superhero?”

“Yeah, I hear it.”

“Know what it is?”

“Linda Greenburg, wife of Alan Greenburg. You kidnapped her while he was entertainin’ guests at Akeldama, his new restaurant.”

“Yo’ good, I’ll give you that. But no. Well, I mean yeah, course it’s her. But what it *really* is, when it comes down to it – it’s that difference between you an’ me. Remember what I said about profit margins? It makes certain things a necessity for me which you jus’ can’t bring yo’self to do. You can’t let her die. She’s innocent. Ain’t done nothin’ wrong. Not an issue for me. I’m better off with her dead, in fact. All o’ which means this grenade in my hand is jus’ about enough to stop you.”

“Nothin’ you can do will stop me. It all ends here, it all ends now. This is it.”

The Knight remained perfectly still. The Reaper moved back towards the elevator. A few steps from the doors, he flicked his thumb.

A grenade pin fell to the floor.

“Yo’ weak. That weakness costs – yo’ dead, an’ she’s dead too.”

“She’s an acceptable loss.”

The Knight moved just as the Reaper began to fling his arm back. As the grenade flew through the air, he pushed the desk towards the lift with all his strength. The explosive began its looping descent; he lowered himself and shifted all his weight underneath the desk, hurling it directly up towards the falling grenade. It rebounded off the oak back towards the Reaper, who leapt behind containers. By the window, the Knight turned his back and covered himself with his heavy cape, rolling up into a ball. As the heavy desk clattered to the ground, the grenade bounced.

It touched the floor a second time, then exploded.

Shards of wood and shrapnel flew in all directions, digging into walls and ceiling. The floor shook violently; flaming debris fell onto the carpet in a large radius around the explosion. The Knight unfurled his cape and stood up. Wood spikes protruded out of his cloak, though none had penetrated both cape and Kevlar. He surveyed the scene. The room was devastated; fires were spreading in several places. Smoke seeped out, polluting the clear night sky. He noticed something.

The box had stopped moving.

He walked over to it and opened the lid. Linda Greenburg was alive. At least, she was still breathing. The entire right side of her body was wrecked with shrapnel. Dozens of wooden spears and metallic shards impaled her skin. Her skirt and blouse were on fire, as was her hair. Blood gushed from so many wounds, it was pooling in the box.

An ambulance wouldn't get to her in time, he knew that. There was little they could do even if they made it here quickly. If he left her, she would suffer a slow and agonizing death. He knew what he should do. What he had to do. What was right.

Leaning down into the box, he grabbed her by the neck and applied pressure, building to a vice-like stranglehold. He recalled vague memories as his fingers tightened their grip against her skin. This time, though, there was no struggle. The woman succumbed limply to death; it was over in less than a minute. He closed the lid, his hands pulsing.

"That was cold, freak."

He looked over towards the crates. There was the Reaper, his forehead burnt and bleeding. He was propped up against the wall, his breathing labored.

"It had to be done."

"You killed her ass, man! Nothin' like that ever needs to be done. You chose to do it. You *wanted* to do it."

"No. I *had* to."

"Why? Why the hell did you have to do it, then?"

"You can't *keep* what you can't *prove*."

The Reaper stared dumbfounded at him. Then he let out a rasped, sarcastic laugh. Around him, fires connected with each other.

"That's rich, man. Yo' stealin' my lines now?"

“No. I had to do this, to get you.”

“To *get* me?”

“If she didn’t die, how many more would? If I let you go, how many more would suffer?”

“You know who yo’ startin’ to sound like? Me. Me, I always got my eye on the bigger picture. Always did, even when we was kids,” he said smugly, sliding towards Marshall.

“You think you’re so goddamn smart. You think I don’t know you set me up at Valerii’s, all those years ago?”

“If only he’d got you, woulda made my life a hell o’ a lot easier. Didn’t matter though – that gang was always gonna be mine, one way or another.”

“An’ Wink?” he demanded, edging nearer.

“I shot Wink two years ago. Steppin’ outta line. What about you, freak? Or are you forgettin’ you just threw a man outta the window? You even know that was yo’ old pal Taylor? Now *he* was handy. Great little puppy, eager to please. My little bitch. Gotta say, I was a little upset when you threw him out like the trash. But hey, I guess he was another one you jus’ *had* to kill. Growin’ list, ain’t it? Yo’ killin’ list. I’m wonderin’ if you haven’t jus’ gotten a taste for it. An’ if you’ll excuse me now, I gotta do some killin’ o’ my own.”

He rolled another grenade – pin already removed – towards the Knight. Pivoting on one foot, the Knight swiveled and kicked the grenade high and hard out into the night. There was a moment of silence before a loud boom echoed around the smoky office. The Reaper was suddenly by him, wrapping his arm around his neck in a choker hold.

“Killin’ innocent people again, huh?”

“B-Brinkmater’s e-empty...nrrghhh...this t-time of night. N-no-one around,” he growled, launching a head butt into the Reaper’s face.

The Reaper's elbow connected with his cheek, sending him sprawling, before thrusting his boot towards the Knight's ribs. Before his foot smashed down the Knight grabbed it and twisted his leg sharply. There was a tearing noise from inside the knee, followed by an impatient scream as the Reaper fell writhing to the floor. The Knight moved over to him slowly, bending down to grab him by the collar. His whole body was shaking.

“IS THIS WHAT YOU WANTED, DWAYNE? IS THIS WHAT YOU WERE AFTER, ALL THESE YEARS?”

There was no response to the question, merely screams. As the Knight shook his head in frustration, the Reaper lifted up a foot long shard of wood.

He rammed it into the Knight's chest.

The Kevlar only protected him so much. Staggering back, he rested on the wall struggling to breath. He stared at the protruding shard, blood starting to ooze around it.

Concentrating on his breathing, he regained composure and lifted off the wall. He held the shard with both hands, gently applying pressure – up with one hand, down with the other. Eventually the wood started to splinter and break, leaving a stump lodged in the wound. He knew not to pull it out.

Clenching his fists, he looked up. The Reaper had moved over to the shattered remains of his desk. The Knight strode over to him. As he got nearer, the Reaper rolled over and aimed a gun at him.

Moving clearly caused a lot of pain; his first couple of shots flew wildly into the ceiling. He shot again, this time hitting the Knight in the left arm. About to pull the trigger once more, the Knight grabbed the hand he was holding the gun in and crushed it, and then tossed the dropped weapon out the window.

“WHY ARE YOU FIGHTIN’? WHAT DO YOU GOT THAT’S EVEN WORTH FIGHTIN’ FOR?” Marshall screamed, tears running down his face.

His adversary simply lay there in silence, crippled by his mangled leg. Frustrated, the Knight stamped down hard on his injured knee. The Reaper tried to scream, but ended up laughing.

The Knight fell to his knees and began to beat him around the head, throwing wild punches at his temples. The gangster scrambled with his good hand to grab the wood stuck in the Knight's chest. The Knight grabbed his hand and flicked his wrist, snapping the Reaper's thumb at the joint. Grabbing his collar, the Knight dragged the Reaper over to the window. Pulling up right by the edge, he heard the whirring noise of a helicopter. The Reaper was still laughing.

"Hey, Marshall – ever wonder what woulda happened if you'd been voted leader instead o' me? Think you'd be me, an' I'd be you?"

"No."

"So yo' really gonna kill me, huh?"

"I told you – if I had to, I would. This can't go on forever."

"You don't get it, do you? What you gonna do without me? Who you gonna fight? You can't exist without me! This ain't jus' the end o' the line for *me*. Do this an' there's nothin' left for you either."

"*Don't* do it, then? How is that an option? You've left me with no choice," he said, hauling the Reaper further over the edge.

"Marshall, no!"

It was Shahina.

She moved closer towards them, walking carefully through the fires consuming the room. The noise outside was growing; the helicopter getting nearer.

"You should not do this."

"I *have* to. You said I should. It's what I gotta do."

"No, you do not. Let him go to jail. I was wrong. If you do this, you are above justice. You are not above justice. This will be the end of you."

"Hey, you should listen to her, man. She's *real* smart. If only y-"

"Shut up," Shahina hissed at the Reaper.

The Knight hesitated. The helicopter lowered down close towards the blasted window, its side facing the building. Shahina ran towards the walls, hiding behind some broken boxes. The helicopter had 'Channel 8' in bold letters on the side. The chopper spotlight was steadied, drowning them in sharp light. For a moment, the Knight was blinded.

The Reaper took advantage, grabbing at the wooden shard stuck in the Knight's chest using his twisted fingers, managing to pull part of it out. Marshall shifted one of his hands, trying to stop the remaining wood from dislodging by pressing it into place. Blood trickled down his stomach; he was struggling to hold the Reaper with only one hand.

“Why'd you do that? Jesus, I can't hold you up. Grab my arm, man. Grab my arm! Why'd you do that? Why? *Why?*”

“Why? Fuck you, that's why.”

The Reaper smashed down on his arm, forcing the Knight to let go. The air filled with noise; whirring blades, police negotiators on loudspeakers and the snarling wind whipping around them. The Reaper didn't make a single sound as he swept down into dark oblivion. The Knight sunk to his knees holding his chest.

“Marshall! We need to go,” Shahina pleaded. “We need to go *now*.”

“I'm hurt. I ain't goin' anywhere. Think...think I'm dyin'.”

“No. You are only hurt. I can fix you, just like I did before. We can do this together. I have a helicopter on the roof. We need to move. Now. Get up.”

He pulled himself onto his knees, doing as she said. Staggering to his feet, he fell towards the wall, desperate for support. She came toward him and put his arm around her shoulder, struggling under the extra weight. As they moved towards the elevator, he took one final look at the box.

It was on fire.

Shahina pressed the 'up' button. The doors opened and they stepped inside, the henchmen still out cold on the elevator floor. He watched flames consume the room, smoke filling his nostrils.

“There's no goin' back. Not after tonight – not after what I've done. Everythin's changed.”

II.

Bleached white bony hands

Pushin' me down into the depths –

The blood-red murk.

Chapter Fourteen

If you stay in the shadows too long, you become one with the dark - a **wraith** amongst the living...

JJG Airport – Arrivals Gate
Tupello
2006

“Mighty nice sign you got there,” said the man next to her.

Grandma inspected the cardboard rectangle, ‘WELCOME HOME’ pasted across it in bright red and gold letters.

“It’s nothin’. Gettin’ my boy back today.”

“Well, I’m sure he’s gonna be real happy when he sees you. Where’s he been?”

“Iraq.”

The man shifted.

“Oh.”

“He’s a real hero, been servin’ our country out there. World’s a safer place ‘cause o’ Marshall.”

The man nodded tamely.

They heard the swoosh of electronic doors opening. Grandma hauled herself up from the metal barrier she was resting on, ready. A dozen or so people ambled out, none of them Marshall. She slouched back down.

“So,” ventured the man once more, “you must be pretty proud of him?”

“Course I am. Boy’s suffered a lot over the years, an’ for a long time I thought maybe he wasn’t gonna turn out right. But he pulled it all together, an’ he did it himself.”

“I’m sure you helped.”

“Me? How’s an old lady like me gonna help with anythin’ much?” she cackled. “No, Marshall’s made his own way in life. I don’t take no credit for the man he’s becomin’. That’s his work, through an’ through. He makes me so proud, I couldn’t really tell you.”

“If he has that, he’s a lucky man indeed.”

“It’s nothin’. Jus’ like every grandmother an’ her grandkids. When it comes to my special fried chicken, that boy *is* lucky!”

They both laughed, Grandma’s chuckle quickly turning into a coughing fit. She dropped the sign as violent hacking motions took hold of her fragile frame. The man pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and passed it to her. She put it to her mouth and let out a painful, rasping cough. After a while, the noise slowed to little throat-clearing groans. She gave the man an embarrassed smile, handing him his handkerchief. It was covered in specks of blood.

They stood staring at each other. He opened his mouth, and then closed it. Her eyes began to well up as she shook her head gently. The man gave her a sympathetic look.

“That must be where he gets his courage from,” he said, leaning down to pick up the sign.

The doors opened again. Grandma glanced up to see the outline of a figure that seemed familiar yet different. Stepping out of the doorway and into the light, he became obvious to her.

“Son, over here, over here!”

He made his way toward her; she embraced him tightly. Grabbing onto his arms, she inspected him. Marshall looked gaunt, his cheeks covered with prickly stubble and sunken in the gaps around the bones. She noticed his army suit hung off his shoulders, dipping where his muscular frame used to fill it out. He tried to smile, the very corners of his mouth turning slightly. Yet his eyes remained as they were – washed out and vacant.

“You-you gotta be tired, that’s what it is. Long journey got you all worn out. Let’s get you home, I made you some o’ my special fried chicken.”

She placed a bony hand on Marshall’s back as she took him out of the airport, not looking back at the stranger holding her red and gold welcome sign.

They sat silently in the taxi, Marshall staring at the world passing by without blinking. Grandma looked despairingly at him, her mouth set downwards. She was ringing her hands in her lap. Marshall shifted.

“Slow down.”

“What?”

“I said *slow down*.”

“But...sir? This is Brinkmater, we don't wanna slow down in this neighborhood. It's gotten real rough these past few years.”

“You heard me.”

The taxi driver sighed but did as Marshall said. They cruised down Brinkmater Avenue past burnt-out cars, the sound of sirens constant in the background. Grandma looked out, horrified; the cab driver had gone through here fast on the way to the airport and now it was obvious why. It was a slum, a hole with barely any light breaking through. She turned to speak, but didn't when she noticed her grandson's face.

He couldn't take his eyes off of it.

Silent tears ran down his face as he sat there, watching. Grandma's own expression filled with worry.

“Bumped into Mrs. Bouvier the other day, she was askin' after you. She didn't tell me, but I hear things from time to time about her boy. He's bad news, Marshall. Was that way even when you was kids, an' it's only gotten worse since you been gone. I know you was close once. But I want you to promise me. Promise me you won't go a-”

“You don't need promises from me. All that's in the past. Dead. Don't even wanna be here, in this...place.”

“Place? What, Tupello? This is yo' home, boy. Born here, brought up here. Part o' who you are, can't never change that.”

She went to stroke his hand, but he pulled away from her.

“What's gotten into you, son? What did they *do* to you out there?”

He didn't answer. After a while Grandma stopped staring at him and turned away, her shoulders bobbing slightly as she held her hand to her mouth.

Marshall pulled his bags out of the trunk and lugged them to the front door. Grandma paid the cab driver and rifled through her purse for the front door keys. Opening up, she wandered in only to turn around. Marshall stood in the doorway, frozen. He muttered something under his breath, his shoulders sagging.

"Think I'm gonna head out."

"What? But...but I only jus' got you back."

"I know, but I...I need some space. Some air. I'll come home later."

"When? What time? What about yo' chicken? I made it for *you*. It's yo' favorite, ever since you was a boy."

"I'm not hungry. Save me some, I'll grab it later."

"Aren't you even gonna change outta that army suit?"

He brushed a distracted kiss against her forehead and walked out. It was dusk in Tupello, the chill of night already starting to creep in. He was alone here, alien to his own neighborhood. There was only one way to fix it. He set out towards Brinkmater Straights.

Marshall finished another whiskey, sliding his glass carelessly across the polished wooden surface. A man playing pool walked over, offering his hand.

"Fuck off."

"Hey, there's no need to be like that, soldier. I only wanted to say thanks for wha-"

"Jus' listen, okay? You got no idea what I did, who I am, *what* I am. What's the fuckin' point of thankin' someone if you haven't got a clue about them. Save your breath an' get outta my goddamn face."

The man sighed but walked away. Marshall waved his hand towards the barman. The burly bartender looked over to another man in the corner, who shook his head. The barman let out a resigned moan.

“Time to pay your tab, my friend. You’ve had enough for one night.”

“Like fuck I have, Mike. Gimme another.”

“Look, I don’t want any trouble. I just can’t d-”

“CAN’T WHAT? CAN’T WHAT, MOTHERFUCKER?” Marshall grabbed the bartender by the collar, their noses practically touching.

The bell above the door tinkled. Everyone’s gaze fell to the floor.

“I see the army didn’t work on yo’ anger management. Everyone else, get the fuck out.”

The bar emptied quickly. Marshall turned towards the door, loosening his grip on the barman. He let out a disbelieving laugh.

“You laughin’ at me? I know you been gone a while, but I don’t take that kinda shit from no-one.”

“I ain’t laughin’ *at* you. I’m laughin’ ‘cause...look at this. You’re my past, man. A ghost. How fuckin’ ironic is this?”

Dwayne moved closer and Marshall got a better look at his face. It was different, harsher. Everything around his nose and mouth was raw. Pink.

“You look like fuckin’ shit, Marshall,” he said as he sat down next to him. “Two more whiskeys.”

“Lemme guess – now you’re the man, you’re comin’ down here to tell me what’s what.”

“Ha, yo’ good. I’ll give you that. But I ain’t quite the man jus’ yet. Almost there, couple o’ years maybe. Got myself an expandin’ franchise. Think yo’ considerin’ yo’self a little too highly if you think I made my way down here to fire a warnin’ shot.”

“You were always threatened by me, even when we was kids.”

Dwayne's bar-stool scraped on the wooden floor as he turned sharply, eyeballing Marshall.

“Careful now. I ain’t never felt threatened by nobody.”

“Whatever, man. Think what you like, I don’t fuckin’ care.”

They sat in awkward silence, Dwayne sipping his drink as Marshall took large gulps.

“So...what was it like?”

“What?”

“Iraq. That’s where they sent you, wasn’t it?”

“Does it matter? Do you even care?”

Dwayne grinned.

“Guess I don’t.”

“Course you don’t. None of it means shit, dead is dead wherever you are, in the sand or in the street.” He took another gulp of liquor. “Bet you killed people since I been gone. Yeah, I see it in your eyes. People would say difference between us is right an’ wrong, our reasons. But they’re fuckin’ stupid. Only difference is blood’s soaked right through my skin, deep into my veins. You – *you* wipe the blood off your hands with hundred dollar notes.”

Dwayne broke out into a loud, toothy laugh.

“Damn good point. You sound a bit like a guy I know an’ admire – me. I didn’t come down here to tear you up. You an’ me go back too long for that. I could use a guy like you in my team. Be like we used to, only better. Mo’ money, mo’ girls. What you say?”

Marshall let out a sigh.

“No.”

“No, that’s it? You don’t even wanna think about it?”

“That’s my answer.”

“Yo’ cold, man. That army shit ate you up an’ spat you out pure fuckin’ ice. Real shame, you coulda made a difference.”

Marshall smiled wryly.

“I thought that. Once.”

“An’?”

“Didn’t turn out so good.”

The barman came over and refilled Marshall’s glass. He offered to top up Dwayne’s half-finished drink, but Dwayne shook his head.

“So, how’s yo’ grandma?”

Marshall lifted the glass up to eye level, studying the way the whiskey sloshed around the sides as he moved, then sunk it in one. He slammed the glass down on the bar.

“She ain’t...not great, man. Not great.”

“Sorry to hear it.”

Dwayne tilted his head and knocked back the rest of the whiskey. He hissed as the harsh alcohol hit the back of his throat, shaking his head as he placed the glass down gently. He chucked a few notes on the bar, giving Marshall a warm pat on the back as he stood up. He paused for a second, then made his way to the exit.

“Dwayne?”

“Yeah?” he said, turning back to Marshall.

“When did it all get so fucked up?”

“What?”

“Tupello. It’s diseased, rotten. Fallin’ apart all around us. Ain’t you seen it? Taken a real good look at it?”

Dwayne opened the door, the bell tinkling once more.

“I have. You know what?” he beamed. “It’s my kind o’ town.”

He stepped out. Marshall sat in the empty bar, thinking about the past, thinking about the things he’d done.

“Another whiskey,” he growled at the barman.

Chapter Fifteen

The dead cannot speak, so we speak for them - in tongues of **guilt**, soaked in lost remnants of the past.

Brinkmater Cemetery
Tupello
Thirteen Months Ago

It was an unusually beautiful day in Tupello. Marshall stood upon a hill between large oaks, larks fluttering above his head. He watched the scene below from behind one of the trees. His mind repeated one thing over and over again, unable to escape the hidden truth: it was a closed casket. *It was a closed casket.*

Grandma sat in the second row, her shoulders trembling ever so slightly as she tried to keep her emotions in check. She was on her own, the space around her making her look even more fragile. The sunshine gleamed off rows of empty white chairs; there were five people attending, including the priest. Floral tributes propped up on the side of the coffin, the largest of which spelled out 'SON'. He felt a twinge in his chest, stitches over the wound rubbing against his flesh.

Turning his attention to Mrs. Bouvier, Marshall was surprised. She wasn't crying. Dwayne's mother wasn't crying. From his vantage point there didn't seem to be any emotion in her face. She just sat there, staring at the coffin. The other people paying their respects looked like older relatives. No young people. No friends.

A lark fluttered around the coffin, singing as it arced through the air. It swung around, landing neatly on the chair next to Mrs. Bouvier. No-one seemed to notice, not even Dwayne's mother. Marshall felt bile in his throat; it burned.

The priest was finishing his sermon.

“To lose someone at any age is tragic. But to lose yet another young man in such a senseless fashion leaves us all with a strong feeling of anger, of injustice. For many it can feel like we are drowning in avarice and pain. It is at such times that we must turn to the Lord and ask for his help, for he is the only one who can heal our hurt. He alone is our salvation, our redemption.

“Tupello has undergone difficult times, testing times for all of us. The hands of evil men – vigilantes and their ilk – have touched our community with their poisonous influence. Violence has become an everyday occurrence under the sway of these masked madmen. There have been those who have suffered more than most.

“Yet if we believe in His word, we will prevail. This is it, a test. One that we must pass. Hold strong, hold true. He will show us the way. Tupello is not lost; there is goodness in the heart of every man,” the priest turned to the coffin as he spoke, pausing. Marshall noticed the lark had flown away. “It is up to us, God’s children, to ensure good will triumph. Almighty God has his plan for all of us, and while we may not understand it, we must keep our faith that...that he wi-”

He turned to the skies, blinking as fat droplets of water splashed onto his thick-rimmed glasses. The graveyard became ominously shadowy under a vast cloud. The air filled with the patter of rain bombarding the coffin lid.

The priest shook his head disbelievingly - staring at blue skies lining the horizon, sunshine no more than a mile from the graveyard. They were under the only cloud and they were getting soaked. Marshall gripped and ungripped his fingers, unwittingly tearing strips of bark away. The priest took off his glasses and wiped them outside and in.

“The poor sonofabitch,” he said.

Mrs. Bouvier glared at the man, a blaze of anger flashing over her dripping face. It quickly subsided, finishing with a nod of agreement. Marshall gripped the bark of the tree harder, desperately trying not to smash his fists into the oak. His old friend, a man so powerful and charismatic he held the entire city in his grasp, was being mourned in a way unfitting for a beggar.

“We had best finish there,” the priest said, looking apologetically at Mrs. Bouvier. “Dwayne, may your soul be replenished by the Almighty in the Paradise of Heaven, may your sins be expunged in the conflagration of immortal reckoning. Son, may you finally be able to rest in peace. Amen.”

Mrs. Bouvier said a loud ‘Amen’. The priest made the sign of the cross just as the graveyard workers moved in to lift the straps either side of the coffin. There were four of them, grabbing it awkwardly. By the time they had gracelessly lowered it into the vacant space and begun shoveling soil onto it, only Mrs. Bouvier and Grandma remained.

Marshall watched as they exchanged a few small words and a warm hug, Grandma grimacing. As she walked up to the road, a heavy cough stopped her in her tracks. It took her several minutes to recover.

When it was clear, Marshall went to her.

“Grandma,” he said softly, so as not to startle her.

“Marshall! What you doin’ here? Why didn’t you come to the service?”

“I-I...it was jus’ too much. I’m sorry,” he said, taking his jacket off and wrapping it around her. “It was good you came.”

“Well o’ course I came. I mean, I didn’t approve o’ the boy – he got you into so much trouble when you was young – but still, gotta pay my respects. It coulda been you in that there coffin.”

“Didn’t think I was *that* bad.”

“There wasn’t such a broad line between you two; if it hadn’t been for you goin’ off, becomin’ a hero for this fine country, I honestly don’t know what woulda happened.”

“Grandma, I was a soldier – like a lotta people. Don’t make me no hero. Besides, you woulda made sure I straightened myself out.”

“Ha, old girl like me?” she coughed as she laughed. “You a hero, Marshall. You went out there for the good o’ people you didn’t even know – that’s what a hero does. Not for his friends or his family, but for complete strangers. As for me even tryin’ to straighten your sorry ass out - if it had been the case o’ me needin’ to, you woulda been the death o’ me.”

Hearing that word, he instinctively put his arm around her shoulders. She felt so light, brittle bones held together by little more than soft gossamer skin. For someone with so much life and fight, it felt to Marshall like she wasn’t even really there. As if she was quietly fading away. He turned to face her.

“Grandma, you okay?”

“Me? I’m fine, son. Never felt better.”

“Right. Except, you ain’t been alright for a while. I’m not dumb, you know.”

“Says who?” she cackled.

“Grandma...”

“I *am* fine, son. I ain’t no spring chicken, but there’s still plenty o’ bounce in these old legs yet.”

She started to jump up and down for effect, only slightly wincing. Marshall laughed, putting a hand on her shoulder to make her stop before she hurt herself. He took her by the hand, which was clammy and cold, and walked her up the grassy hill. They reached a road where her taxi was waiting. Marshall opened the back door for her, refusing to accept his jacket back. He then leant in the front window and paid the fare.

“See you later, Grandma,” he said as he leant in and kissed her on the cheek.

“Marshall, don’t you stay out too late again. Don’t think I haven’t noticed you been partyin’ all night long recently. It’ll catch up with you, all this runnin’ around. You miss yo’ dinner, then you just plain well gonna go hungry.”

“I won’t be late – I promise,” he chuckled as he walked away from the car.

The giant rain-cloud had passed; Marshall felt his clothes starting to dry on his skin. He walked down, past the tall oak trees towards the rows of chairs. The coffin had been completely covered, the graveyard workers pressing down the last lot of soil. Marshall sat down on a seat just as the diggers were packing up their tools and leaving. Now he was on his own he could think about things.

It had occurred to him several days earlier that maybe he hadn’t killed the Reaper; that only Dwayne fell that night. And with Dwayne, himself. The Knight was firmly in the shadows now – the media were going crazy for it. Even the Mayor was wading in, promising action against this ‘comic book monster’. None of it seemed real.

He’d crossed a line that shouldn’t ever be crossed, but there was no choice. The Reaper would have torn the city down if he’d let him. But now he was stuck, feeling dead as Marshall and tainted as the Knight. It was like he’d poisoned his own dream, his own ideals.

He leaned down and brushed his finger into the recently packed earth. Which one was it: Dwayne? Or the Reaper? It felt strange to even think about that name now. He felt uneasy, like some sort of separation point had been reached.

The Reaper had given him reason. A motive to continue fighting. To carry on being the Knight. They were locked in each other's orbit, spiraling too fast to release each other. One was always going to crash, he saw that now. But there were four people in this, not two. Now there was just one – him. Marshall. He wasn't so sure that was what he really wanted, in the end.

"It was not your fault."

"Shahina?"

"I thought you might be attending. I wanted to know if you were okay. I see you are recovered – physically, at least."

She walked down and sat next to him, placing a hand gently on his. He gave it a tender squeeze. Marshall looked past the coffin, noticing that the workers were starting to dig another hole.

"It was my fault. Goin' way back. I coulda done more."

"What could you have done? He chose his path – as we all do. You have missed something. An important lesson."

"Huh?"

"For every action there is a reaction. You did not force his actions, you merely reacted to them."

"But I reacted badly."

"Who judges that? All the people saved by you? Think of all the suffering that will not happen now he is gone. Think of all his sins. Did he not, in some small way, deserve his fate?"

"No-one deserves to die."

"Exactly – yet did *he* care? Did it stop *him* from killing? Can we treat the man who kills with the same rules as the rest of us? No, they are different. You stopped him. This is it, the result. The end."

"But...but, it coulda been me. Been on virtually the same path all our lives. Grandma's right –ain't much space between us, me an' Dwayne."

"And look at the difference both of you have made to the world. He chose a life of darkness – you chose the light."

“But it ain’t as simple as dark an’ light. People are made of more than that – no-one’s one or the other. There’s all this grey area, all the time. An’ where there’s grey, nothin’s easy. When I first became the Knight, it was so straightforward. They’re bad, I’m good. But it’s not like that, it’s *never* been like that – not really. How can the Knight exist, if I’m not certain what I’m doin’ is right?”

As soon as he said this, Shahina withdrew her hand. Standing up, she walked around the newly dug grave to the other side.

“Marshall, do you see that cloud?”

He looked up. “Yeah, it was over us jus’ a minute ago.”

“It is like all things. The cloud comes and hides the sky from us – for a time, it feels like it will never leave. But it must. In time another cloud will come – not the same, but it will be here nonetheless.”

“And that means...?”

“Everyone leaves a legacy – people will remember us – but only until the next thing comes along. Over time our legacy will pass just as clouds do. But in the present, the here and now, some of us have the chance to be the sky. To be an ever-present force that is always there, in the background. A strong influence that need not be shifted. You can be the sky. He,” she nodded towards the soil, “was merely a cloud.”

“An’ now he’s gone.”

“Yes, now the skies are clear. But what of tomorrow? The next day? Marshall, the Reaper was not the end – he was the first chapter of the Knight. Just as he dominated briefly in the name of evil, you can dominate in the name of good for much longer. You can make Tupello your own.”

“No one person can make this city their own.”

“Not you, Marshall. The Knight. The Knight is no person – he is myth, he is legend. Young children no longer play with toy guns; they wear capes and masks. You have captured this city’s imagination. It is your kingdom, if you want it to be.”

“Ain’t you read the papers? They all hate me!”

“Not everyone, Marshall. The loudest voices at the moment are those afraid of your power, of your potential. Those that think they hate you will soon change their minds. You need to lay low for the time being. Bury the Knight for a while – let the situation settle. There will be a time for his reappearance – and it will be a victorious return, I assure you. Tupello will realize all too late that it needs you.”

Marshall was uncertain. She grabbed him by the arm, forcing him to hold hers in a link. She led him up towards the road, where a large black car with tinted windows was waiting with the engine running. She got in the back and closed the door. The window lowered. Marshall bent down towards it.

“Have faith, Marshall. This is what you are meant to do with your life. Do not give up your purpose. If you endure, you will get everything you deserve.”

“Thanks, Shahina. I really appreciate your support,” he said, straightening up. “Oh, hey, I wanted to ask you somethin’.”

“Yes?”

“That night, when you turned up. At the skyscraper. How? I mean, how did you know I would be there?”

“I wonder if you could tell me how you *flew* that day the newspaper boy saw you?”

“Shahina, that’s not really relevant t-”

“Exactly,” she smiled as the car drove away.

Marshall stood there in the sunlight, his clothes now dry.

Shahina had dodged the question, but maybe he shouldn’t have asked. She saved him, after all. He chided himself for being so ungrateful, hoping she didn’t hold it against him.

As he approached his battered car, his thoughts turned to a plan of action. It was time to lie low. Clean up any evidence linking him with his alter ego. He killed the Reaper, killed Dwayne. Now it was time to kill the Knight.

Chapter Sixteen

Are there any **real** secrets in the world? Or are we fooling ourselves that there are places we can hide...

Brinkmater Cemetery
Tupello
Thirteen Months Ago

A large, twisted oak tree hid him from view. He was surprised at her appearance; his research hadn't mentioned anything about a woman. A whole new avenue of investigation had opened up. He studied Mason, analyzed his frame. A big man, an impressive man. In some ways, he couldn't wait to see him fight. To see the mechanics of it, the strength. But that wasn't why he was here. There was the bigger picture. His phone rang; he'd set it to silent before making his way to the funeral home.

"What?" he whispered.

"Just thought you should know, we successfully tagged the residence."

"What about the car?"

"Got that too, sir. Wherever he goes, we'll know about it."

"Good. Good." The woman was leaving. "You think it's him?"

"Solid bet, in my opinion."

"Then carry on."

"Yes, Mr. Greenburg."

It was either very late or very early, Alan Greenburg couldn't quite tell. He hadn't slept for days, the cocktail of drugs his physician prescribed kept fatigue from taking over.

The first few weeks after his wife's death had been quite normal, given the circumstances. He went to meetings. He cried at strange moments, laughed when it was inappropriate to do so. People around him offered their support, which helped some but at the same time not at all.

Then there was a meeting where the projector broke and the presentation had to be stopped while someone came to fix it. After a while a man, old and wiry, walked tentatively into the cavernous meeting room. Where his body language was filled with doubt, his eyes were so sure.

To everyone's surprise, Alan stood up and walked over to the projector to observe the man closely. It all became so clear to him in that brief moment. Things are always there to be fixed, even if you can't see the problem on the surface. If there's a problem, it can be fixed. You have to believe in that.

"It's broken. Of course it is. It's *always* been broken. But...but I can fix it," he mumbled to himself as he walked out of the meeting. That was the last time his board members had seen him, two weeks ago.

Everything that had happened since that meeting was building up to this moment. Alan was surprised how quickly it had come together; only two weeks of investigation and here he was, ten to four in the morning, sat in a parked car outside Marshall Mason's house. It'd only been in the last couple of days his research team had pieced together the vital information about Mason. His past with the Reaper in his gang days, their fights in school.

Then there was his bizarre military record, the cleanest he'd ever seen. People refused to talk about Mason's time in the army, even for a lot of money. Alan had enough ex-military on his security team to figure Marshall was black ops, well off the radar. That meant training, that meant skills. It could even mean that Marshall was enhanced in some way; Greenburg had been in business long enough to know the military would do just about anything to create that elusive super-soldier.

It all pointed to one sketchy conclusion; he was probably the Knight. There was only one thing left, and that was the smoking gun. Greenburg was desperate for it, hungry for it. He *had* to know. If he knew, he could fix it.

He felt himself slipping into sleep when a figure appeared in the doorway of the modest residence. The fact the person filled the entire frame meant it had to be Mason; the only other person living there was his frail grandmother. Greenburg felt a pang of excitement. What was he doing, going out at this time of night? Mason jumped into his car and closed the door quietly, doing everything with the utmost care. The car reversed slowly into the road before pulling away. Greenburg waited a while then turned the engine on. He picked up a device next to him and switched it on. A grid appeared, followed shortly by a beeping green dot.

Greenburg spotted Mason's car parked on the outer edges of Brinkmater. Was he going to go out as the Knight? That would be surprising; the vigilante hadn't made an appearance since the night his wife was murdered.

Alan was almost certain the Reaper killed her. What he didn't know was what part the Knight played, whether his recklessness made the situation worse. Mason got out of his car, as careful and quiet as when he'd started the journey. He crept down an alleyway, out of sight.

Alan went to open the door, stopped, then cursed himself. Tiredness was creeping in. He was getting impatient and that could blow everything. Trying to combat his weariness, he thought about Linda. About *why* he was doing this. His back tensed and his eyes narrowed.

Mason returned with something slung over his shoulder. Greenburg couldn't quite make it out. However, the item in Mason's hand made his eyes widen. Although dull, when the stuttering orange streetlight hit the surface its shape and form were unmistakable. It was a mask.

Greenburg had done it, the first part was over. Marshall Mason *was* the Knight.

He'd finally cracked it. Mason got into his car and drove off. Alan sat there, chuckling quietly to himself. He ran his fingers through his hair, sighing with relief. Then he started to panic...what next? He'd isolated the problem with no idea how to fix it. There was a tap on Alan's window.

"Open the door, motherfucker." Alan stared down the barrel of a gun.

He opened the door. The man with the gun had a hood around his head, his face masked by shadow. As Alan closed the door he was struck with the butt of the gun.

Blood flowed from the back of his skull, his neck warm and wet. He was surprised to find he wasn't angry or scared. The problem had been solved, and now he *wanted* to fix it. This was a distraction, a stupid needless distraction, and he hadn't gotten this far to allow anyone – let alone some street punk – get in his way.

"I see. Coward."

"What the *fuck* did you just say?" the hood said, jutting forward with the gun in Alan's face.

"I said you're a coward. You know who, throughout the entire history of mankind, suffers the worst of deaths?"

"Shut the hell up, dick."

"Cowards. They always do. Trust me."

The hood went to hit Alan with the gun again but this time he was too obvious. Alan swivelled quickly so that his back was up against his assailant's chest, his right hand gripping the punk's wrist to make sure the gun was pointing away from them. Then he shifted his weight to the right and pulled his folded left arm around sharply, his elbow coming across the hood's face and smashing his nose in two. Alan's right hand moved up to the street punk's hand and took the gun from his grasp. He turned to the hood, his eyes wide.

“You don’t know me, do you? Walking around like you own the place because you have a *gun*. I own the goddamned tarmac you’re standing on, the house that keeps you warm. I own the companies that made your clothes, your shoes, your gun. I own you. There isn’t anything in your pathetic, pointless existence that doesn’t belong to *me*. But you, you have no idea who I am,” he snarled.

The hood stood clasping his shattered nose, blood seeping over his lips. Alan bent one knee and swooped his other leg along the ground in a large arc, cutting the punk’s legs down. He fell hard on his back.

Alan grinned. The tiredness was long gone now, a distant past. He felt better than he had in months. Alive.

“I’m going to be honest, even though that’s more than a cockroach like you deserves. I’ve been struggling recently. My life used to be about better things. Now, it’s all about...justice. You see, my wife, she died. Was-was murdered, actually. At the hands of shitty little scum like you, and for no good reason either. So all there is for me now is justice, and what it means. See, what’s been going through my head is...can justice ever truly be real? Real justice, not just in the courtroom. And that justice – shouldn’t it equate to *my* pain?”

Greenburg stepped forward, pointing the gun at the hood’s knee. He pulled the trigger, the gunshot echoing down the street.

“Does it ever mean anything, to get justice? You’ll be hobbling the rest of your life. Unable to do anything like what you have so far. But then, I doubt you were much use to anyone before I destroyed your knee.” A thought crossed his mind. “Have you ever raped anyone?”

The hood lay with one hand on his busted kneecap, the other clutching his nose as he whined quietly. Alan shifted the gun slightly and shot his other knee. It wasn’t a clean shot this time, fragments of the kneecap splintering off onto the road.

“HAVE YOU EVER RAPED ANYONE?” Spit flew into the night sky.

“Y-y-yes,” came the muffled answer.

Alan was slower this time, more deliberate. The gun unloaded, the bullet slamming into the hood’s groin.

“Is this really justice? Hmm. You know, when the Knight first arrived, I was such an advocate of his. He was being proactive. Trying his best to make a difference in this shithole. Then my wife got killed. And you know what? I didn’t hate him. I hated myself for not hating him. Even now I see why he’s been doing this. Ridding this city of vermin like you.

“I bet how I feel at the moment isn’t too far away from his feelings. Making you pay for your waste of a life. He has to fall, of course. It was obvious from the start. This city always needs balance. Needs balance more than justice, even if that is a dirty secret no-one wants to admit.

“Nonetheless, I appreciated his sentiment. A belief that we could make this town better. More just. But we can’t make *you* better. You’ll always be this way. In this life, for you, there is no redemption. So it makes sense the only decent thing I can do to you is punish you. Like he used to. There’s just one mistake the Knight always made.”

He smiled.

“He was too soft.”

Another shot, this time with gritted teeth and arm tensed. The hood’s left shoulder exploded.

“You thought you could just come here and take what I *earned*. Without right, without work, without effort. Probably been doing that your whole life. That’s the problem with justice. Justice the way society *needs* it to be. It doesn’t take into account that some people are simply *better* than others. You kill, life. I kill, life. But what if you killed my wife, who never harmed anyone, and I kill a shitbag rapist like you? Then justice tells you one terrible truth – that being a good person and a shitbag rapist amount to the same thing. Which one’s your writing hand?”

“I c-can’t w-write.” The hood’s voice was very weak now; he’d gone pale.

Greenburg shook his head.

“Your stabbing hand, then. Your mugging hand, your raping hand, whatever. Your strongest hand, hold it up.”

The hood held up his right hand. Greenburg raised the gun, blowing a hole clean through his palm.

“How fucking ironic, that there are six bullets in the gun you carry around to scare people. You can’t write, can you count? How many we down?”

“F-f-f-five.”

“Good, I guess being a criminal helps your basic arithmetic. Now, do you believe in God?”

“N-not...r-really.”

“Good. There is no God. Only pain. Only suffering. And that’s if you’re lucky.”

Alan knelt down and pressed the gun into the hood’s forehead, his face etched with determination. The punk’s warm blood was pooling around his knees; it felt strangely pleasing.

“See, here’s where justice – *my* kind of justice – kicks in. You’re a rapist, a thief, probably a murderer. Got to be involved in drugs somehow. I could kill you right now, wipe you clean off the face of this planet. Stop the pain you inflict, instantly.

“But then...look. Look at what I’ve made you. You can’t walk anymore, let alone run or even drive. You can’t rape because you’ve got no dick left. You can’t punch or kick or throw or shoot. You can’t lift anything or hold anything with your strongest hand. I’ve stopped the pain you inflict instantly, and you’re not even dead.

“And here’s the kicker, the best thing of all – this is where *real* justice begins. Instead of the release of death, I’ve given you a lifetime of pain and suffering to look forward to. All those bad things you used to do – not anymore. You’ll just sit in a chair getting fat and old, always in pain, dying one agonizing ache at a time. I’d like you to think about that as you lie here in your own blood.” Greenburg ran the gun from the hood’s forehead down along his cheeks to his jawline. His eyes narrowed. “At least you’ve still got your looks...”

Alan stood up and raised his foot, smashing his boot down on the hood’s face. He did it again and again. His hair flailed wildly, a manic expression plastered on his face. He stopped, his leg buzzing.

Sirens in the distance.

Greenburg leaned over the mess of a man, adrenalin making his jugular pulse.

“Have a nice life, *motherfucker*.”

Alan got into the car, gun in hand, and drove off. He tried to control fits of wild laughter and disbelieving tears as he left the scene. He put the gun in the glove compartment as police cars, sirens wailing, sped past him. Reality was coming back in waves and it made him feel nauseous. He knew who the Knight was, finally. It was all there for him to work out and fix. He had to focus on that, only that. Whatever it takes, he repeated to himself.

His eyes kept drawing towards his shoes and the bottom of his trousers. Strange shapes in the blood. Was it eggshell? Greenburg stopped the car and got out, throwing up violently as the realization hit him.

It wasn't eggshell.

Chapter Seventeen

There are some places where things cannot be hidden -
deep inside, where the self **cannot lie**...

Mason Residence
Tupello
Thirteen Months Ago

Marshall stared at the map. Several symbols on various locations around Tupello – mostly medical supplies or bags of clothes he could change into. A few were duplicate costumes – he usually changed in his car, but sometimes there were too many cameras around. Other points on the map marked where tools and kits were stored, all part of his legend-making scheme. Marshall figured it wouldn't have looked too heroic to see the Knight lugging a rappel kit over his back.

“You got as much panache as one o’ those corn-fed dumbass whiteboy superheroes.”

The only problem was now, the moment he never thought would arrive, when he had to get rid of it all. Make everything vanish without anyone noticing – not just when he retrieved the items but also when he dumped them. He hadn't even thought about *where* he was going to ditch the gear; everything so far was being stored in one of Shahina's shipment containers at the docks.

The house was already clear – two weeks spent removing anything to do with the Knight. The only things remaining were on this map. It would have taken less time if Grandma didn't have the amazing knack of being present at the most inopportune moments. She almost caught him removing a crate of tear-gas canisters when she came back early from her weekly game of checkers with Mrs. Renewilov.

“So, how's yo' grandma?”

He looked up at the clock – almost four in the morning. It was time.

Putting on a smart suit jacket, he straightened his tie as he got into the car. Heading out at a slow speed, he set the map down on the seat next to him.

Marshall parked the car and checked the map. He drew out his route, marking any cameras and main streets in red. Once he had finished, he let out a sigh. It would take longer than he'd originally figured – a *lot* longer. Marshall opened the door, surprised at how mild the night was. Folding his jacket onto the driver seat, he tucked the map into his pocket and headed out.

Marshall passed Greenburg Tower. He stopped for a moment, looking up at the window. It was still boarded, police tape plastered everywhere; the yellow in stark contrast to the darkness of the entire building. As he walked past the entrance, tiny remnants of glass crunched under the soles of his feet. Marshall's hands remained in his pockets, fists tense.

“So, yo’ really gonna kill me, huh?”

He reached the drop point. The package was a small rucksack, just a change of clothes. The contents weren't very important. Evidence – DNA, fingerprints – that was what made this so vital. Shahina had offered to help with collecting, but this was something he had to do on his own. He felt a little queasy as he leant down to pick up the bag.

“Hey, Marshall – ever wonder what woulda happened if you'd been voted leader instead o' me? Think you'd be me, an' I'd be you?”

He hadn't been sleeping well. It wasn't unusual; ever since childhood, Marshall had struggled to get a full night's rest. But recently he seemed to be getting barely *any* sleep. Rain began to fall as he made his way back, his steps uncertain.

“What you gonna do without me? Who you gonna fight? You can't exist without me!”

Waves of nausea hit him. Marshall tried to slow his breathing. The air was cooling because of the rainfall, which helped. He could see the car in the distance. Pausing for a moment, he retched. Bile burned his throat.

“You can’t keep what you can’t prove.”

The car was so close, this felt stupid. Yet his legs were so heavy, his whole frame burdened with each step. These streets, for so long his territory, now felt other. How could this be home, if he couldn't even walk twenty steps? He just needed to get back, back off the road, into the car and into the house. Away from here, where everything hung heavy around him.

“You gonna go home an’ cry to mommy?”

He half-collapsed onto the car door, almost dropping the keys. The rain was stinging his eyes as the metal latched and the door was unlocked. Finally inside, he threw the rucksack in the back and hugged the steering wheel. The tears wouldn't stop coming, no matter how much he tried to compose himself.

The respite – the sanctuary he thought he would find in the car – was nowhere. There was nothing in the whole vast landscape of this city for him – no noise, no dreams, only the padded cell of silence broken by half-dead whispers. He was going insane, he was dying.

It struck him now how much he had given up for this, and how cruel now that he had to strip yet more away. These final few pieces – remembrances, more like – felt as though he were tearing at his own insides. They were all he had left. Marshall wondered why it had to be this way.

“Why? Fuck you, that’s why.”

Chapter Eighteen

The paths we choose are often the paths of *most* resistance, beaten down by our stubborn refusal to believe the truth: we are **not good enough**...

Chorrcha's Bar
Tupello
2007

"Gimme another."

"Marshall. Come on, man. You been here all day, knocking 'em back. You're gonna kill yourself if you carry on like this."

"Promise?"

The barman shook his head and walked towards the spirits shelf. He picked up a half-empty bottle of whiskey. There was an empty one sat next to it. Reaching under the shelf, the barman pulled out a bottle of water. He poured a small whiskey, topping it up with the water. Adding ice, he brought the drink to Marshall.

"Better make this one last."

Marshall picked up the glass and held it to his nose. He looked at the barman, then towards the whiskey bottle on the shelf. Placing the glass carefully on the bar, he let out a disappointed sigh.

"Why...why'd you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Cut the bull, Mike – it's, it's watered down. Way down. *Know* my damn whiskey, for god's sakes."

"It's just melted ice!"

“No, ain’t! This’s...half a whiskey. Trust me, I been, been drinkin’ whiskey long enough time to know when it ain’t the real deal.”

“Fine. I did it. The drink’s on the house. You happy? Satisfied?”

“You shouldn’t have done it, M-Mike. You...can’t be judge, the judge o’ me. Only *I* know what’s right...an’ what’s wrong.”

“For you, you mean.”

Marshall looked up at him, frowning.

“Huh?”

“You only know what’s right and what’s wrong *for you*.”

“Yeah, what...whatever man. Just don’t, don’t do it again. Cool?”

“Sure, won’t happen again.”

Marshall gulped the rest of the drink, sliding the empty glass towards Mike. He obliged by going and filling it up, this time a large one without ice. Mike looked at the clock.

“Marshall, you rich?”

“No, man. Ha. Why, why’d you ask?”

“Because it’s not even three in the afternoon and you’ve spent a day’s wages already. Because you’re *always* in here. You’re not working here, you’re not working anywhere. So I figured you must be one of those rich guys.”

“Not m-me. I got myself army stipend, that sees, sees me...by.”

“Oh, you get an award or something? Like the medal of valor?”

“No. Ha. I ain’t no h-hero. All I got from my time out there is, is...bad sleep an’ a big ol’ paycheck each month.”

“Every month? How long they paying out for?”

“Till I quit breathin’.”

“Holy shit! How come?”

“It’s what they call, call ‘liability’...‘insurance’. See...*see*, I was on some s-special missions – top secret. Guess they figure money talks.”

“Top secret, huh? Guess you can’t tell me...”

“Couldn’t even if I-I wanted to. Don’t r...remember.”

“Nothing? Not any of it? Why they paying you all this cash, then?”

“‘Cause...they sittin’ up on the hill, scared shitless. They, they figure there’s gonna come a day it’ll all click into place. It’s like a constant a-apology...‘sorry for what we did to you, for what we made you do. Please don’t, don’t kill us when it all comes back to you.’ Guess their plan’s workin’ out just f-fine, seein’ as I can’t, can’t even remember what happened this...mornin’.”

“You could always try a therapist. They got that – what’s it called? Hypno-something. Help you remember.”

“Think it’s, it’s better to f-forget. Else you won’t know what you end up needin’...needin’ forgiveness for.”

Marshall gave Mike a wry smile as he slid the glass across once more. He filled the glass to the very top, no ice. Marshall’s eyes widened.

“Thanks M-Mike, you’re a real pal, you know...you know that?”

“Yeah, well. You’re a good customer, Marshall. What does it say about us, if we can’t look after you?”

Marshall nodded emphatically as he guzzled the whiskey.

“Jforrrr...isssno...na...I’m...jush...I...ffffine. Grannafout, nuh. Fine-nuh.”

“Course you are. Just fine, my friend.”

Mike pulled Marshall's arm but he remained planted on the floor. After a couple of attempts he managed to rest Marshall's arm around his neck, awkwardly propping him up. He was straining under the weight, Marshall was heavier than he looked. A man came over and wrapped Marshall's other arm around his neck, helping with the burden.

"Is he alright?"

"He's fine, just drunk. He's had three bottles of whiskey."

"You serious? It's only five o' clock!"

"That's the half-time interval for this guy."

"What we gonna do with him?"

"There's an apartment above the bar, we'll put him to bed for a few hours, let him sleep the worst of it off."

After struggling up the stairs the two men dragged Marshall over to the bed and dropped him face first onto the duvet. Within seconds he was snoring loudly. They laughed as they headed back to the bar.

Marshall opened his eyes. Pulling his head up, his mouth stuck to the pillow. Lifting his shoulders, he slowed down as the headache hit him. He turned to the bedside cabinet, letting out a groan. Three in the morning. Grandma was going to kill him this time. By the clock was a glass of water and two painkillers, with a note:

From your friendly neighborhood barman!

Marshall sank the painkillers and washed them down with the water. Sitting upright for a few minutes, he started to feel better. He stood up and stretched, raising his arms above his head. He drank the rest of the water and put the glass back on the cabinet. As he walked towards the door he trod on a patterned rug, which promptly exploded.

Jumping back, he stared at the rug. A large, splintered hole in the floor. His ears were ringing from the blast, but he could just about hear people shouting downstairs. Shuffling quietly across towards the hole, he peered through the gap.

“I SAID, GIMME ALL YOUR FUCKIN' MONEY, BITCH!” shouted a masked man at Mike, pointing a shotgun directly at his chest.

Marshall silently picked himself up off the floor and looked around the apartment.

“Gotta be a bat or somethin’,” he muttered to himself.

Searching with his hands under the bed, he touched something cold and metallic. He held it in front of him for a moment. Checking the barrel was loaded, Marshall crawled back towards the hole in the floor. Pointing the gun towards the robber, he didn't have much space around the gun to see how accurate his shot was.

He took a deep breath and squeezed the trigger.

Drawing away from the hole, he heard shouting and a strange gargled noise. Building up the nerve to look, he peered down. He'd managed to get the robber; a shot to the neck. The man wasn't yet dead; he lay awkwardly on the floor, holding his neck as his breathing grew weak.

The strange noise stopped.

The other robbers moved to his side. Marshall moved quickly and quietly to the door, stepping gently down each step. He pointed the gun at the two men, who were crouched beside their dead colleague.

“No-one move. You move, I kill you.”

He looked over at Mike; there were tears in the barman's eyes. His hands were still held up in the air, still surrendered. Marshall focused back on the robbers.

“Mike, call the cops.”

“Sure. Give me the gun.”

He turned to Mike.

“What?”

“You need to beat it. I’ll wipe the gun.”

“I ain’t getting’ you, Mike.”

“You just killed a man. They catch you, you go down. I’m not gonna let that happen to a hero. Not in my bar. Gimme the gun, I’ll wipe the handle and tell them what happened.”

“But the bed, I slept – there’s drool on t-”

“Don’t worry about it. If it comes to that, you left hours ago. Bar was empty for half hour before these guys came in. You left then. Only people know you’re here are me and these punks. And I’m the only one who knows who you are. So scram.”

Marshall hesitated.

“Give me the gun. You’re done here.”

Marshall reluctantly walked over and handed him the gun. He looked down at the robbers, who were kneeling in their friends’ blood. Then he looked back to Mike.

“Go on, quick. The precinct’s only down the road – they’ll get here as soon as I call.”

“But-”

“Go! Get out of here.”

Marshall walked towards the door, his hands clenching and unclenching. It felt strange. He grabbed the handle, pausing to take another look at the dead man. Mike smiled at him.

“You saved my life. You’re a real hero, you know that?”

“I ain’t no hero.”

“Yes you are. Yes, *you are*. Don’t let no-one tell you otherwise. This city needs a man like you. Seriously, you did a great thing tonight.”

Marshall gave Mike a weak smile before stepping out into the cold night air. He barely jogged twenty steps when two shots rang out from the bar.

He froze. Marshall began to head back but something made him stop. Hearing a siren, he ducked into an alleyway. Marshall ran the rest of the way home, his mind racing – one thing repeating itself above all else: *You're a real hero, you know that?*

Chapter Nineteen

When you are in the fire, what is purged? Your sins, your soul entire? The crucible reveals its motives all too late - when we are **drowned** in flame...

Mason Residence
Tupello
One Year Ago

And then, a feeling. So horrible, so real. Boom boom boom. Someone was behind him, coming closer. Marshall could hear their footsteps, but he couldn't turn to see who they were. Boom boom boom – their feet, closer, his heart. An icy hand placed on his shoulder, and he began to tu-

Boom boom boom.

“OPEN UP, MARSHALL! NOW!”

Marshall jolted out of bed. He could hear Grandma still snoring; he laughed as he hurriedly put a t-shirt on. He was pretty certain she could sleep through an earthquake. Tiptoeing nimbly down the stairs, he opened the door.

“Gibb? What the *hell* you doin’? You know what time it is?”

“I know, man – thought you’d like a heads up. They comin’ yo’ way.”

“What? Who?”

“Cops – lots o’ them. They just about done trashin’ my house. Be here real soon.”

“What the hell? Grandma’s gonna have a fit.”

“They said it’s a manhunt. They’re lookin’ for that dude, the crime lord. You know, the one in the news, likes to dress up.”

“The Knight?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“You said ‘crime lord’.”

“The brother killed someone on live television, Marshall. An’ crime’s dropped near sixty per cent since he’s been gone. You do the math.”

“Crime’s dropped since the *Reaper* died, Gibb. It goddamn dropped because he was responsible for almost sixty per cent of the city's crime! Knight's got nothin' to do with it.”

“What you talkin’ about, man? Freak disgraced us in front o’ the whole city. Dude's done for us what 9/11 did for cab drivers in New York. I can't walk around with a bag or rucksack no more – that's *his* work.”

“You're full of shit.”

“Really? Look outside! You think the cops’d be tearing up the whole neighborhood if it wasn’t for that punk? I hope they get him. Psycho needs lockin' up,” he said, shaking his head.

“Marshall, what’s all this commotion goin’ on down here? Is that Gibb?”

“Yes, ma’am. Sorry to wake you.”

“Not a problem at all, son,” she said with a forgiving smile. “Marshall, what the hell you tryin’ to do to me?”

“Sorry, Grandma. Tyler was tellin’ me to expect some guests real soon.”

“Who’s comin’ round this time o’ night?”

“The police.”

“What they want with you, Marshall? You hangin’ around with that Bouvier kid again?”

He stared at her, before turning to Gibb. A small nod goodbye and he was gone. Marshall closed the front door and walked over to Grandma, placing his hands softly on her shoulders. She looked at him, confused.

“Grandma, you okay?”

“Course I am. Don’t be stupid, Marshall.”

“It’s jus’ that...Dwayne Bouvier’s dead.”

“You think I’m dumb, son? I went to that poor boy’s funeral.”

“But you jus’ asked me if I was still hangin’ with him.”

“Well, it’s...it’s obvious I meant someone else, ain’t it?”

“Okay. Who?”

“What?”

“Who did you mean, Grandma?”

“It don’t matter, does it? Now, are you gonna tell me why the police are after you?”

“They’re after the Knight.”

Grandma’s eyes widened. She put her hand to her lip, before moving over to the kitchen table. Searching through a pile of magazines across the wooden surface, she picked up a paper.

“What you got there, Grandma?”

“Copy o’ the Herald. I remember readin’ somethin’ about this Knight.”

Marshall saw a flash of light shine through the curtain. There was a strangely familiar sound outside. A helicopter circling. He remembered that night, thinking about what Gibb had said.

He *dropped* Dwayne. Marshall knew he dropped him. Nevertheless, like millions of Channel Eight viewers, he couldn’t get the notion out of his head that maybe he did it on purpose. Maybe part of him *wanted* to drop Dwayne. Those viewers were only getting part of the story, though – and that’s all they would ever get. Marshall wondered if their judgment simply came with the territory.

Opening the front door, he looked up the street. Twelve lots down was a large police unit preparing to storm the next house. People were milling about in the street now. He turned back, his breathing quicker.

“Grandma, you don’t need all this stress right now.”

“Son, I didn’t ever need this sort o’ stress.”

“Do you fancy takin’ a ride, out of the city? If we go now, they’ll have been an’ gone time we get back.”

Grandma rested the newspaper on the kitchen table and gave her grandson a beaming smile. Still smiling, she slowly made her way towards the stairs, before turning back to him.

“Sounds like a great idea. Yo’ a smart kid, Marshall. Always thinkin’ about me. I’m lucky to have you.”

As she made her way up the staircase slowly, Marshall opened the curtain to see what was going on. People's lives, opened up and torn apart. Searching. Hunting. The Knight was finally dead now, but he knew. He knew. Tonight was the night.

He was going to tell her everything.

The throttled roar of the battered engine made everything outside the car seem even more serene; there was a sense of stillness all around them.

“So...where we goin', son?”

“I don’t know, jus’ ...outta the city. Escape for a while.”

“Nice to escape sometimes.”

“Yeah.”

They were beyond the city and into the countryside, a mix of untamed woodland and crop fields. Night was beginning to disappear on the edge of the horizon, the sun still hidden below the surface. They drove past a farm, a cock crowing energetically.

“It is nice out here, Marshall. Gettin’ away from all that noise. An’ the crime. Men runnin’ round in masks. World’s changin’ too fast for me.”

“*People* change, Grandma. Only people. World stays the same.”

“Well look at my boy, the philosophizer! Maybe my words o’ wisdom did get through to you when you was growin’ up, after all.”

As they passed more barns, the sound of crowing grew louder. Marshall pressed his foot harder on the accelerator. They continued through the fields towards the rolling hills and ragged rock faces at the edge of the county. Pulling up towards a large cliff side, Marshall decided it was time to stop.

He got out of the car and ran around to the other side, opening the door to help Grandma with her seat belt. They walked around to the front of the car and sat down, the engine making the hood a warm seat. The horizon was now tinged tawny white, more daylight forcing itself into the sky. The moon grew faint.

“Grandma, you okay?”

“What? This again. Seems like all you been doin’ recently is ask me that same dumb question.”

“You ain’t well, it’s ob-”

“Marshall, I’m *old*. It happens to the best o’ us, the worst too. Ain’t nothin’ I can do about it, ain’t nothin’ you can neither. Jus’ the way it is.”

“You can get help, I’m sure there’s someth-”

“Stop it, Marshall. I mean it,” she said forcefully, before turning to the horizon. “This is the way it is, son. Everythin’ got its dusk to go with its dawn. We are blessed with this mortal life, Marshall. Everythin’ we cherish means that much more, ‘cause someday it all has to end. What we got in our hearts more than makes up for death.”

She smiled at him; he looked down towards his feet. A cockerel crowed behind them, making them both jump. They turned around. It was standing proudly atop the car. Grandma chuckled loudly; Marshall twisted back towards the horizon. The edge of the sun showed itself, so bright the landscape in front became completely black.

“Grandma...”

“What is it, Marshall? You’ve seemed troubled these past few months. Anxious. What’s on yo’ mind?”

“I got somethin’ to tell you.”

“Well, go on. I ain’t gettin’ any younger,” she joked.

The bird behind them stopped crowing.

“I’m the Knight.”

She stared at him, her mouth open. Marshall didn’t turn to look at her. He faced the hills, watching as the sun burst above the horizon.

“I jus’ didn’t want you findin’ out any other way. I woulda told you earlier, but I didn’t want to put you in danger.”

He finally turned to her.

“Please, Grandma. Say somethin’.”

Tears in her eyes, she shifted away from him, glaring at the breaking dawn.

“Take me home.”

By the time they arrived back home the sun was clear of the horizon. Marshall ran around the car to open her door, but Grandma didn’t wait. She pushed the door into his side, knocking him back slightly. She pulled the house keys from her purse and went to open the door.

It was already open.

Inside, she dropped everything – her hands moving instinctively toward her mouth.

The sofa had been pulled apart, the fabric torn from the cushions, even the back was gutted. The television sat on the floor in bits, its panels removed and cables strewn across the floor. In the kitchen, every drawer had been taken out, their contents emptied onto the floor. Linoleum fragments lay ripped, with strips of carpet pulled up everywhere. Then there was the paper. Discarded sheets littered every corner of the house. Grandma let out a warbled sigh.

Marshall stormed in, fists clenched.

“GODDAMN! They can’t do this! It ain’t allowed. This is wrong.”

He noticed a piece of paper stuck on the kitchen worktop with sticky tape. Tearing it off, he held it with shaking hands.

Ref. No 126732/A3P

TCPD Infosheet

Citizen –

Thank-you for your recent assistance in the investigation of a highly dangerous fugitive. Having inspected your property, we have cleared your household from our list of criteria-led suspects. Unfortunately, as you were unavailable at the time of our search, we were reluctantly required to use force in opening the door.

To claim expenses for the effects of the search (up to a maximum of \$50), please check our website for the relevant addressee.

Once more, thank-you for your co-operation in making Tupello a safer place.

Marshall screwed up the note and threw it across the kitchen table.

“They can’t do this. It ain’t right.”

Grandma went to him, grabbing his t-shirt, her eyes imploring.

“No, Marshall. Killin’ ain’t right. Hurtin’ people *ain’t right*.”

“What?”

“Marshall Xavier Mason! You murdered a man. You killed Dwayne Bouvier.”

He flinched at the mention, trying to pull away.

“I didn’t...I-I didn’t mean to. You gotta understand.”

Grandma's jaw set, her grip on him firm as she stared intensely.

“It was wrong. I never believed you was capable o’ such things. To do such an evil thing an’ justify it as if y-”

“BUT YOU CALLED ME A HERO!” he bellowed, shrugging free of her so he could turn away.

“What?”

He stood panting, his face etched with angry torment.

“When...when I got back.” His voice was shaky. “After I’d killed an’ killed until I couldn’t kill no more. There was so much blood, Grandma. So many people I didn’t know an’ I didn’t even care. I’d done all that, killed all those people, until I couldn’t feel nothin’ no more. Then I came back an’ you called me a *hero*.”

“That’s different. Different an’ you know it.”

“Do I? Who were those people I killed in Iraq? They evil? How do you know? Only difference as I see it is now I got the blood of bad men on my hands. It’s a whole damn world from where I was all those years ago.”

“No, it ain’t. When you was over there it was kill or be killed – it was war, Marshall. Here, in America, you got a choice. You coulda left Dwayne to the authorities.”

“You don’t know what it’s like, but I seen. It *is* war. Battle’s ragin’ day an’ night. It’s been goin’ on from before I was born an’ it ain’t ever gonna end. If I’d left him to the police, they woulda done what they did before I became the Knight: ignored him. Been afraid of him. Police may make you feel protected but it ain’t real. The Knight is real, he can protect this entire city from itself. There’s no more sufferin’ ‘cause of Dwayne Bouvier.”

“Tell that to Mrs. Bouvier,” she snapped. “Get out.”

Marshall blinked.

“What?”

“You heard me. Get outta my house. We done.”

Marshall stared blankly at Grandma. Looking around, he laughed in disbelief as he fought back tears. He trudged over to the door, pausing a moment in the threshold of his childhood home.

“An’ Marshall,” she said, not turning to face him, “Don’t never come back. I don’t wanna see you. Yo’ momma woulda been ashamed o’ the man you’ve become.”

Marshall slammed the door as hard as he could, hearing it splinter as it reverberated against the broken frame. He walked past the car, pulling out his cell phone as he headed towards Brinkmater. He pressed a number on speed dial.

“Hello, this is Shahina. I cannot get to the phone at present. If you would be so kind as to leave a message with your name and number, I will call you back as soon as I can.”

He hung up without leaving a message.

The bar was empty. He pulled up a stool on the corner.

“Like a ghost town in here,” he said.

“Marshall, my man! Long time no see. You could say that since the Knight disappeared, the neighborhood's going back to its old ways. The usual?” Mike asked with a broad smile.

“Better make it a large one.”

Chapter Twenty

And into the future we tumble, clawing away from our history. Can we ever **forget** what we have done?

Chorrcha's Bar
Tupello
Ten Months Ago

"Fill her up," Marshall mumbled, shoving his glass across the bar.

"Don't you think you should slow down?"

"What for?"

"Your liver's gonna give out one of these days."

"Mike, how many times you said that? I'm still standin'. Well, sittin' at least."

"Fine," the barman said, pouring another whiskey. "But you take a bit longer on this one, yeah?"

"Sure," Marshall replied, finishing the drink in one.

The barman moved over to the side of the serving area and began unloading the dishwasher. A man leaned over to speak to him, staring intently at Marshall.

"What's with that guy?"

"Leave him be, Frank. He's been through a lot."

"He's *going* through a lot, you mean."

"That may well be, but you lay off him. Guy's a bona fide hero."

"Yeah," Frank snorted, "from the looks of it, he's a real freakin' superman."

Mike let out a polite laugh at the joke before heading back towards Marshall. Without being asked, he took the empty whiskey glass and filled it up. Marshall put ten bucks on the bar, which was swiftly pushed back by Mike.

“Your money's no good here, man. Won't take a cent – I still owe you, man.”

“You owe me nothin’, ‘cause that’s what-what I damn well is. Nothin’.”

“Stop beating yourself up. I’m still here because of you.”

“You're still here, Mike,” he slurred with a smile, “‘cause you got no ambition.”

The two men laughed, Marshall more raucously than Mike. He tilted his glass to the barman, before gulping it down in one. Letting out a sharp gasp, Marshall shook his head violently as he frowned. An involuntary belch escaped his mouth.

“Jesus Christ, guy’s a fuckin' tramp!” spat Frank.

“Easy, Frank.”

“No, Mike. Look at the state of him! Hey, buddy - when was the last time you had a wash?”

“Last time I was home.”

“And when was that, the freakin' eighties?”

People around the bar sniggered. Mike didn't laugh. His gaze focused solely on Marshall, his hands set firmly on the wooden surface of the bar.

“Ha! You're a funny guy, funny guy,” Marshall mumbled through a grin.

“You got a stammer, or has that liquid diet pickled your brain?”

“You're a *real* funny guy,” Marshall said.

The smile had dropped from his face.

“Holy shit, look at you. Your mother must be real proud of you.”

Frank turned to enjoy the laughter of the other people in the bar. Marshall moved in one large leap across, a wild punch crashing into Frank's cheekbone. A forearm smash into his Adam's apple and Marshall had him down. A flurry of kicks and punches followed, specks of blood spattering the old wooden floor.

Marshall lifted off him, his arms pulsing. Picking up Frank's bar stool, he lifted it up above his head. Mike dove across the bar, holding a hand in front of Marshall's face.

“NO! Don't do it, Marshall. He ain't worth it, buddy.”

Marshall hesitated before dropping the stool behind his head. He stood for a while over Frank, whose face was caked in blood. Marshall stepped back.

“*No-one* talks about my family.”

“I know, I know. He shouldn't have said that.”

“Damn fuckin' straight.”

“Come on, man. Let's just go back and grab you a drink, yeah?”

Marshall reluctantly retreated towards his stool as Mike poured him another large whiskey. This time he drank slower, savoring the sharp bite of the alcohol as it washed the back of his throat. A few minutes later, the sound of sirens filled the air. Marshall sat there, circling the glass in his hand.

“Marshall, you better go. I think the cops are coming.”

“So?”

“So, they're coming for you.”

“No they ain't. They're comin' for him,” he replied, nodding to Frank.

“Buddy, you smashed him up real bad. They're coming for *you*.”

“Bu-but *I'm* the good guy. He's the one they want. I only give 'em what they deserve.”

Mike blinked.

“Huh?”

“All of them. Me an' them, up against it, all the time. The only damn one to make a stand. They ain't comin' for me. I'm the good guy.”

Mike stepped back, confused. As he did so, two police officers burst through the front door. They both clocked Frank instantly, one of them radioing for an ambulance. Their gaze then turned to Mike. One officer noticed Marshall's swollen, bloodied fists. Exchanging a glance, they moved as slowly and quietly as possible.

“Sir, please step away from the bar.”

Marshall didn't move.

“Sir, step away fr-”

“Mike, come on man! Jus' do as they say,” Marshall joked.

“Come on, man. Don't make it difficult,” Mike pleaded with him.

At that, Marshall stood up. The officers reached for their guns. Marshall put his hands firmly on the back of his head. As he was being cuffed, he gave Mike a sorry smile.

“Time for a road trip, fellas?”

“For your own sake, sir, please remain quiet 'til we get to the Precinct.”

Marshall's head began to hurt soon after he woke. Memories flooded back; the bar, Frank, getting thrown into the cell. They'd moved him from a group cell into this solitary one because he was causing too much trouble.

Sunlight broke in through the slatted window. Marshall winced as he used his hand to get up off the bed. Looking down, he couldn't believe how badly bruised his knuckles were. A long time had passed since he'd hit someone without his gloves on.

“Mason? You awake?”

“Yeah,” Marshall grumbled.

“You're not gonna cause any more trouble, are you?”

“Not today, officer.”

“I’ve had enough of your lip, boy. Now, do you want to be released or not?”

Marshall held his head, feeling all fuzzy. He looked up at the officer, frowning.

“What?”

“Do you want to get out of here, son?”

“I guess.”

“I guess? That all you got?” the officer said, shaking his head. “You a lost cause if ever I saw one. But it isn’t up to me whether we keep you locked up. Frank Castello dropped all charges against you.”

“For real?”

“No. Do I look like a joker to you? Of course for real!” he shouted, unlocking the door. “Now get the hell out of here before you cause more trouble. Go up the corridor and collect your possessions on the left. And Mason?”

“Yeah?”

“Clean yourself up. Last thing this city needs is another guy flushing his life down the crapper.”

Marshall nodded without conviction. Making his way up the corridor, he turned left into an alcove signposted ‘Possessions’. Behind the counter stood a gaunt old man who barely filled the folds of his immaculately pressed shirt. His droopy eyes flicked towards Marshall, not even blinking. They stood in silence for a few minutes.

“Christ, son. You waiting for my funeral?”

“What?”

“Name, son. I need your goddamn name. Jesus, they make ‘em dumber day by day.”

“Right. Marshall....Mason. Marshall Mason.”

“You sure? I don’t want to get you all confused,” the old man said sarcastically.

Marshall stood embarrassed as the officer shuffled over to a shelf at the back of the alcove. Pulling a plastic tray down from above his head, he rummaged in the items before bringing them over.

“Phone, Keys, Wallet, forty bucks, one photo, and...a dog tag?”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“You army, son?”

“Used to be.”

“Once a soldier, always a soldier. Guess they didn’t teach you no respect, that’s why you turned out like the punk you are. Not much of a surprise, really – it’s all going to hell, one bit at a time.”

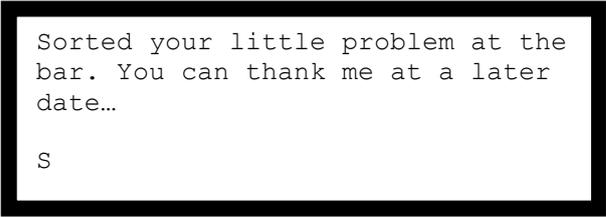
“What is?”

“Tupello. More like a cancer than a city these days. Everything that used to be good about it is crumbling away. My grandson’s girlfriend got raped last week. She’s twelve! What in god’s name can a twelve year old do to deserve that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t know much, do you? Well, there’s your stuff. I guess I’ll be seeing you sometime real soon.”

Marshall collected his items, putting all of them in his pockets except his cell phone. He gave the old man an apologetic glance before walking towards the exit. Switching the cell phone on, it instantly beeped. There was a text message. He opened it.



Sorted your little problem at the bar. You can thank me at a later date...

S

As Marshall smiled another beep rang out, this time a different tone. A missed call. Dialing his answer machine, the automated voice said he had four voice messages. The first one was at just gone eight this morning. He looked at his watch. It was now ten o’clock. He pressed ‘1’ to listen to the message.

“Hello, Mr. Mason. This is Feeney District Hospital, my name is Dr. Traleke and I’m calling about your grandmother. You need to get here as soon as possible. Any problems, my number is...”

Marshall still held the phone to his ear but he wasn't listening.

He was running.

The hospital wasn't too far away from here – in the west side of Brinkmater Straights. He put the cell phone in his pocket and built up to a sprint, several police officers staring at him as he fled the station.

“Ah, Mr. Mason. We've been trying to get a hold of you the past two hours.”

“Sorry, Doctor - my phone was switched off.”

“Right. As I'm sure you're well aware, your grandmother is a very sick woman.”

“Well...yeah. I kinda knew somethin' was wrong.”

“A *lot* of things are wrong. Her refusal of treatment over the past decade has led to multiple issues. She has a lot of fight in her, but there's only so much the body can take.”

Marshall stared at him.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, Mr. Mason, that the point where we could operate has long gone. And, having looked very closely at your grandmother for the past month, I couldn't really say where we should operate first. That's why I called you. She had a rough night, and there's been little improvement this morning. You're listed as next of kin.”

“And?”

The doctor let out a little sigh.

“Mr. Mason – your grandmother is suffering Stage Four multiple organ dysfunction syndrome, a type of sepsis. She’s suffering ischemic colitis *and* lactic acidosis. Those symptoms occur in the latter part of Stage Four. There isn’t a Stage Five. What I’m saying is that she’s coming towards the final element of our prognosis, and when that happens she will die. My guess is it will be sooner rather than later. You should be with her. The priest is in there now. Once he’s done, you can go in.”

Marshall looked at him, his eyes wide in disbelief.

“So...you're jus' gonna give up on her? That's it?”

“Sir, I have done all I can. She is a very old lady, and she’s had a very full and long life. It's more a case of reducing the pain now, and that’s been so for the past few hours as her condition deteriorated. We can’t save everybody.”

“But you can try!” he cried.

“I know this is hard. I’ve been a doctor twenty-six years. Seen some miracles, seen some real heartbreaking tragedies. All I’ve seen – all my expertise – tells me that if I single-mindedly try and save your grandmother, I’ll fail. There is no cure for this, no way to reverse it. All I’ll do is prolong her life – and that would only mean prolonging her suffering. I don’t want to cause her any pain, and I know you don’t.”

“But...there’s really nothin’?”

“I am so sorry, Mr. Mason. We’ve made sure she’s as comfortable as possible.”

“So when is she gonna...?”

“Sometime today. A weaker person would’ve gone in the night, but she’s a real fighter.”

“Right.”

“When you came in I instructed the nurse to give her something to make her more responsive, but it’s temporary – after that, she’ll slip into an unconscious state again. You might be able to speak with her.”

The priest came out of the room, nodding a polite and discreet smile to both the doctor and Marshall. Stepping away from the door, he went to walk down the corridor before pausing. He then gently returned, flicking his head towards the door opposite Grandma's as he looked at the doctor. The doctor nodded, and the priest gently opened the door, crossing himself as he entered. Marshall realized where he was: the ward no-one leaves. Marshall took a deep breath, trying to sort his head out. He twisted the handle and walked in.

"Hey, Grandma."

"Marshall?" she asked weakly, coughing dryly. "What the hell you doin' here, boy?"

"Came to see you."

"I can see that, I ain't no fool, boy. Don't you remember what I said? About not seein' you again?"

"I know. An' I'm sorry. Not jus' for what I done, but for the way I treated you since I came back."

"Bit late for that, Marshall."

For a moment he stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to do.

"Why'd you do it?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"Why'd you," she coughed again, "why'd you dress up an' beat people up?"

"I was tryin' to make a difference. Tryin' to make this city good again."

"Again? Son, city's been the way it's always been! What does that mean, good *again*?"

"I mean...like it was, before. Before Iraq."

"Ah," she said with a frail smile.

"What d'you mean, 'ah'?"

She stared at him gravely. He didn't know what to do, whether to match her gaze or look away. Her face was conflicted: a smile at odds with the tears running fast down her gray cheeks. She tutted loudly.

"I didn't raise you to be no fool, Marshall. An' the quickest fool o' all is the one who don't know himself. You tried to change a *whole* city? An' you never questioned *why*?"

"It needed changin'. It was bad an' I could fix it. Tupello's dirt."

"For you! You came back an' it wasn't the same, was it? An' you couldn't get it back to how it was, no matter how you tried. So what did you do? Put a mask on. Hid in the shadows. That ain't normal, Marshall."

"Maybe not!" he shouted. "But I did it for *good*. It's why I done everything I did, since I was a kid. 'Cause someone's gotta fight. People need someone to help them when they can't help themselves."

"An' you decided that was you. No-one asked for it. You been dealin' in secrets an' lies all this time. Even from me."

"What about you? All this treatment you've been refusin'?"

"Who you been talkin' to?"

"No-one! I heard it myself in the goddamn kitchen!"

She frowned, her lips trembling.

"When?"

"9/11. It was 9/11. You were talkin' to some doctor about what was wrong with you. But you never told me. Heard it all, there an' then. I've known somethin' was up. Known for years, an' you never told me yourself."

The old woman opened her mouth to protest. Marshall moved towards her, grabbing her hand and holding it gently between his. He couldn't believe how cold it was.

"I'm sorry, Marshall. I jus' thought...that it'd be better you not knowin'. I didn't want you worryin'."

"An' I didn't want you worryin' either."

“But son, you can’t go around beatin’ people up. It ain’t right.”

“I know that now, Grandma. I’m not gonna do that no more.”

She smiled once again as tears continued to run down her crinkled face. Resting her head back on the pillow, she was suddenly overcome by a painful coughing fit. Marshall passed her a handful of tissues. Once it was over, she passed him the tissues to throw in the waste bin. He noticed large specks of blood splotted everywhere.

“Marshall, I’m feelin’ a little tired...d’you mind if I shut my eyes for a while?”

“Course not, Grandma. Get some rest. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

With that, she closed her eyes and fell asleep. Marshall quietly rose from his chair and switched the television on. A familiar face took up the screen.

“Mayor Lee had this to say about the debacle:

I would like to assure you that, as Mayor of this city, I am still dedicated to tracking down the vigilante known as the Knight. While it's obvious there have been mistakes in the manhunt, My resolve remains strong. I have rectified those mistakes by relieving the strategist responsible, and I hope we can move on from this and have a successful Mayoral campaign...

It was announced later this afternoon that one of the Mayor's chief strategists had been removed from the campaign team. Mister Siegel was unavailable for comment.

In other news, it was announced today that Tupello's richest man, Alan Greenburg, is to pump yet more money into the already multi-billion dollar redevelopment of central Brinkmater, which began with the building of what is now known as Linda Greenburg Tower eighteen months ago. It is rumored the additional four hundred million dollars has been provided to clean up the Straights prior to the construction of a giant plaza adjacent to the Tower. The surprise news was delivered by his att-”

He switched it off and moved towards the window. The blinds were down but open, the early afternoon light spiking through the gaps. He glanced out. The hospital was just to the west of central Brinkmater – the part where people still lived. It was heavily built up, crumbling Victorian townhouses degraded with corrugated iron shacks and wooden huts. He couldn't believe how impoverished it was – the Masons had always been a low income family, yet they would never have lived here. He wondered how bad it had to be to resort to this.

Marshall stood still by the glass, staring unblinkingly at the scene below. He was drinking it all in, letting it fill his mind. The tags on the wall, the gangs that skulked down ramshackle streets looking for trouble. A few decent people, the only hint of their goodness being utter fear in their eyes. He had become good at spotting different types of fear. The criminals always had guilty panic in their faces – they couldn't hide it. A selfish look.

He noticed a little girl riding her bike down the street, tassels on the handlebars rippling in the wind. She was smiling broadly, ignoring the dirt and the grime surrounding her. How does she do it? he thought. Marshall knew it didn't matter. All that mattered was that she *did* do it.

A teenage boy came along the street and jumped in front of her; she panicked and swerved, crashing to the floor. She let out a painful cry that even Marshall could hear, all the way up here through closed windows. The teenager picked up the bike and ran away with it.

He looked on in despair as the little girl sat there screaming. Not moving, just wailing. Run, little girl, he thought. Run. No-one's gonna save you.

He felt his heart swell as his resolve became stronger. There was something there, a part of him. It wanted to burst through the window and jump. Jump down into the very depths of Brinkmater and take them on, all of them, every last one. Save the good, save the bad from themselves.

It was the better part of him and he knew it.

“They need me, Grandma,” he said without turning around. “If I don't go to them, no-one's gonna pick them up. They'll stay in the dirt 'til the day they die. 'Cause there are people in this world who want nothin' more than to keep people down.

“Dwayne was one of those people. I was wrong to do what I did – I see that now. But if you asked me if I’m sorry he’s gone, I’d say no. No way. It’s all about the bigger picture. You can’t save everyone. I got that from the very beginnin’. People gonna die whatever you do. Now they’re alone an’ they’re hurtin’.

“I ain’t gonna go back an’ do what I did. I’m gonna do it better. Gonna get it right this time. ‘Cause...I’m all they got. An’ they’re all I got. I ain’t nothin’ without them, an’ they can’t fight for themselves. Gotta make a stand, Grandma. They need me. This is what I was meant to do.”

He moved away from the window. Grandma was very still. Stepping towards her, he took her hand in his.

It was a different kind of cold now.

His lips trembled, his eyes glazing over. She was a fighter, he remembered the doctor saying. Marshall leaned over and kissed her forehead gently.

“Gonna get it right this time, Grandma. Make you proud. I promise,” Marshall whispered as he walked out of the room, leaving the door wide open.

Chapter Twenty-One

And in the firing line, who will stand? Are we **alone** in our judgment? Or will we bring others down with us...

Fitzgerald Park
Tupello
Ten Months Ago

It was a sunny day, cherry-blossom petals dancing lightly on the soft breeze. Most people taking lunch in the park had already scattered, she noticed. Shahina took a tentative step closer, acutely aware that everything was held in fragile balance. There could be no wrong moves here. His eyes were wild as he flailed the gun around indiscriminately.

No-one screamed, which surprised her. People ran or froze, all in silence. He was crying. Shahina stepped forward once more; he waved the gun in her direction, his hand shaking. She stopped instantly, raising her hands slowly.

“It is okay.”

“S-stay away from me.”

“You do not need to do this.”

“What d-do you know? It was MY LIFE!”

She’d never heard his voice raised before.

“This serves no purpose.”

“And? Not as if anyone c-cares.”

“I care.”

He looked directly into her eyes for the first time.

“How could he do this t-to me? After all this time.”

“I know. Awful.”

“He ought to...to pay. He should pay for this. He’s not a g-good man.”

“True. He *should* pay.”

They stood looking at one another, the tension ebbing slightly. People around them slipped away. The faint noise of sirens could be heard beyond the birds singing in the trees.

“Siegel, listen to me. Are you making him pay?”

“W-what?”

“Are you making him pay by doing this?”

“Well...no. I g-guess not.”

“I can help you. This cannot be helping. It makes no sense, what you are doing. We can make sense together. You need my help. You can make him pay, with my help.”

He lowered the gun slightly. Siegel’s expression was muddled now, rage and confusion blurring. She stepped closer to him.

“Siegel, please. You hear that? They are coming for you. If you want my help, you have to put the gun down and come with me. *Now*.”

“B-but how? How am I going to get back at the Mayor?”

“I can show you, but not if you get arrested. The opportunity disappears if that happens.”

She reached, placing her hand on his cheek. Lowering the gun down to his side, he smiled.

“Come. We cannot let them catch you.”

They hurried out of the park, jumping into a black limo with tinted windows.

“Did I do the right thing?”

The Mayor sat scratching his beard, small white specks proliferating on his tie.

“Of course you did. The man was an idiot, anyone could see that. You’re behind in the polls, now’s not the time to get sentimental. Kean has the drop on you, and if the election were tomorrow he’d be Mayor. There’s no room for softness.”

“I suppose,” the Mayor replied dejectedly.

“What are you doing about the Knight?”

“Huh?”

“I said: what are your plans for the vigilante? You implied in your speech you were determined to catch him.”

Lee looked at the laptop screen for any hint of a smile. There wasn’t any. The face staring back was gaunt and ragged.

“There’s been no success with the manhunt, which cost more than I’d like to say. No clues, no leads. Oh, and crime’s up near forty per cent this month. So frankly, and this means nothing in respect to your personal grief, I’ve had it with your constant fucking whining about the Knight.”

“Mayor Lee. I would watch your tongue very carefully, or else it may be curbed unexpectedly.”

“Is that a threat, Greenburg?”

“I don’t make threats. I’ve supported you a lot over the years, even when you’ve done some pretty shitty things. Don’t forget that I put up half the money for that manhunt, too. It’s just...don’t you get it?”

“Sure, crime’s up, but before he showed up we all knew what was what, where was where. Places you shouldn’t go at nighttime. Now it isn’t just Brinkmater anymore. They shifted to get away from him. There’s no order. Don’t you understand? He’s going to come back. I know it. A man like that, he’s obsessive. He doesn’t retire, doesn’t stop. A perfectionist. Once you start to think you can be a hero, it can never end there. It’ll eat him up, and then he’ll put that mask back on. We can’t keep doing this dance, it only leads to one place.”

“Where’s that?” the Mayor asked distractedly. He was trying not to look into Greenburg’s manic eyes.

“Damnation. You think there’d have been a Reaper without a Knight? The two fed off each other. Never mind the unforeseen effects. What’s safer, two criminals in jail or two criminals on the streets?”

Lee decided to hazard a guess.

“In jail?”

“Wrong. You put all the worst criminals in a confined space, first thing they’ll try to do is kill each other. The weakest and dumbest always die. So then you’ve got the worst, strongest, smartest criminals all sat together. Talking. Thinking. Plotting. On the streets they’d be avoiding each other – as rivals. Their paths would never cross. They’d never get caught. But now they’re in jail, and they’re becoming a unit. An army. Word is Marquez is putting together a team that’ll rival the Reaper’s empire.”

“Marquez? But – he’s in there for life! He was lucky to escape the death penalty – god knows Illinois and Florida were pushing for it.”

“He’ll be out of jail on a technicality. The chain of evidence was compromised.”

“Jesus. That’s the last thing we need. But, Greenburg...how? How’d you find all this out?”

“I have my contacts. You need to sort this, Mayor. I’m not ploughing my fortune into improving Brinkmater to have it ruined by *him*. The issue of the Knight isn’t going to go away just because he’s taken a sabbatical. You need to be ready for when he’s back. If you don’t do something, I will.”

And with that Greenburg’s transmission was cut, leaving the screen blank. The Mayor slammed his giant fists down onto the desk, sweeping his arms across. The laptop and several photo frames went crashing to the ground amid fluttering campaign papers. He took a deep breath and picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“I...,” the Mayor hesitated. “I need your help. Please. I’m losing the Mayoral campaign.”

“I thought you would never ask.”

“Whatever it takes, Shahina. Whatever it takes.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

In complete darkness, only one element can be born -
new light, both pure and blinding...

KCI Furry Compound
Tupello
Nine Months Ago

He stayed in the shadows, close to the moldy brick walls on the perimeter. Floodlights cast harsh brightness onto the middle ground. He pulled a glove off and held his hand above his head. There was a breeze – he figured it would be stronger out in the open, away from the walls. Taking a pen-like object from his belt, he brought it up to his lips. Then he waited.

Eventually, one of the men working in the floodlit center stepped into the dark. He watched the worker move one step, another, waited until he was five steps from the light. Then he pushed air hard through his throat, a sharp exhale. The worker grabbed his neck, went limp and collapsed with little noise. In the middle the other workers continued.

He loaded another dart and readied himself.

Four workers down and the others were starting to get suspicious, but they didn't venture from the lit area to check their colleagues were okay. He sighed.

“Fine. Just one more, then. It's time,” he whispered.

Another dart, this time hitting a worker standing in full view under the lights. He stared at the dart protruding from his chest, then collapsed. The others – only numbering three, now – peered out into the darkness, all staring in different directions. He took something from his belt.

“What the fuck?”

“Are we – are we under attack?”

“Get Jose – NOW!”

He rolled two balls towards the middle. The remaining men gawked at them as they came riding in from the darkness. Raising their guns towards the shadows, one pulled off a shot just as thick smoke plumed from the spheres at their feet.

He flicked a switch at the side of his mask and the world changed. Blue, green, yellow and orange. He headed towards the orange. Moving forward, he disarmed the men one by one before knocking each one out with a clean strike to the temple. He dragged them close together and, pulling rope from his belt, quickly tied them up.

The smoke was beginning to dissipate. Stepping back into the shadows, he resumed his place by the wall. He flicked the switch on his mask again and normal vision returned.

One of the workers was coming to.

“Help! HEELLLPP! Boss, get out here! There's someone – some motherfucker – tryin' to kills us!”

Two men stepped out of the depot building to inspect the commotion – one a giant block of a man, the other a small, muscular man covered in tattoos.

“What the...?”

“Boss, we gotta get you outta here,” cried the worker. “There’s some kinda fuckin’ banshee out there. Some dia de los muertos shit goin’ on, I swear. Ain’t never seen anythin’ like it before, Holy Je-”

The tattooed man walked over and slapped him across the face hard.

“The *fuck* you talkin’ ‘bout? Ain’t no ghosts here. An’ if there is – so what?” He prodded his chest. “I am Jose Marquez. Even the dead fear me. Ain’t that right, Julius?”

“Damn straight, boss. The mother-fuckin’ dead,” muttered the man-mountain.

A deep laugh echoed around the compound walls. Julius looked around, trying to spot something in the black. Jose moved to the very middle, where all four lights were most concentrated.

“You better stop fuckin’ with me right now, homes. Whoever you are. You come out an’ I spare your life, I promise.”

“A thief’s promise? No thanks,” shouted a voice from the darkness.

“Fine. Have it your way. We gonna fill you with holes now, fool.”

Jose pulled up his gun and began firing all around, narrowly missing Julius. He held the trigger down until the gun was completely out of bullets. Jose tossed the gun in frustration, surprised when seconds later it came back and hit him in the back of the head.

“I’ve been watchin’ you, Jose.”

The gangster stumbled around, dazed by the blow. Holding his head as he stepped back, Jose tripped on one of his worker’s legs and went sprawling beyond the light and into the black. Julius bounded out of the center in his eagerness to help his boss.

A muffled yelp was followed by some padded, thumping noises, and then something heavy being dragged. The workers, still tied together, wriggled and squirmed to get free. Jose scrambled back into the light, facing the shadows with his jaw clenched and fists balled.

“Where are you, you sonofabitch? I’m gonna kill you! I’m Jose Marquez, you fuck! No-one messes with me. No-one! Know where you are, homes? Estar entre la espada y la pared! Eh, man? Time to find out your pain threshold, takin’ on me. You gonna wish you was never b-”

A fist slammed into his temple, making a neat smacking noise. Jose Marquez fell to the ground unconscious.

“...Gonna wish I was never born. Ha.”

He tied Marquez up, dragging him closer to the tied workers.

“Is that – are you the Knight? I-I thought you were dead.”

“I can't die.”

“Shit, man – just go away already. No-one wants you here, can't you see that? You're a fuckin' pariah, homes. Pigs want you worse than they want us, an' that's sayin' somethin'. They don't care if you get rid of us, man. All they're after is control, an' they don't like you 'cause you're out of control. To them, we just gangsters. But you, no. They look at you an' they see a monster.”

The Knight dropped Marquez and held a fist high over the talkative one.

“Go on, do it! Prove me right, you freak. Least we got motives – money, power. What's pushin' you, huh? What kinda guy wears a mask an' beats the crap outta people he don't know?”

“The kinda guy who's doin' it for himself,” the Knight said, his hand falling back down. He felt an urge to speak, to say aloud all those things he'd kept hidden in the past. There was no hiding, not now.

“I made her a promise. *I* don't care why I do this, or whether it's right. To hell with what people think of me. But, for her, I made a promise. You should be thankful.”

“For what?”

“That there are people like her left in this world. 'Cause she's the only reason I ain't bustin' your head into a dozen pieces right now.”

He went over and dragged Julius back to the others, which took a lot longer than Jose. Once the massive man was tied up, the Knight left the compound. Sneaking down a side alley, he changed back into his normal clothes.

Back out on the main street, he walked over to a phone box. After dialing a number, he placed a device over the receiver.

“Hey. Yeah, I'd like to give you some information regardin' Jose Marquez an' his gang. I know my voice sounds weird...no, I'm not usin' one of those voice-alterin' gadgets. I *have* heard they are expensive, as well as illegal – please, jus' listen up. Marquez' gang can be found at the KCI Furyn compound on Lower East. They've been restrained an' there's evidence of narcotics an' weapon trading on site. Thank you – no, I don't wanna leave my name. My pleasure. Bye. Oh, I almost forgot...be safe.”

“This is a strange place to have your morning coffee.”

Marshall looked up from the magazine he was reading. He gave her a warm smile. He noticed her hair was sleek – it looked straightened. A very different style.

“This *is* a coffee shop. Well, last time I checked...”

“I meant it was strange in terms of its location. So far away from your home. It must take you, oh, *forever* to get here,” she said, smiling.

He didn’t reply as he took a sip from his coffee. Looking into her eyes, he watched as she carefully lowered herself down to sit on the chair opposite him.

“That seat’s taken.”

“Really?” she said, looking around for the taker.

“I suppose you can have it. For a little while, at least.”

“Why, you are so gracious, kind sir.”

Marshall picked up the magazine once more.

“Good read?”

“Yeah. Interestin’. Front page about that new development Alan Greenburg's workin' on in Brinkmater. Looks real promisin'. Rest is about the mayoral race. They reckon Lee's messed up big time, lost the race. Kean for mayor all the way, or so they say. Some say Mayor messed it up 'cause o' all that business with the Knight.”

“Maybe he did.”

“Maybe,” he repeated, trying not to sound defensive.

“But then, there is still time. Any man can make a mistake – it is his capacity to pay for such errors that leads to success.”

“You know, if Grandma ever met you I know exactly what she woulda said: you talk real fancy.” She looked concerned. “That’s a compliment. You always have the right words to say. I like it. There’s somethin’...inspirational about you. Plus, it’s nice to have someone smart around. An’ I think you’re right – everyone deserves another chance.”

“Well, that is not *quite* what I said. But thank you,” she said, pulling her hair delicately behind her ear.

Marshall leaned over and did the same for her on the other side. His hand lingered, fingertip brushing softly down her earlobe. He pulled away as soon as he realized, yet the look on his face didn’t change.

“That’s better.”

“Nowhere to hide,” Shahina said meekly.

“Girl like you shouldn’t never hide.”

“Says the man who wears a mask?”

“Sshh – an’ hey! I have to. Got my own life, you know.”

“And that is the only reason?”

“Now, Shahina – what have I said before? Let’s cut the psycho-mumbo-jumbo before it even starts. I’m jus’ a guy.”

“Ha! Yes, Marshall. *Just* a guy. What do you Americans call it? I remember – an average Joe,” she giggled.

“You know what I mean. I ain’t sayin’ I’m some nobody – it’s jus’ meant to mean that I ain’t deep. Like you.”

“*I* am deep?” she asked, her giggling cut short. “Whatever gave you that impression?”

He looked out into the street below, the large window capturing all the cornucopia of the city. Endless waves of people going this way, that way. So many small lives. Marshall turned from the window to look back at her, intensity etched on his face.

“It’s in your eyes. You can’t hide it from there. Maybe you don’t say much – not about yourself, anyhow – but that’s the thing, ain’t it? People who hide in themselves always got layers, wrapped tight so no-one else can see. Your eyes reveal the depth your silence tries to hide.”

Shahina stared at him, her face a muddle of emotions. She seemed to smile, but not quite. Marshall placed his hand on hers. Initially she flinched, then relaxed.

“You see, Marshall? What you just said – that shows real depth. A man who thinks carefully about the world, about his actions. A man of responsibility. So you cannot say you have no depth. I, too, see it in your eyes. You would never have taken on this task, this mission, if there was nothing there. Some past event driving you forward...”

Marshall gave her hand a squeeze before withdrawing, his spine pressed against the backrest of his chair. He gave out a great sigh, as though admitting defeat. Shahina straightened her slouched position, waiting intently.

“Okay, okay. Now what I’m gonna tell you – I ain’t never said before.”

“I understand.”

He rubbed his nose, then shuffled in the seat.

“Well, when I was a kid – about eleven – there was a car accident. My sister, mom, an’ grandpa all died. Only me an’ Grandma survived.”

His eyes dropped. She leaned over and placed a hand on Marshall's arm.

“Marshall, that is terrible. I am so sorry, how di-”

“Wait,” he put his hand up. “Wait. I ain't finished. See the thing is...the thing is – it was my fault.”

Her mouth gaped.

“What?”

“I was causin’ all these problems, I distracted my mom an’ grandpa, then we...”

Tears fell as the words choked up in his throat. Shahina put her both her hands on his.

“...we crashed. If I hadn’t been the way I was that day, they’d all still be here.”

“Marshall, you were just a child. You cannot blame yourself. It was an *accident*. A culmination of several people’s actions all working together to create one awful, tragic miracle. That is what an accident is. You were just a child. There was no crime, no fault. These things happen, there is no blame to go around. Accidents go beyond one person’s actions, their responsibility. You were just a child, Marshall.”

He looked up at her, his cheeks wet.

“I guess – I guess you're right.” He let out a long sigh as he wiped away the tears. “I think that, in the long run, it made sense to blame myself. Couldn't blame anyone else in that car, an' the idea it was jus' a random thing always made me sick to my stomach. If it wasn't anyone's fault it was plain unfair. Twist of fate. That seems more harsh than feelin' guilty.”

“Is that what made you become...?” she asked, looking around.

“I guess. I mean, that’s got somethin’ to do with it. I had a lot to prove – that’s how it felt, anyways.”

“So...that was only part of it?”

“How’d you mean?”

She looked at him, her eyes searching.

“Does anything else play on your mind when you are out there, in the night?”

Marshall looked down, thinking about what went through his head as he stalked through the city. It hit him quickly, the shady memory that kept him awake at night. But he didn’t want this to come out. Didn't want judgment, especially from her.

He remembered what happened with Grandma, how much it stung when she disowned him. That it happened because he *didn't* tell her, because he kept secrets. Marshall looked back up at Shahina. She's all I got left, he thought.

“Iraq.”

Realization spread over her face.

“The shaylah comment, that first night we met. Makes sense now. You spent time in Iraq?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened? What did you do?”

“I-I don’t really wanna talk about it, Shahina. Let it rest.”

“Tell me,” she insisted. “It is good to share things.”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good id-”

“I will not judge you,” she said soothingly.

He stared at her. There was an interest in her eyes that didn’t seem quite right. Marshall chided himself, halting the negative thoughts. Here was his only supporter, his only friend. She'd always been there. She just wanted to help him.

“Okay. As long as you *promise* not to judge.”

“I promise, Marshall.”

“I don't know how much you've heard 'bout war. It's difficult to explain to someone who's never seen what can happen. The things you see, the...the things you do. Can't help but change you. Early on, you buy into it. Believe it, almost like a religion. You do the things you come to despise, 'cause it's like a different world.

“Eventually there's a point where somethin' happens, changes your outlook. It happens because you make it happen, an' after that there's no goin' back.”

“What?”

“I was on a mission an' it got messed up. No, that ain't true. *I* messed it up, real bad. Got my whole team cut down. Went in on my own, didn’t listen to orders, an’...I ended up killin’ someone.”

“Who?” Shahina asked, grasping his hand firmly as she stared at his mouth.

“I-I thought it was a boy – well, a young man. Had to be. You don't expect it. Tryin’ to kill me. It's a different world. Dog eat dog. I got the upper hand, an' I...I strangled him. Except. Except he wasn’t...a man.”

“You mean he was just a chi-”

“I killed a girl. A teenage girl.”

Shahina's hands pulled away from his. She looked at him in disbelief. Marshall crossed his muscular arms across his chest, waiting for her to storm out. Yet she just sat there, gazing at him.

"This is it? You killed her?"

"Yeah, that's it. Can't believe you're bein' so cold, Shahina. You expectin' a massacre? Ain't what I did to her bad enough?"

"You would think so."

"Huh?"

"Nothing," she snapped.

"What's wrong with you? I'm layin' my soul out, here. I killed a girl. With my bare hands. Don't get much worse than that."

Her mouth dropped a little after he said that. A quick shake of the head seemed to help her compose, as the calm smile returned once more.

"She tried to kill you, Marshall. She was not innocent."

"You don't know that."

"People more innocent than her have died unfairly."

"I guess, bu-"

"No, do not guess. She *was* bad. A killer. Like you said, dog eat dog. All that is in the past. The time for judgment of your history is not today. What you need to focus on now is your sense of right and wrong. It needs to be stronger than ever. Testing times lay ahead – you have to be at your best."

"What d'you mean?"

"Your return will change things – both on the streets and in the offices. There will be more scrutiny than ever before – the media, the Mayor, the authorities. I have helped with the new equipment but the rest is down to you. Can you be the best you can be? Is it in you, Marshall Mason, to be the hero you always wanted to be?"

“I- yeah. It’s in me. I got what it takes.”

“Good. There can be no slip-ups this time, no excess. Balance is a key thing if you are to find justice. You must be a guardian, not a weapon.”

“I know, Shahina. I ain’t gonna make the same mistakes. Last words I said to Grandma – an oath. I’m gonna get it right this time. It’s gonna be perfect.”

“I am certain it will be, Marshall,” she said, standing up.

She exited down the spiral staircase and flicked her hair from her face as she walked out into the street.

Rummaging through her bag, Shahina pulled out her cell phone. Once outside the coffee shop, she made a call.

“It is me. Make sure this is tomorrow’s headline: He is back. Yes, of course *him*. He was involved in the Marquez arrest last night. Cover it, give it your full attention – plus a positive spin. Make him a hero. Your best writing, nothing less. Do not fail me.”

She snapped the phone shut and dropped it back into her bag. A sleek black car pulled up beside her, stopping parallel. The driver got out, taking his cap off as he ran around the back to open the door nearest her.

“Ma’am. Hope today's meeting went well?”

“Everything is in place.”

“Glad to hear it, ma’am.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

There are many judgments, but **only one crime** - a lack of judgment...

Mayor Lee's HQ
Tupello
Eight Months Ago

“Believe me, I know I am right.”

“You’ve said that before, and god knows you’ve been wrong. What if you’re wrong again – how many people get hurt this time?”

“I *am* right.”

“I appreciate your confidence, Shahina...but my political career was almost wrecked by the Knight – who you've supported from the very beginning. Now he’s back. I’ve got to do something.”

“Damn right you have.”

They both turned to the door; it was Greenburg. His clothes hung from his shoulders, the cloth of his suit looking shabby. His hair, normally immaculate, made him appear wild.

“Sorry I’m late.”

“Not a problem, Alan. Take a seat. Shahina here was just telling me to go easy on the Knight.”

Greenburg’s eyebrows raised as he sat down. He turned to her.

“You can’t be serious, can you? He’s a menace, a threat. The most dangerous man in this city.”

“Mr. Greenburg,” she replied gently, “the Knight rounded up Jose Marquez and his entire gang. He wiped out over eighty per cent of Tupello’s heroin production instantly. You are a man of business. You, Mayor Lee, are a man of politics. How is it that you cannot see what the Knight is? An asset.”

“Tell that to all the brain-damaged guys, the ones he half-near killed down in Brinkmater,” the Mayor scoffed. “Don’t see us doing that, do you?”

Alan looked out the window and then down to his shoes, wiping his nose awkwardly.

“Mayor’s right,” he said shakily. “The Knight is a complete liability. At what point are his victims going to start suing the city for not bringing him to justice?”

Lee’s cheeks puffed out in disdain and he pushed himself away from the desk.

“There’s going to be another manhunt. To get re-elected I have to make tough decisions. That’s what needs to be done. Got rid of Siegel, didn’t I? Need things to run smoothly in the build-up, and having a maniac scurrying around punching people in the face isn’t my definition of smooth.”

Shahina got up out of her chair and wandered over to the window. The sun was setting behind the office buildings across the road, the street gloomier than the sky. She turned slightly, her gaze on Greenburg. They exchanged a look the Mayor didn’t catch. Greenburg went slightly gray in the face.

“Mayor Lee. You *should* have a manhunt. The Knight has done good things, but he has also done bad things – things for which he *will* be punished. No-one escapes justice, no matter where they go or who they become. But let me say one thing: wait. Hold off the manhunt until after your acceptance speech. You have fought so hard for the Mayoral race. Wh-”

“But-but it’s not over! I’m down in the polls, I need a miracle.”

“You *will* succeed. That is why we are all here, is it not? To make things happen. When you do win, Tupello will need time to breathe...to celebrate. Brinkmater is once again becoming a respectable neighborhood, thanks to Mr. Greenburg’s redevelopment. The city is healing, it would seem. Announce the manhunt at your acceptance speech, which you will hold in the heart of Brinkmater Straights. It will be a perfect symbol of leadership – embracing hope, showing development and promising justice.”

The Mayor looked at Greenburg, who shrugged. Then he stood up and went over to Shahina by the window. For a moment his bearded face remained still, but after a while he broke out into a broad grin.

“It’s a wonderful idea. But I’ll need your help – and yours,” he said to Alan, “if we’re going to make it work. I can picture it now, the best acceptance speech ever. This is it. This will cement my place in the history books.”

“I have no doubt it will,” replied Shahina.

“Great. Well, thanks for coming over here, you two. It’s been good talking, but I have to go meet my wife for dinner. Forgot our anniversary last week, she won’t stop whining about it. Do you mind if I head off? You can shut the door behind you when you leave, security will lock up.”

“Sure.”

“Fine by me,” Shahina said firmly.

The Mayor blundered around picking up his cell and wallet, knocking into his desk. He shuffled his giant bulk awkwardly around the furniture of his office, before slamming the door shut. Shahina and Greenburg stared at each other in silence. Neither blinked, neither moved.

“Your conscience is clear, Mr. Greenburg.”

“Thanks,” he said without sincerity. “What about yours?”

“That does not come into it, frankly. I have another purpose.”

“Right, right. Judas had a purpose, you know.”

“I am afraid I am not familiar with western religion.”

“So...how’d you know Judas was from western religion then?”

They both smiled, Greenburg’s a little more tired.

“You’re a smart girl. There’s a lot of things you could do. You know. With your life.”

She turned once more to the window, where the dark was settling and street lamps buzzed into life. Shahina thought she felt a cool draught, but didn’t trust that it was real.

“I could say the same for you, Mr. Greenburg. We are both bound by our convictions, which stand tied to our pasts. There is but one difference between us.”

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?”

Shahina walked purposefully over to him, towering above him. She was beautiful, he could see. But he wondered how many people saw this side of her, the one she wasn't hiding from him.

"I am not burdened by the weakness that cripples you, making you impotent. I will not flinch, will not fail. I am not a sad, useless old man prolonging his own limp interpretation of life with pale, half-wished thoughts of retribution."

"And that makes you...better than me?"

"No," she said as she ghosted towards the door. "It means I will do what needs to be done. There is no better or worse, no good or evil. There is no hate, no anger, no rage. Only justice. We all await the final judgment – either from others or from ourselves. I believe you do understand what I'm saying. And perhaps you agree, after what you accomplished that night in Brinkmater."

"What night in B-"

He stopped, his head bowing.

"How did you find out? No-one knew, no-one knew..."

Greenburg looked up but she was gone, leaving him alone in the suffocating darkness.

Chapter Twenty-Four

In the future, there are echoes of the past; they **never** disappear entirely, we merely choose to ignore them - at least, some of us do...

Edge of Brinkmater Straights Tupello Six Months Ago

Rain hadn't fallen in weeks. The ground beneath him felt spongy. There was a thirst at the back of his throat, trying to scratch his attention. It was no use; he had business to attend to.

"Be on your way," he bellowed to the figures down the alleyway.

"We ain't doin' no harm," said the scrawny teenager holding a needle.

"Not now you ain't. It's what you're gonna be doin' in a couple of hours that I'm concerned with. You heard me – pack up your things an' get back home. It ain't safe round here."

The teenager threw the needle away and pulled a gun from his jacket pocket, strutting forward with cool arrogance. Raising the pistol, he drew it up to the Knight's forehead.

"Is this really what you wanna do?" he said to the kid, pushing the gun down so it was pointed at his chest. "Then do it. Blow me away. But a real man ain't scared of what he does. He don't shy from difficult things – like blood, like pain. You gonna shoot me, you better be prepared to watch me die slow. Pull the trigger."

"Fuck you, man. No-one tells me what to do, no-one. You ain't my dad."

"You're right. But it don't mean what I said ain't true. How many kids you think I seen like you round here?"

"I dunno, man. That don't matter."

“Don’t it? Your dad tells you what to do simply ‘cause he can. You think these streets out here are meant for you – maybe they *should* be, but they ain’t. I walked every single patch of this city – every step.

“I’m not tellin’ you what to do ‘cause you’re a kid, or simply ‘cause I can. I’m sayin’ it ‘cause I believe I’m tellin’ you the right thing to do, straight up. Brinkmater’s better, but it ain’t finished with the bad old days jus’ yet. Trust me. You go now an’ it saves me the job of rescuin’ your asses later on.”

The teenager let out an involuntary laugh. Now relaxed, he lowered his gun and secured it in his pocket. The rest of his gang came out from the alleyway, traipsing past the Knight.

“Hey. Kid?”

“Yeah?”

“You be careful who you wave that around, okay? Straights ain’t safe.”

“Whatever, man,” the teenager said, sucking through his teeth.

The Knight shook his head as he watched them walk away. Climbing a gutter pipe on the side of a high wall, he found himself thinking about Dwayne. How much things had changed since then.

There were different kinds of scary; the Reaper had been grand scale, operatic – yet in a way, human. The scary that really sent a chill through him was the kind he just witnessed. He knew that kind of power should never be wielded so easily. Any time he’d confronted death it had been the hardest moments of his life.

He reached the top of the building. Looking out, he gave a disappointed sigh. The streets were almost empty – it seemed like Brinkmater Straights were hemorrhaging people.

He jolted: a scream in the balmy night air. Twisting, he sprinted to the edge, leaping onto the next rooftop. The alleyway where the cry came from was a couple of blocks up. Scrambling across the roofs as quickly as he could, almost losing his footing on the last one.

After he regained his composure, he looked down towards the alleyway. One woman, one man. The man on top of the woman, his pants by his ankles. Moonlight reflecting off the knife in his hand.

The Knight drew an object attached by cord from his belt and threw it onto the opposite roof, where it made a sharp ‘clink’ noise on the edge. Pulling the cord from his belt, he removed the object and placed it carefully on the edge, where it also made a ‘clink’ sound as it bit onto the ledge. He took a deep breath. Another step toward the side of the building and then he jumped, aiming for the middle of the cord.

He made it cleanly, the cord smoothly loosening to descend him silently onto the alley below. The guy’s voice, muffled up on the rooftop, suddenly became clear.

“Take your pants off, you fuckin’ bitch. Ain’t gonna tell you again – do it or I cut your face.”

The girl tried to contain her crying as she began to loosen her belt. The Knight reached the ground, his right foot landing on an empty beer can. The man registered the hollow metallic sound but didn’t bother to look over his shoulder.

“Get the hell outta here, this ain’t none of your business!”

“You an’ I both know that ain’t true.”

“Great. Got myself a fuckin’ Samaritan, have I? Why couldn’t you ju-”

The attacker swiveled on his feet as he stood up, his voice trailing off as he saw who it was. Behind him, the girl let out a sigh of relief, pulling her belt up and fastening it.

“You okay?” the Knight asked.

“I-I suppose so.”

“Don’t worry, the police will be here soon.”

“Not gonna deal with me yourself? What’s the matter, big shot - you chicken? I *knew* you were just some nobody. All my buddies said ‘no, man, he’s the real deal’ – but here you are, and you can’t do squat.”

“Trust me, you’d prefer it this way.”

“That so? Maybe I disagree, motherfucker!”

He charged, plunging his knife towards the Knight's stomach. With a sharp twist of his wrist, the Knight broke the blade from its hilt. He launched a sharp chop to the side of the neck and the attacker fell.

Grabbing him by the collar, the Knight balled his fist ready to smash down hard. He hesitated, his knuckles shaking just inches from the guy's face. Pulling a canister from his belt, he sprayed it in the man's face. After a moment, the man went limp and slipped down onto the ground. The Knight tied him up.

"Why-why didn't you beat him up? He deserved it!"

"I...maybe he did. He *did*. But, thing is – I can't decide what this guy deserves to get. I ain't the police. I don't decide the law. I'm jus' a citizen, same as you."

"Don't be crazy – you're a hero," she said, hugging his side as he tried to tie the man up.

"Uh, thanks. You gotta cell phone?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Call the cops, tell them where you are," he said, climbing another pipe.

"You're gonna *leave* me here?"

"No – I'm gonna sit up on the roof an' wait. I'll be watchin' over you 'til they're here. Could you do me a favor?"

"Can *I* do *you* a favor? Anything!"

"Don't tell them I'm up here. Fools will only try an' chase me."

"Sure – my lips are sealed."

"Thanks," he said as he struggled off the pipe and onto the roof.

Once the blaring sirens tailed off into the distance, he descended the pipe. He felt good about how it had gone so far, but...different. Somehow diminished. It seemed less satisfying this way – justice always beyond his grasp. There was no immediacy in what he was doing. Yet he knew this was the way it *had* to be.

Touching down on the alley floor, he heard a noise behind him. Deep in the alley. Turning, he was surprised. A person stood there, dressed all in black. Even a balaclava covering their face. He'd never seen anything like it before. They stood staring at each another, completely frozen.

The stranger dipped their shoulder and ran.

The Knight jolted awkwardly on his right knee, pushing his joints into action as he gave chase. The alleyway wasn't a dead end, merely a starting point for a series of side roads barely large enough to fit a car. The person in black turned right, knocking into a garbage can. The Knight sped up, sensing an advantage as he leaped over the fallen metal can.

As he landed his foot planted squarely into something soft, almost liquid. He slid forward sharply, sending his legs high into the air. He landed heavily on his left arm, his hip crunching against the floor. Looking up, he saw the stranger take a left.

Heaving himself up, he ran with a heavy limp. He saw that the road immediately in front was shrouded in darkness. Beyond it was a lighted section lined with more garbage bins. He proceeded into the gloom, puffing hard through the pain.

The Knight hobbled past the shadows into the light. He heard a noise, so faint as to be the merest whisper.

Everything melted into overwhelming black.

He slumbered.

Rolling onto his back, he noticed that the sky was lighter. Dawn was fast approaching. His eyelashes flickered as splashes of rain fell from the sky onto his mask. Feeling the ground with his fingers, he let out a groan. He was still in the alleyway. His hands felt like they'd been forced through a meat grinder.

Trying to pull himself up from the floor, he failed. As his senses came back, intense pain shot up his arms and legs. He pulled his hands up to his eyes. The padded gloves were shredded, his fists caked in blood where holes revealed lacerated skin underneath.

He lifted his head. Inspecting his boots, he noticed deep scuffmarks coupled with heavy gouges. He wiggled his toes or, at least, he tried to. It only took a split second for the agony to traverse the length of his body up to his head. He wasn't sure if they were broken, but they felt...mangled. The Knight rolled himself onto his side to take a look around.

"Holy shit," he gasped.

The garbage cans that had lined the alleyway were strewn everywhere. Some were heavily beaten, some even ripped in half. All along the torn metal, the impact marks, there were smudges of blood.

Glancing up at the wall, he saw that there were more red smudges – even spatter marks up high around smashed windows. He focused on those covering the walls – round, compact stains. He fought what his instincts told him, not wanting to believe it.

The smudges that were everywhere, *everywhere*, looked as though they were from solitary impact. No victim, only an aggressor. And judging from the size of the smears, someone had gone berserk.

A thought passed through his mind – maybe the stranger in black had torn the alleyway apart. He glanced from his hands up to the wall. Then back at his bloody, pulped hands.

Planting his palms on the floor, he winced. It didn't matter how much pain it caused him, he had to get away before it became light. Putting his weight entirely on his feet was too much; he hobbled towards the side of the alleyway, pressing some of his bulk against the wall as he struggled along.

There was a noise behind him.

Turning around awkwardly, he thought he saw something. It was the darker part of the street, even in the growing light, but he could have sworn someone was there. He limped awkwardly toward the shadows, but stopped after a few steps. The pain was too much to chase anyone at a decent speed and he was losing time.

Looking in the opposite direction, he noticed out in the main street a café that had lights on. His car was two blocks away. He pulled himself off one wall and half-fell towards the other. It was too risky to go onto the main road, even now; he would have to struggle on through the mazy alleyways towards his car.

After twenty minutes of staggering, he reached the side road leading to his car. Pulling off his mask, he detached the cape and wrapped it over his shoulders to look like a homeless bum. He turned back, staring into the darkness of the alleyway.

As he shuffled into the street, he checked to see if anyone was there. It was clear, save for a tramp on the corner fast asleep on a bench. The Knight made his move, getting into the car with an awkward jolt.

He swore as he pressed his foot down on the pedal. He'd just pulled away when another question entered his mind, one that pushed the pain away and left him hollow.

There was no reason to think it, except the strange sensation that all this was somehow familiar. History repeating itself. No reason at all, yet the question echoed in his brain, all the way home.

He shambled through the front door, heading towards the phone. Dialing a number, he huffed impatiently.

“Hello?”

“Doctor Roundearth? It's me, Marshall. Marshall Mason.”

“Ah. Good morning, Marshall. What's the matter?”

“Somethin' happened. Somethin' bad. I need to see you. We need to do the procedure. Now.”

“We discussed that, Marshall. It's dangerous. We don't know what you might remember, what you could reenact. It's still too soon.”

“You don't understand. I *have* to. There's no choice now. I'm not in control now, an' I need you to help me.”

“Hm. Why don't you come in and we can talk about this some more? It's been quite a while since your last session.”

“I know. I know. There's been a lot goin' on. I'll come in later today. You gotta understand, you gotta. This is life or death.”

“Try and calm down, Marshall. Get some rest, you sound tired. I'll clear my afternoon appointments and we can talk then. See you later. Get some sleep.”

“I can't sleep, someone's tryin' to get me. I can't do w-”

“Marshall. This afternoon. Now sleep.”

The line went dead.

He stared at the stairs. He remembered those first few nights all those years ago. After the crash. It wasn't getting to sleep that was an issue. The real trouble came with how his sleep ended: throat hoarse and back drenched in sweat. Grandma wasn't here anymore to talk him down, to make it easier.

He limped over to the drinks cabinet and pulled out a bottle of whiskey.

III.

Girl in the blue dress...

She the blood that's drownin' me,

Dragging me under.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Power demands sacrifices - there can be no
indecisiveness, not if **closure** is what you seek...

Dr. Roundearth's Residence
Tupello
Five Months Ago

Alex Roundearth swayed gently around her living room, humming along to an old Bob Dylan track. She gulped another mouthful of red wine, bending down towards the coffee table to pick up the bottle. It was empty.

"Oopsie," she giggled.

Taking the bottle into the kitchen, she paused by the wine cabinet.

"What the hell. Had a rough day at work; I deserve it."

She opened a cabinet door and pulled another bottle out. Staring at it for a moment, she picked up the corkscrew. Then she put the wine back, replacing it with another. She unscrewed the lid with corkscrew still in hand.

The music shifted pace, from Dylan to Hendrix. Alex attempted to swing her head around but almost fell over. Taking a sip of wine, she turned to look around the flat.

"Sabbusti?"

She waited a while, but there was nothing.

"Sabbusti!"

She placed her wineglass on the side cabinet without care and pulled a saucer out of the drawer, before taking a carton from the fridge. She filled the saucer with milk, her brow furrowed in concentration. Milk still sloshed over the side and onto the kitchen tiles.

"Sabbusti, come on, boy. Here, kitty. You getting lazy in your old age?" She turned and headed out of the kitchen. "Where are y-"

Alex dropped the saucer, milk splashing everywhere as the china cracked into pieces.

“Ohmygod.”

A shadowy figure stood by the doorway. In one hand a knife, in the other Sabbusti, his throat slit.

“Do not scream,” the stranger commanded.

Alex opened her mouth, but the intruder took a quick step forward and slammed the hilt of the knife hard into her temple, knocking her out cold.

“Wake up.”

Alex opened her eyes. There was something tarry around her left one. Her head was pulsing.

“Sorry about this,” the intruder said.

“What – what the fuck? You come in here, a-”

“Please. Be calm.”

“Be calm? Be fucking calm? Are you out of y-”

The stranger was fast; before Alex could finish what she was saying, the knife was embedded in her left side. She opened her eyes wide but made little noise. All she could do was breathe; even that was a struggle.

“This is excruciating, but not deadly. I am sorry to do this to you, truly I am. You were only doing your job, and so none of this is your fault. But I cannot let that stand in my way.”

Alex forced words out.

“W-what...do y-you mean?”

“I need the words that trigger him.”

Alex looked away, tears filling her eyes. She looked down at the knife, then back at her attacker.

“Please, you d-don’t under...stand. He’s v-very dangerous.”

“I understand perfectly well. More than you could know.” The stranger twisted the knife, and Alex let out a silent yelp. “Now. *The words*, Doctor Roundleath.”

Alex leaned slightly forward, the intruder doing the same. Turning her neck slightly, she whispered a few words before slipping back, tears filling her eyes.

“Thank you,” said the intruder. “Your sacrifice has been a worthy one.”

“No, w-wait, you...d-don’t have to-”

The knife was out of Alex's side and drawn hard across her throat before she could finish speaking. The intruder placed the dead cat on the doctor's bloody lap and left

Chapter Twenty-Six

POWER IS A FORCE **WITHOUT CONSCIENCE**, WITHOUT SIDES
- EITHER *GOOD* OR *BAD*...

Brinkmater Straights
Tupello
Four Months Ago

The rain battered against his mask, haze rising into the night. He shifted his feet on the mossy brickwork high above the street. They still ached from...from whatever it was that happened.

The bruising had gone but the bones in his hands and feet were still sore. The Knight looked up and down the street, still waiting. No one was there. Nobody was up at this time, except him, and the men who were due any moment now.

Finally, a noise broke against the beating rain – an alarm. Amateurs, he thought. Brinkmater was quickly gentrifying and, to his surprise, the level of criminal intellect was plummeting. The Knight had already had the luxury of hours to rig his roping from the rooftop to the tree just beyond their getaway car. As soon as they revealed themselves, it was show time. It seemed that either they didn't have a driver, or he was helping them.

The first robber came out of the building carrying something heavy. The Knight watched in mild disbelief as he took the effort to put the object down carefully and fiddle around in his pocket for his keys. Finding them, he unlocked the trunk and put the stolen item in. The Knight secured himself onto the rope, getting himself ready.

The others came out a few seconds later, also carrying heavy goods. After taking the time to put them neatly in place so the trunk would shut, they all jumped in – one in the driver's seat, two in the back.

The Knight slid off the roof, picking up pace as he descended.

“Get a fucking move on, Tarrance!”

“I’m trying, man. The goddamn car won’t start.”

“What are you talking about, dude? It was working fine a couple of hours ago.”

“Don’t you think I fucking know that? I drove us here! I’m telling you guys, for some reason it just won’t st- hey, do you hear that noise?”

“What noise?”

“*That* noise, it sounds like a g-”

The passenger side window smashed into tiny pieces. A massive boot slammed into Tarrance, knocking him against the door. The robber slumped unconscious, held up by his seatbelt. The Knight turned to face the others.

“We gonna do this the easy way?”

The two criminals stared at him, then at each other. They shifted so fast out of the car that the doors swung open and shut. The Knight let out a growled sigh and turned to Tarrance, who was still out cold.

“*You* better not go anywhere. I’ll deal with you later.”

Getting out of the car, he laughed in sheer disbelief. The criminals hadn’t only stuck together, but were simply running down the main road. He pulled two small spheres from his belt and flicked a switch on each. Taking a slight run-up, he pelted the one at the criminal on the right. It stuck; he stopped running and fell to the floor in convulsions.

His compatriot halted and turned to see what happened. As he looked up to see where the ball had come from, one stuck to his chest. He collapsed in a shaking heap. The Knight walked over to them, pulling rope from the back of his belt.

“What a shock,” he joked.

“You could’ve killed us,” one of them said, shivering on the floor.

“Don’t be stupid, voltage won’t kill you. Not unless you’re a goldfish.”

The man didn’t reply as the Knight began to tie them together.

“What were you guys stealin’, anyways?”

“Just some computer crap or something.”

“What? You mean you don’t even know what you were takin’?”

“It’s a job. We’ve got a boss like anyone else.”

He lent down and grabbed the robber by the collar.

“Who sent you?”

“Yeah, like we’re going to tell you.”

“LeFay, shut your fucking mouth, man.”

“What?”

“We don’t want to get in any shit with...them.”

“Who is he?” the Knight bellowed.

The two robbers gave each other a look he didn’t understand.

“Both o’ you gotta realize somethin’. You’re goin’ to prison. But you’ll only be there a few years. An’ when you’re out, I’m gonna be here. Waitin’. I’ll be your new shadow.”

They laughed at him. The Knight picked them up roughly, one in each hand.

“What’s so damn funny?”

“Nothing, dude. Nothing. It’s just so fucking poetic, is all.”

More laughter. He could feel the anger boiling inside of him, the temptation just to throw law aside, to give them *real* justice. Allowing it to reach the edge, he refused to let it tip over.

“Looks like the job’s not done yet,” said one of them, nodding back to the car.

The Knight looked over his shoulder. The driver’s door was open.

“Think you need to look up the meanin’ of poetic,” he said as he walked away.

“We’ll see,” the criminal said, grinning once more.

The car was empty.

He was pretty certain the guy sustained some damage when he swung into the vehicle; maybe some cracked ribs or a busted shoulder. Opening the door, he spotted the clue instantly.

There was a small radial crack on the driver side, a trickle line of dried blood snaking down onto the leather arm rest. A head wound. That would mean a blood trail.

He slammed the door shut, scanning the surrounding area. A few steps beyond the car there was no sign. The Knight let out a sigh. Nothing to go on; he must be holding something against his head, stopping the blood from spilling. It was then that he saw a smudge of blood on the base of a streetlight across the road.

He ran over to it, running his fingers over the blood. Tarry, but still wet. The robber was leaning on things; perhaps there was a lower injury too. The Knight walked up a little further and spotted another blood smear – this time a palm print on a poster. The guy must be in a bad way; the Knight knew he had to find him quick, before anything bad happened. He jogged down the road, until the trail stopped.

He heard a groan from the side alley.

“You okay?” The Knight called into the darkness.

“Get-away...from-me.”

“I’m here to help, I can ge-”

“You’re the...the one who did this-in the...first-place! How-the-fuck could...could you help?”

“Listen, I’m not gonna hurt you. I promise. I’m sorry about earlier – I didn’t mean to do that. I can get an ambulance for you,” he said as he neared the man.

“And-how about the...cops, so I can-report your...your assault?”

“Fine, cops too. Although I think it’d be in your interests to concentrate on your own case. Think they might see it...see it as a...”

He stopped and turned.

Was someone there?

It was difficult to make out in this alley, the streetlights yielding little light. He walked further into the darkness, past the robber; there were rotten cardboard boxes everywhere. Nothing seemed to be moving and there was no noise, except the gentle rain and the groans of the injured man behind him. He turned back.

“What the...the hell you-doing, dude?”

“It was nothin’. Thought I saw somethin’. It’s jus’ so dark...so...dar...”

There it was again, that faintest of whispers he heard before in another alleyway, in another time. It swept through him, washing the lines and shapes of the real world away and plunging him into endless darkness.

The smell of mould filled his nostrils. It took him a while to realize his head was covered by one of the rotten cardboard boxes. The mould made him feel nauseous; he pulled it from his face and stumbled to his feet. The Knight shook his head as he stumbled out from the boxes.

Then he was blinded.

Light filled the alleyway. He fell to his knees, trying to cover his eyes as dots and shapes danced across his vision. Blinking intermittently, the Knight tried to force his eyes to become accustomed to the new light. Eventually the dots faded, although there was a dull pain at the back of his eyes. He pulled his hands away, looking up to the sky.

High-strength night lights lined the high walls of the alleyway. He looked down at the ground.

It was red.

A strange red, unnatural. There was a pile of rubbish up ahead, a few steps in front of him. He made his way towards it slowly, unsure what was going on. As he got closer, it moved.

The pile wasn't garbage.

It was the robber. The rain washed blood from his broken face, yet still more poured from deep wounds. There were gouges on the man's swollen cheeks and temples. His white t-shirt now stained incarnadine. The Knight lifted his hands up toward the light.

"No. Please, no," he said, barely a whisper.

The rain pattered his blood-stained gloves. He staggered over to a manhole, almost falling over. The Knight just managed to pull the mask clear from his face before he vomited. Bent over, taking deep breaths, he looked back at the ruined mess of a man.

Panic began to set in; it felt like everything was folding in on itself. His mind was blank, just like weeks ago. He tried to tell himself it was random, some kind of seizure. Yet there was a feeling, holding strong under the root of his desperate attempts at logic.

This wasn't new.

It wasn't even a loose pattern. This *exact same thing* had happened before.

He shook himself out of his thoughts. Looking at the scene, he knew. He knew this wasn't what he wanted. What he'd signed up for. There was no way he could allow it to happen again.

It was time to focus. The Knight slipped a glove off and checked the robber's pulse. Faint, but still there. He moved to the entrance of the side alley, before ducking back in. Police. Processing the other robbers. His escape route was gone.

He wracked his brain for an alternative. There was only one other way – through Fitzgerald Park. If he cut into the alleyway just opposite and cut through to the park entrance, they might miss him.

Here goes, he thought. He sprinted across the road.

The Knight didn't wait to see if he'd been spotted; this part had to be done quickly if the robber was to have a decent chance. Still running flat out as he bounced through puddles and dodged around bins, he took a sharp turn left, coming out onto another alleyway. From there he could see the park entrance. Opening a pouch on his belt, he pulled his cell phone out. He called an ambulance for the guy in the alleyway, then headed towards the wrought iron gates.

They were closed, but there was a large oak tree next to the entrance. He climbed carefully, not wanting to slip. Securing one foot on a branch and another in between spikes on the gate, he balanced as he maneuvered from the tree to pause over the spikes. Lowering himself, he grabbed the spikes firmly with both hands and pushed his feet off, using his arm strength to stop his boots from making a heavy noise as he cartwheeled over the fence. He made it.

Letting out a relieved sigh, he walked across the path and over the grass, cutting straight through the middle to get to his car as quickly as possible.

In the very center of the park stood a memorial statue for the town's war heroes. It was like a giant coin face down with a railing around its circumference, more like a bandstand than a statue. His was not one of the five thousand names etched in marble.

As he got nearer he noticed someone stood on the statue. He moved away silently.

"Where are you going, Marshall?"

He turned, shocked.

"Shahina?"

She was wrapped in a thick black shawl, protecting her from the non-stop rain. He stood for a second, pole-axed. She smiled and beckoned him to come over.

"W-what are you *doin'* here?" he said as reached her.

"If you can wait a minute, you will see."

“Huh?”

“Trust me,” she said as she placed her hand softly on his arm. She noticed his gloves. “Trouble?”

“What?” He saw where she was looking. “Oh. Listen...I need to say somethin'.”

He took a deep breath, trying to compose himself. He didn't want to let her down, but he had to do this.

“I thought I was always doin' the right thing. Made lots of mistakes, sure. But when I came back, after Dwayne, I knew it had to be for the right reasons. Now, there's nothin' left to do. The Knight can't exist anymore.”

“Why?” she asked, horrified.

“I hurt someone. Hurt them real bad. I don't even know why or how. That's somethin' I can't live with.”

She frowned, her face full of disappointment.

“But you cannot stop *now*, you have come so far. This city needs you more than ever.”

“It doesn't need me if all I'm gonna do is cause pain.”

“That has never been *all* you do – you know that. There is so much you have left to do.”

“I damn near killed him, Shahina! He wasn't a threat, he was injured for cryin' out loud. That ain't right.”

“Was killing the Reaper right?”

His chin jutted out.

“Of course it wasn't, I ai-”

“But you came back, did you not? You persisted in the fight. You refused to give up. That is your greatest strength, Marshall. Do not admit defeat now.”

He was angry. This was a decision he felt he didn't have to defend, even to her.

“What am I meant to do? They’re gonna come after me, an’ this time they ain’t gonna stop.” He laughed wryly, shaking his head. “You know what? They shouldn’t ever stop. I’m gonna get what I deserve.”

“You do not deserve *that*. Trust me. You should lay low for a while – let it blow over.”

“It ain’t gonna blow over this time, Shahina.”

“Of course it will – it always does. The ebb and flow of things – light and dark, good and evil, power and darkness. *Right and wrong*. Think about it; you are wanted for the murder of Dwayne Bouvier. Yet how long have you existed since that night? Why do you escape their punishment?”

“I-I don’t know...”

Shahina smiled knowingly.

“Because they do not *want* to punish you, that is why. They need you. It is not up to them to pass judgment on you, Marshall.” She touched his arm. “Now, let us forget about all this. Do you see the moon?”

“Huh? Shahina, I really have to go, I can’t ha-”

“Daybreak is hours away, and police in this city are exceptionally slow workers. You can spare me a moment; you owe me at least that. Look at the moon.”

He shrugged, irritated.

“Okay, fine. Why am I lookin’ at the m-”

He caught it just as he looked up; in between velvet blue clouds, swallowed whole, a red tint around its edge.

“Appearances can be deceptive, Marshall. To you and me, this eclipse is an instant effect. We glance, and then we get on with our lives. Yet for those two up there, those giants of the sky, this is an ancient dance. They know what we can never know. But that will not change how it appears to us.”

“Is that meant to mean somethin’? I never went to college, Shahina.”

She smiled brightly at him.

“Everything appears to be at its absolute worst. What I am saying – and believe me, I know – is that this is only an appearance. An illusion. This is not reality, the current state of affairs. Things will change very soon.”

“I hope you're right.”

“I am.” She looked down, studying the names on the marble below her feet. “I believe you were in a hurry?”

He leaned over, stroking her solitary curl back under her shawl.

“Not because of you. You know I'd never rush to leave you.”

His hand moved down to her neck and lingered, gently touching the soft skin of her nape. She smiled meekly but moved away.

“People will talk.”

“Yeah,” he replied with a laugh, “all these crowds of people round here. You're right.”

He sighed. He didn't know what this was anymore, yet another thing up in the air.

“I guess I better get goin'.”

“Stay out of sight – for the time being.”

“Sure. I'll be seein' you, Shahina.”

“And I will see you too, Marshall.”

The Knight walked away from the memorial into the open grass, his head feeling fuzzy. Why come here for the eclipse? Why come alone to Fitzgerald Park, in the middle of the night?

He wasn't thinking straight; now was the time to concentrate. There was a far more pressing issue – what had happened in the alleyway? The clue was in his head, as much as he tried to ignore it. There had been another time when he suffered blackouts, unable to recall his actions. That was long ago, far from here. The past was catching up with him, time-lines muddling together. He had to face it, confront his history in order to resolve his future. It was time.

He had to face the General.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

We seek a return where there is none - stumbling blind
in altered worlds, searching for anything resembling
the truth...

Greenburg Mansion
Tupello
Four Months Ago

The vivid rise and fall of Prokofiev swept through the high ceilings of the east wing sitting room, echo upon echo in the cavernous gothic architecture. Alan Greenburg sat alone, staring aimlessly into the large fire. The flames were the only source of light in the giant room, looming shadows filling every corner. The door opened and a suited man walked towards Greenburg.

“We have news. Lee won the mayoral race. The pieces are falling into place.”

He got no response.

“Sir?”

The only sign Greenburg was alive was his right hand, tilting a half-empty decanter to and fro in time with the music.

“Sir? It’s me, Bachon. I was told to report back to you. Are...are you okay, sir?”

Bachon moved beyond the back of the chair to face his boss. Alan Greenburg did not look okay. His hair, greasy and unkempt, gave him the appearance of a wild animal. His beard, speckled and uneven, only added to the effect. The facial hair couldn’t hide how gaunt he was, though.

And his eyes, once so bright and vibrant, now had the hint of a man beyond reach. Looking lost entirely, his tears falling as the crescendo of noise echoed around them. He shifted his head slightly and looked up at Bachon.

“When is all this going to end?”

“All...all what, sir?”

Greenburg turned back to the fire, fixing on nothing in particular. When he spoke again, it was in a hushed growl that murmured against the alabaster pillars.

“I built this mansion nearly twenty years ago. And when I say build, I mean literally. It was a dream of mine, from when I was a kid. It was never enough to have money, to be successful. Not with my name. You had to do twice as much as anyone else for half the praise.

“We couldn’t have kids, Linda and me. I spent so long trying to surpass my father – all of my twenties, most of my thirties. Always figured there was still time left for a family. Kept postponing it, year after year. The new projects never stopped. I never stopped. Then Linda finally put her foot down and I relented. But nothing happened.

“We had every test under the sun, poked and prodded and probed, but still nothing came up. Keep trying, they said. You’re both healthy. We,” he shook his head, his voice cracking. “We were still trying, right up to when she was taken. I see her sometimes, in our room. Haven’t been sleeping well, maybe that’s it. For whatever reason, I can’t bring myself to look at her. That’s all I want to do, gaze into Linda’s eyes, but something always stops me.”

Greenburg wiped the tears from his cheeks.

“Pathetic. What have I become?” he stared disgustedly at his spindly limbs. “A shadow. Is it right that fate strikes at us so hard?”

Before Bachon could answer, Greenburg leapt to his feet, dropping the decanter. As glass smashed onto the floor, Alan grabbed Bachon by his collar.

“How *can* it be right, son? To take away someone who never hurt anyone? She – she was a good person. A good soul. Can you right a wrong? With what? Or are we all dying slowly, one atom at a time, forever bemoaning a luck that isn’t even real?”

The tears were back and coming fast now. Bachon tensed up; Alan’s grip lessened.

“Sorry. Excuse me. I’m...tired. When you lose a whole lot of your reason, it’s difficult to adjust. It’s just...all this stuff. Mason. Brinkmater. The Mayor. All so confusing. What’s right? It sounds like such a simple question. I thought I used to know the answer. But now there’s this thick fog, all around me.”

He rubbed his face, his fingers flicking against his stubble.

“After she died, I just wanted to die. Simple as that. I’m not so sure even that’s going to...to...help. Help me. I will *never* forget – in this life, or the next. The only thing I have left is the road I’ve chosen, the course I’m set on. And now it’s back to that question. Is it right, Bachon? What I’m doing – is it the right thing to do?”

Bachon paused. Then he put his arms on Alan’s scrawny shoulders.

“Sir, all things considered, I would have to say yes. You’re not feeling good at the minute. That’s understandable. But the city’s also not feeling good at the minute. We’ve all lost balance, and when you lose balance what you need to do is correct it.”

Alan looked up at him, a glimmer in his eye. Bachon nodded, pressing on.

“Something has to give, and we both know what – or who - that is. I know it’s been tough waiting, not being in control of what’s going on. That’s natural for a man like you, a man of power. Giving up control can’t be easy. But the endgame’s close at hand, sir. All this mess, everything that’s happened since *he* decided to show up, it’s all coming to a head. That’s when the fog will clear, and you’ll see much better. You need to do this for the city, *and* for yourself. Sir.”

Greenburg smiled weakly, patting Bachon gratefully on the shoulder. He seemed energized, if only a little.

“Thank you, Bachon. You’re a good man. I will endure.”

He looked away, a flash of the Greenburg of old lighting up his face.

“This is it, I have to let it end. There is only justice in judgment, I know that now. Jesus, look at me,” he stared into the gargantuan mirror hanging above the fireplace. “Call my tailor, my stylist, my trainer. We don’t have much time. I need to make sure I look the part. Oh, and give Siegel a call. I need to speak with him about his...plans.”

Bachon smiled.

“Yes, sir.”

Bachon left the room, and Greenburg’s teary eyes turned once more to the flickering fire. With his assistant gone, he slipped back into his somber thoughts, mesmerized by the blaze. It was all so random, the way the flames danced in the darkness. Always wanting it all, wanting what it couldn’t have. He knew it was ultimately the human condition; you always craved the opposite of what you had. He also knew there was no point fighting that.

The numbness was worst.

Death within life, without excitement, without memory. There was no happiness, no pain. All he could do was manufacture it to help him struggle along. His gaze turned to the decanter, its shattered remains spread across the floor.

Death within life – worse than any pain, worse than death itself. His achievements, his billions down to the simple involuntary act of breathing, they all meant nothing without her. It was a small relief just to *feel* once more.

He lifted his foot over the jagged shards, wept in shame for his dead wife, then plunged his bare foot hard onto the broken glass.

He was alive, again.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

There is a prism through which all things are seen - life, death, everything. The whole world can change with a **small turn**, a shift of vantage point.

Mason Residence
Tupello
Three Months Ago

“NO!”

Marshall opened his eyes. His arms and legs were tense, his back drenched. He tried to calm his breathing, wiping a forearm against his brow. A glance at the clock; it was five in the morning.

“Goddamn,” he muttered, climbing out of bed.

He pulled the sheets off and headed downstairs, putting the linen into the washing machine. Fixing himself some coffee and toast, Marshall sat at the kitchen table staring into space. Then he stood up and walked over to a drawer. He pulled a box out and went back to the table. Opening the box, some crayons fell out.

Marshall took another sip of coffee, followed by a mouthful of toast. Then he started drawing on the beige surface of the kitchen table. Grandma woulda killed my ass for this, he thought.

He didn't focus – not because he couldn't; he didn't want to. These images were vague to him, so he should try to recreate them the same way. Something registered with him. Not a memory, or a clue. Just a fact – he was using very few colors. Lots of blue, lots of yellow. And one color above all.

Red.

Once he was done, he stepped away and switched the TV on. He figured his memory might be triggered better if he wasn't concentrating so hard. A familiar face came on the screen.

“It was announced today that Mayor Lee would be holding his re-election ceremony in the heart of Brinkmater Straights, outside the new building development dedicated to the late Linda Greenburg. The occasion promises to be a memorable affair, with all of Tupello's great and good present, as well as a large press contingent. Lee had this to say abo-”

He switched it off.

“Heard more than enough from that man,” he said to no-one.

Marshall moved back to the table. He approached it from the opposite way, everything upside down. It was all so mangled up, just colors really. But from this angle, different elements appeared in a new light to him. There were imprints – gaps in the color, small shapes that hadn't looked like anything when he was drawing.

Were they...

...were they

...people?

He supposed they could be, but it didn't jog anything. Marshall found himself drawn to one in particular; it was different from the rest. Where the others were simply gaps, this had a slight splash of color. Light blue in the middle, and then the faintest hue of black around it.

He stared at it, willing it to give him an answer, a clue. After a while, he thumped the table in frustration. The drawing smudged, everything muddled. Marshall examined his hand. It was caked in red.

As he washed the crayon off at the sink, he felt a strong urge to resolve things. He wasn't sleeping; the Knight had been retired, perhaps permanently; he had this constant weight on his chest, like he was being dragged down. Some bridges needed repairing.

Marshall hadn't spoken to Doctor Roundleath in a little over two months. Her refusal to treat his memory loss properly made him so mad he'd smashed up a chair in her office. They'd only tried the hypnosis therapy once, and after that she said they shouldn't try again. If there was a reason, her willingness to tell him evaporated after his show of violence.

He'd been so wrapped up in his head since then, the time to apologize just drifted away. But maybe she could help – the regression therapy he sought was dangerous, she had said; perhaps Roundleath would be able to make sense of this picture.

He opened the phonebook and dialed her office number.

“Newmatch Therapy Associates, how may I help?”

“Hi, I need to book an appointment with Doctor Roundleath, please.”

Marshall waited for a response, but there was nothing.

“Hello?” he said, checking the line hadn't gone dead.

“Hello – sorry, it's just...what was the – I mean, could I have your name, please?”

“Mason. Marshall Mason.”

“Right. Mister Mason, I'm afraid I have some bad news.”

He sighed.

“She's moved on, hasn't she?”

A pause.

“No.”

“Then why can't I talk to her?”

Another pause.

“Because she's dead.”

Marshall slumped over, barely holding the receiver to his ear.

“What?”

“A couple of months ago.”

“A couple of months? I'm her patient! Why wasn't I informed?”

“I can only apologize – it's been difficult informing her clients. The investigation held up her files.”

“Investigation?”

“Yes. I'm surprised you didn't hear. It was all over the news.”

“Hear what?” Marshall bellowed angrily.

“Doctor Roundleath was murdered.” The receptionist paused a while, then continued. “We can offer you the services of another therapist; Doctor Waney is a very experienced clini--”

He hung up.

Dead? How could she be dead? He corrected himself. No. Roundleath wasn't dead.

She was murdered.

A woman he'd been sharing his darkest secrets with. A woman who, after their first attempt at regressive therapy, refused outright to do so again. He picked up his car keys and headed out the door.

Marshall checked the map again; there weren't many street signs up here. He couldn't make out if he was headed in the right direction, but carried on nonetheless. Further up, he spotted a car by the side of the road. Moments later, a man stepped from out of the bushes, pulling his zipper up. Marshall took his foot off the accelerator, winding his window down as he neared the man.

“Excuse me?”

“Hello there.”

“Er, hey. I was wonderin' if you could tell me where I'm headed?”

The man smiled curiously, his leather-like tanned skin creasing around his pale eyes.

“That’s a funny accent you got there. You’re a city boy, no?”

“Yeah.”

“Lemme guess – Champton? No, too far way. Straphis? What about Marlonville?”

“No.”

“Well...where, then? You gotta be from somewhere, one of those big cities they always show on the TV?”

“Tupello.”

The man’s intrigued smile dropped, his arms crossing.

“Uh.”

Marshall decided to press on before this got hostile.

“Sorry, but I need to know if I’m on the right track. Where’s this road head?”

The man scratched his head and stared up into the direction Marshall was facing. He stopped scratching, putting his hand on his hip. There seemed to be some debate going on in his mind.

“That way’ll take you to Brownley Creek.”

Marshall smiled, relieved.

“Thank you.”

“But son, be careful. They don’t like city folk up there. You best be discreet.”

Marshall nodded, before pulling off. Sure enough, five minutes further on there was a small sign signaling that he had entered the town of Brownley Creek. The road crept up and up, his ears popping as the snow grew heavier the more the car climbed.

He came on to a road that had a dozen buildings either side: the main street of Brownley Creek, the hub of the community. Marshall looked left and right, slowing down. The fifth shop along, he stopped. Brownley Creek Real Estate.

He parked the car and jogged into the realtors, surprised at how biting the air was. The agent didn't look up.

“Good afternoon, what can I do for you this fine d-” he stuttered, finally glancing up at Marshall. “Jesus! What're you doing, you want to get yourself killed coming up here?”

Marshall paused, confused. He examined himself.

“Because I'm black?”

“What? No! Because you're dressed like a goddamn city slicker and it's an ice cube outside!”

Marshall stared at his own clothes – modest shirt, creased trousers. He certainly didn't look like a slicker.

“Can I ask you something strange?”

“Sure, as long as it's not anything...personal.”

“How many black folk live up here?”

The man looked down, shuffling some papers as he mulled over the question.

“None. There was one, long time ago. But he was...he was...”

He tailed off, seeming as though the sentence was never intended to be finished. Marshall soaked up the awkwardness, smiling.

“A slave. It's okay. My grandma might have said differently on the matter, though.”

The man looked overwhelmed with relief.

“I'm pretty sure you didn't come up here just to ask me that.”

Marshall took a step forward.

“I need to know about a guy who moved up here some years ago, think he lives a little way out of town. He's an old army general.”

The agent's demeanor soured, his face dropping into a harsh glare.

“I don't speak to no media.”

“Excuse me?”

“You're one of them investigatory journalists, aren't you? Looking for your big scoop, huh? Wrong place, buddy!”

The man moved from behind the desk, raising his arms out above his chest and walking towards Marshall.

“Wait! Wait, calm down. I'm not a journalist. I'm an ex-soldier. I was in the war with the General, that's all. I wanted to catch up with him.”

“Ha, good one! Like I'd fall for that cheap trick n-”

Marshall began to unbutton his shirt, stopping the man in his tracks. Taking it off, he revealed old scars – bullets, knives, explosions. Several army tattoos adorned his arms and chest. The man looked at some of the scars.

“When did you say you came off active duty? They look fresh.”

“I didn't say when. I can't tell you when.”

“Oh,” the man said, a little disappointed.

“Please, let me know the General's address. I know it's a big ask, but we go back a long way and I just need to see him.”

The realtor looked unsure for a moment, his fingers dancing against his hips. Then he turned back to the desk, picked up a pen, and scribbled an address down on some paper. He handed it to Marshall, who scanned the writing. Marshall looked up at the realtor.

“Is this some sort of joke?”

“It's all a big joke, son,” the man replied, deadly serious.

Marshall tucked the paper into his pants pocket, put his shirt back on, and left without saying another word.

Marshall eased his foot onto the brake; once the car was stationary, he turned the ignition off. Taking the paper from his pocket, he stared at the address once more. How could this be right?

He stepped out of the car, making his way across the white-speckled lawns towards a tree. By the tree, he found out the realtor was telling the truth. By the tree lay the General.

“Rest in peace,” Marshall said bitterly.

The tombstone was simple, elegant. Understated. Even the strange tone of the epitaph seemed eloquent: *An Army Man to the Bitter End*. Marshall wondered what that meant. Pinned to the mound in front was a newspaper clipping, protected from the elements by a plastic cover. Marshall knelt down and pulled it from the earth.

GENERAL MURDERED

He could barely read on.

The General was killed in his own home, the victim of apparent torture. Nothing was stolen, no known enemies, no apparent motive. Marshall began to hyperventilate, dropping the paper carelessly. He took his phone from his pocket, desperate.

“Newmatch Therapy Associates, how may I help?”

“It's Marshall Mason.”

“Hello, Mister Mason. Would you like to book an appointment?”

“NO! No, Goddamn it. Just tell me – how was Roundleath murdered?”

“Excuse me?”

“Tell me! How was she murdered?”

“Well, I don't like your tone, sir. But...she was killed in her home. Tortured, apparently. How awful.”

Marshall brushed over this.

“What else?”

“What do you mean, what else? Nothing. No theft, no sexual assault, no motive. They just walked in, killed her and her cat, and then left. Sick.”

Marshall looked down at the discarded paper, one word standing out.

“How?”

No response.

“How was she murdered? With what weapon?”

“A knife. Are you happy now? Someone came into her flat and slit her throat like she was an animal. God, you've got some nerve. She was a colleague of mine. How can you call me and st-”

Marshall hung up, bending down to pick up the clipping. He kept reading the line, over and over again, trying to soak in some hidden meaning that would make all of this appear reasonable, logical. *No evidence of firearms – the crime was carried out with sharp implements, probably a knife.*

It was all piling up. People were dying, being hurt, and he had no answers. Everything came back to him, one way or another. His answers were with the dead, buried in silence. Someone had tortured these two for a truth he could never now know.

Two blackouts, two murders.

The Knight was out of the way now and Marshall had never felt so exposed to the murky past, his past, a past he couldn't even begin to guess at. But someone was out there, someone who did have the answers and they were out to get him.

His phone rang.

“Shahina?”

“Are you coming to the Mayor's speech?”

“No, I'm not in town right now.”

“You have to come quickly.”

He didn't like the sound of this; her voice was distressed, as if she were in trouble.

“Why?”

“Someone is going to kill the Mayor.”

She hung up, leaving him gasping at those words as he stared at the pale tombstone of his former mentor.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Regret is born from staring at the past, wishing it were different...and having that feeling shape your very existence.

Linda Greenburg Complex, Brinkmater Straights
Tupello
Three Months Ago

The key speakers were still mingling behind the background screen of the stage. Mayor Lee finished chatting to Police Chief Greyson and walked over to Shahina. She was on the phone, her hair slightly covering her mouth as she talked in hushed tones. When she noticed the Mayor ambling towards her, she hung up and put the phone in her bag.

“Shahina, once again – thank you so much for all your help on this.”

“Thank you – but honestly, there is no need to thank me.”

“Well, I just wanted you to know how grateful I am of your support.” He went to touch her arm, but she pulled away. “There was something I wanted to talk to you about, though.”

“Oh?”

“It’s Siegel.”

“Siegel...yes.”

“I did what you suggested – but no reply. All I get is his answering machine.”

“What did you say?”

“I told you, I followed what you said exactly. Treat him as I’ve always done. There wasn’t anything I held back on – called him a maggot, pathetic. You name it, I called him it.”

“Then you did well,” she said in a consoling tone.

“But he hasn’t got back to me. Why wouldn’t he? I mean, it’s not like I really need him. It’s just these new aides are a little dry. You know, there’s nothing to them – like they’re not really there. Ever met anyone like that?”

“More than you could imagine.”

He stared at Shahina, her curly black locks blowing across her delicate mouth.

“So I don’t know what else to do,” he shrugged.

“You should not panic about these things. Those were the exact words Siegel needed to hear. You simply have to wait.”

“That’s the rub, isn’t it? Spend most of your life waiting for things to just happen. Patience truly is a virtue, you know that?” He let out a deep sigh, blowing his cheeks out. “God, I guess you’re probably right. Waiting it is, then. Yet again, here I am, leaning on you for support. And I didn’t even know your name when this campaign started! I’m sure lots of people have said it before, but you’ve got a wise head on those pretty young shoulders, Shahina.”

“It pays to be thoughtful.”

A bullish smile spread across Lee's face.

“How would you like an advisory position in my team?”

“That is a kind offer, but I cannot accept. I will not be here much longer.”

“Going back home, huh? I guess there’s people there who’re missing you pretty bad by now. Or are you going to see the world? Europe?”

“No...just away from here.”

He looked into her eyes but she didn’t match his gaze, preferring to look up at the gleaming façade of Linda Greenburg Tower behind him. The sadness in her eyes was unmistakable; a subduing melancholy had taken hold of her. He coughed awkwardly.

“Right, right. Whatever it is, I’m sure it’ll be worthwhile. You’ll be missed around here, I’ve no doubt. If only there were more people like you in Tupello. You’ve made a big impact in a short space of time, young lady.”

“There will be more to come.”

“I’m sure there’s a bright future ahead of you.”

The Mayor patted her on the shoulder affectionately just as an aide came over and whispered in his ear. Shahina noticed the expression on his face.

“Does this look like a good time, you moron? Can’t you see I’m busy, Stanford?”

The aide didn’t cower from his boss. His jaw moved forward, as though his teeth were clenched tightly together.

“Of course, *sir*. I’ll leave you two to talk. And the name’s Stanwick.”

With that the aide stormed off, not waiting for a response. Lee’s cheeks turned ashen. His eyes narrowed as he kept staring at the retreating Stanwick’s back.

“See that? Exactly the kind of crap I’m talking about. Sorry, Shahina – no excuse for bad language. It’s just...Siegel. It’s not the same without him.”

“I am sure he is upset too.”

“I hope so, I really do,” he replied, checking his watch. “You all ready? Looks like showdown. This is it.”

“Yes, I believe it is.”

They made their way around the screen to take their seats on right of the stage. They both squinted a little as the unforgiving spotlights warmed their faces.

As they sat down there was a ripple of uneven applause from the grandstands, the crowd slowly rising to their feet. Five hundred people stood, lit by the constant flash of cameras. After a while, the multitude returned to their seats; lights bursting from the darkness became more intermittent.

Shahina glanced over to the left of the stage. She was looking at the chair speaker, Adam Merryweather, and Police Chief Greyson. They weren’t speaking to each other. Lee had mentioned about some kind of rivalry during the canapés.

Merryweather rose from his seat carefully, flicking his papers as he walked over to the center of the stand. Testing the microphone with a small tap that created an unnerving bass boom, he smiled apologetically to the crowd.

“A warm welcome to you all on this glorious Tupello day, on what I’m sure you’ll agree is a very auspicious occasion. Without further delay, I’d like to hand you over to our first speaker, Shahina Ba—”

The chair speaker shifted to his left, Shahina pressing him sideways. He turned and gave her a wounded look before retreating to his seat. The audience sat surprised, the silence only broken by the constant rubbing of balloons.

A few people eventually stood and clapped, which rose into a muffled and subdued applause. The murmur of cautious booing was also unmistakable. Shahina glanced to her right; she noticed a row of expensive cars parked by Linda Greenburg Tower. She recognized the battered old car in the middle. She smiled.

He was here.

Looking down at her speech paper, Shahina inhaled sharply. Her nostrils filled with the smell of hibiscus. Glancing down, she saw that the waxy white flowers surrounded the stand, almost like a ragged halo. The crowd had gone quiet again, waiting.

“Chair speaker, thank you for your kind words – and to the people of Tupello who are present today, thank you for your attendance at this important ceremony. As you all probably know, I am not from this country; indeed, I only arrived on these shores a few years ago. So while there are those of you who are unsure of me, I feel I can offer you something of great value.

“The viewpoint of the outsider involves great conflicts. On one hand, an excitement at seeing exotic things, undergoing new experiences. On the other, an innate sadness bound by the stranger’s inability to assimilate – to become part of the group. Yet, I do not stand here in sadness – I do so in celebration. Look around you. Brinkmater Straights, born anew. The Linda Greenburg Complex standing as a new landmark on the Tupello horizon, signaling a wonderful new community center.

“This is the legacy of a man you have rightly re-elected as your chosen leader. I have no doubt it will stand the test of time, beyond even the Mayor himself, transcending the fluctuations of politics. It is *important* to leave a legacy. To leave a lasting mark on life. This man,” she gestured towards Lee, “has done Tupello a great service. I find it interesting that some of you have looked for your heroes in the shadows – in men of wild natures, whose fierce hearts draw them to the fire – dragging you into the flames with them. That you follow these seriously flawed men when there is a *real* hero, right here. He does not wear a cape or mask or jump around on rooftops. It matters not.

“Mayor Lee has given so much to you – to you all. It is a huge responsibility. If anything is heroic, then this is it.” A little pause. “That marks a first for me...I never thought I would call a politician a hero,” she said with a smile. There was a fast ripple of laughter from the seated audience, followed by applause.

“I guess the important thing – the thing I am trying to get across – is that you should be proud of your mayor. I am not from this city, this country. However, this very fact has granted me an insight into vastly different environments. Believe me when I say Tupello is better than most of you would freely admit. It has a large heart, a capacity for good that merely needs the right direction. It is my belief you can find it in this man. It is important to know the path you choose, for it is you who must walk it. You have chosen wisely.

“So I would like to suggest two reasons for applause. One for Mayor Lee and his determination to make Tupello even better than it already is. Two for you - the people who cared enough to pick the perfect man for the job.”

Everyone rose enthusiastically from their seats, slapping their hands together emphatically. There were a few whooping noises; whistles pierced the air. Shahina smiled brightly and removed her speech papers from the podium, returning to her seat next to Lee. He leant over and squeezed her hand a little too hard.

She allowed herself a contained laugh as she turned from him and looked at her notes, before putting the papers back into her bag. Pushing curly locks behind her ear, Shahina glanced up towards Linda Greenburg One.

Her eyes narrowed as she scanned from the top of the building downwards. There were three small toilet windows open, all on separate levels. She nodded, at nothing and no-one.

Merryweather reclaimed the microphone, his inane swagger almost causing him to knock the podium off the main stand. Shahina sighed as the intense smell of the hibiscus drifted away.

“Thank you, Shahina. That was some speech – I wouldn’t want to be the guy following you!” he joked, shooting a glib smile at Greyson. “After those kind words of support from our young Iraqi guest, I’d like to pass you onto a veritable *captain* of our great city. A man who has fantastic *drive*, *chipping* away at the criminal element in Tupello. It gives me great pleasure to *tee* him up - please *putt* your hands together and give a warm welcome to Police Chief Greyson.”

As he rose to the podium, Greyson eyeballed Merryweather with barely-hidden contempt. His introduction was heralded with half-hearted applause. Greyson was not an impressive looking man. Frog-skinny limbs provided hangers for oversized clothes, while his sunken eyes looked gray under the shadow of his tangled eyebrows. His thin lips and large ear lobes rounded off a drooping face. He cleared his throat with a short, polite cough.

“Ladies, gentlemen and members of the press,” he said, raising a few laughs, “I’d like to take this opportunity to talk about Mayor Lee’s impact on our proud city. It comes directly from a policing perspective – from the streets. Some have commented that Tupello has a problem. That crime riddles this town like a cancer. There are times when I have wondered: Are they right? Is this a battle we can win? Maybe a couple of years ago, my answer would have been a negative one. However, under the careful stewardship of the...the...a...a...ahhh-”

Greyson sneezed loudly. He removed an ironed handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose hard. The crowd groaned collectively as the honk of his blowing rang through the speakers. The Police Chief put his hand up to apologize.

“Where was I?” he said, shuffling through his papers in a panicked way. “Ah, yes. As I was saying, under the careful stewardship of the Mayor, Tupello has begun to mend itself. That we are standing in the heart of Brinkmater Straights, one time a no-go area of the city, is a testament to how far we have come. Behind us stands a modern community center, which will provide a new focus to the revival of the Straights. I think that as the political architect of this redevelopment, Mayor Lee should be held in the highest possible regard. I would like to follow Shahina’s example and lead a round of applause for two reasons: one, for all the everyday heroes that patrol our streets, the cops walking the beat. Two, for the Mayor who has contributed so much in terms of police infrastructure – and a man I’m proud to call my friend.”

The crowd again rose and applauded, but it seemed subdued. The police chief gave a short, sharp nod to both grandstands and returned to his seat. Across from him, Shahina leant down and removed her cell phone from her bag. She pressed a button, waited a moment, and then put the phone back in her bag. Brushing her hair from her eyes, she glanced up high, only briefly.

Merryweather returned to the microphone, breathing heavily through his nose.

“That was a...nice speech from the Police Chief there. Ahem. Now, for the main event! As you are all aware, the Mayor was inducted into office in a formal ceremony earlier today in front of friends and family. Aside from confirmation of acceptance, he hasn’t been able to give us his thoughts and feelings about this momentous occasion. Ladies and gentlemen, the wait is over. It gives me great pleasure to hand you over to our leader, Mayor Lee.”

There was raucous noise from both grandstands as people jumped to their feet and bellowed appreciation. The bear of a man rose slowly, an impish grin spreading across his hairy face. By the time he got to the podium, he was wiping a tear from his eye.

As Lee looked out into the crowds, all he could see were camera flashes. The sun was beginning to set, falling behind Linda Greenburg Tower. Burnt orange and bright, pale yellow caked the stage.

“Thank you, thank you so much. I can’t really say how much it means to me, all of you being here. To get a reception like that – I’m touched. Thanks also to Shahina and Richard for their kind words – it’s always nice to know you’re appreciated.

“I would say that all this, the election, even the mayoralty, is down to much more than just me. We are a team, all of us. A strange one, I’ll grant you; we aren’t all pulling in the same direction, don’t all want the same thing. But it is the effort and endeavor to create a Tupello which we can be proud of – that’s what drives us. *Us* – not just me.

“That involves my campaign team spearheaded by Clark Siegel, the sterling work by the police force, community leaders throughout the city and all you people taking pictures and writing notes out there. You have also had your part to play in how Tupello functions – how it will function.

“We all leave a legacy, be it positive or negative. It is my sincere hope that my mayoralty will have a lasting impression on this city. We all witnessed many things during the campaign process – good and bad. I made some mistakes, for which I apologize.

“To lead a political life and not hold regret is to be a robot. I have regrets. The important thing is to *learn* from these experiences. To grow, so that your weaknesses are turned into strengths. What I’m trying to say is that I’ve learned from my errors.”

The Mayor stopped and took a gulp from his glass of water. All eyes were on him, except Shahina's, who stared into the darkening sky. She turned back to that battered old car parked between the limos. He wasn't there, not anymore.

“As I was saying, I’ve learned from my mistakes. You may have noticed there hasn’t been much mention of the Knight today. Let’s talk about him. I haven’t given up finding this unwelcome vigilante. Bringing him to justice. That’s why I’m going to instigate a new search for the Knight, using our exp-”

The giant man let a deep gasp of air out, something clattering into him.

It was the Knight.

He’d charged the Mayor from the right of the stage so quickly none of the security guards noticed. As the two men were falling, a gunshot echoed around the grandstands. Guards rushed around, startled into activity but aimless, confused.

They lay there on the stage, the Knight above the winded Mayor. Blood flowed steadily from the vigilante's right arm, a deep laceration grooved through his Kevlar. He looked down to check on the Mayor. Apart from being bundled over, he seemed okay. Lee looked up at the Knight, gratitude etched on his face.

"T-thank you," he muttered in a small voice.

They extended each other a hand to help one another up when the Knight felt hot breath against his ear.

A hushed voice hissed into his consciousness, yet he couldn't hear any words. He was drowning in darkness, the briefest outline of his body doing things he hadn't told it to do as the world slipped away. And then, there was something else.

A flash, a scene in his brain. Only for a second, but it felt like his eyes were finally beginning to open.

The first thing he noticed was the iron taste in his mouth.

Marshall lay face down on the wet floor. Not soaked, just a saturating damp. Trying to get up, his ribs screamed as he moved. He looked at his hands and was horrified at the now-familiar sight; swollen and bloodied. He tried to get a bearing on his surroundings, but his eyes hurt for some reason. A thought ran through his mind that made his legs weak.

He didn't have his mask on.

Peering down at his clothes, panic set in. He was in a faded navy blue jumpsuit covered in stains. He rubbed his temples, peering up as his eyes became accustomed to the strange light. He wished he hadn't.

The rough brick walls painted a gray-beige color. The linoleum floor with scuffs and marks everywhere. Even the tattered bed to his left, with its plastic mattress. The front of the room, through which stale air and artificial light pushed through murkiness and metal bars.

A prison cell.

He turned to the wall above the bed, spotting a small mirror. Dragging himself up off the floor, he moved towards it. Looking into the mirror, all Marshall could see was a puffy, broken face – boot marks and heavy cuts spread out over swollen lumps. This triggered a thought and he looked back at the floor.

It was covered in blood. He was in prison and someone had gone to town on him. He felt a dragging sensation in his chest that seemed to say: this was the end of the line.

He heard a guard whistling in the hallway, getting nearer. Limping over to the bars, Marshall tried to get a glimpse of the man. It was no use; he could barely see five feet to his right or left.

“Hey, guard! Guard!”

The guard stopped whistling.

“Well, if it ain’t sleeping beauty?” he sneered, coming closer.

“Why am I here? What did I do? You gotta tell me, I need t-”

“Trent don’t have to do nothing for no con, scum!” the guard screamed, slamming his baton against the bars of Marshall’s cell.

“I-I’m sorry. But I don’t know what’s goin’ on.”

“Right. Gonna have to tell the guys about this. That your plea? Amnesia? Haven’t heard *that* one before. Jeez.”

“Plea? For what? I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about!”

“Sure. You have absolutely no idea why you’re locked up, why we beat seven shades of shit outta you?”

“You...,” Marshall stopped speaking, staring instead at Trent’s sharp features. His lips tapered off into deep laughter lines that hung on his face like a vulture’s wings. He was grinning at Marshall, whose mouth hung open. “*You* did this?”

“Of *course* we did,” the guard eyed him suspiciously. “Man, you’re one hell of an actor. Almost had me going there, killer.”

The guard gave him a toothy smile and wink as he stepped away from the bars and walked off, whistling. Marshall slammed his palms against the bars, oblivious to the pain.

“Hey, Trent! HEY! Killer? Why’d you call me that?”

Marshall slammed the bars one last time, but Trent was gone. He hobbled back to the thin mattress and collapsed onto it, holding his head in his hands. Exhaustion ate away at him, but sleep was the last thing he wanted. There was only one thing he wanted to do, and it was the one thing he seemed incapable of.

Marshall wanted to remember.

He lay there running through events in his head. After a while, a guard shouted lights out, at which point the covered bulb in his room went dark. The only brightness came from the hall lights, an eerie blue. A few moments passed before the howling began. Not just howls, cackling hyenas. And the name, always the name, spat into the darkened air. *Knight*.

Hey, Knight.

We gonna get ya, freak.

Gonna cut ya, hero.

You're a dead-ass nigger.

Marshall lay there, letting the threats wash over him like a wave.

“Keep it down, y’hear!” shouted a guard.

A couple of minutes later there was a gentle tap of his bars. It was a guard. He was a short man, carrying a lot of weight around his cheeks. His kindly face was framed by a slightly greying tight crop. He smiled sympathetically at Marshall.

“You okay?”

“No. But thanks for askin’,” Marshall replied.

“Look, I’m sorry for what my colleagues did to you. They shouldn’t have. Not right. Name’s Reeve.”

“I’m Marshall. Why’d they do it, then?”

“Everyone knows who *you* are, son – no need for introductions. Well, I guess they were jus’ mad at what you did. Plus, you put some mean sons o’ bitches in here – kind that don’t care about killin’ a guard. Guys like Marquez an’ his gang. You made our jobs ten times harder an’ a hundred times more dangerous. Probably counted against you somewhat.”

“What did I do?”

Reeve looked at him sharply, surprised.

“You mean you don’t *know*?”

“I can’t remember nothin’. I went to the Mayor’s ceremony – someone told me about an assassination attempt. But I don’t remember anythin’ since. What time is it now?”

“That was this afternoon. It’s eleven o’clock now.”

Marshall wracked his brain for some idea of what was happening. It was like trying to watch a busted TV – the interference made it impossible. Eleven o’ clock meant nothing to him – time receded from his mind. It felt like he could have missed a whole week and not known the difference.

“Eleven. How the hell did that happen? This is all messed up. Look, I gotta know. Please, tell me what I did.”

“I think yo’ a good man, deep down,” the guard said, his jowls down-turned.

“I need to know.”

“A good man.”

“Please.”

Reeve sighed a long, drawn out breath. Playing absentmindedly with his baton, he tried to delay for as long as possible. Marshall’s insistent stare remained constant, begging for the truth to be told. Reeve dropped his shoulders in resignation.

“Fine. Yo’ friend told you the truth. There was an assassination attempt on the Mayor, an-”

“Did he survive?”

“No.”

Marshall gasped, the muscles in his arms contracting.

“Goddamn. Do they know who killed him?”

“Yes,” he said, barely a whisper.

“Who was it?”

Reeve's eyes dropped; what seemed like an age passed. Marshall let out a hurried breath.

“Who was it?”

The guard finally looked up.

“You.”

Marshall shook his head, overwhelmed. He was close to tears – of frustration, of fear. This was all too much. There wasn't anything in here that scared him as much as not knowing. Is this real? He looked up at the guard, his head still shaking. Reeve sighed as he moved away from the bars.

“It *was* you. You killed him,” he said in a low, firm voice as he walked into the ethereal light and down the corridor.

The words hit Marshall hard. He moved over to the bed, sitting down. His legs were no longer able to support him. Killed him? It didn't make sense. There was only one thing Marshall could piece together as he sat there in the dark. Three blackouts – one harmless, one left a coma victim, the last a fatality. He'd been set on this path clueless, powerless, but not anymore.

There had been a flash, a small instant, but it could help save everything. He lay down and went over it again and again, trying to concentrate as slowly hissed chants began to crackle in the air once more.

Gonna take ya apart, piece by piece.

Gonna gut ya good, superman.

Sweet dreams, dead man.

He found the noise strangely soothing, drifting him away from his broken thoughts. Thoughts about things he couldn't quite remember, no matter how hard he tried. Marshall slipped into fitful sleep, where the dreams that had filled so many of his recent nights conjured new and dreadful images.

His sleep didn't last.

Chapter Thirty

There is no judgment in the past, only reckoning. If you are fortunate enough to glimpse it, **redemption** can be yours...

Eastman Correctional Facility
Tupello
Present Day

“Here you go, killer – look, we even got you a new pillow. Try not to be so...messy next time.”

“Thanks, Trent,” Marshall mumbled.

He limped into the cell, cleaned ready for his return. The guard left without saying anything. Marshall looked at the calendar on the wall. Trent put it up, yet another small torture. Flicking through the pages, he worked it out. six weeks receiving medical attention, five in his cell.

He scanned around the cramped room, an overwhelming smell of bleach making him nauseous. Eleven weeks shuffling through dirty halls with nothing but time on his hands. Eleven weeks – barely even three months.

Was that *all*? Marshall thought.

He cradled his head in his hands.

“Hey, man. Heard you got back from the doc.”

Marshall swung around. He smiled at the familiar face peering into his cell.

“Hey, Kurt.”

Marshall watched him, careful not to let the welcome drop. Kurt attempted to reciprocate the smile but was only able to grimace awkwardly.

Marshall didn't recognize Kurt when he first came across him; both temples were slightly caved in, pressing his eye sockets slightly inward. Kurt's jaw was bent out of shape, hooked sharp to the left and unable to close properly. And his nose, flat and curving left and right in painful angles. He looked like a Jack-o-lantern dropped from a great height. Mangled, yet still there...just.

It took Marshall three weeks to figure out this was the bigot he'd beaten up that first night he met Shahina, to figure out that this was his work, in the unnatural grooves and agonizing contours of Kurt's face.

"How you doin'?" Marshall asked tentatively.

"Not bad, I guess. Same old, same old."

"What's for dinner?"

A pause; Marshall held his breath.

"HOW THE FUCK SHOULD I KNOW?" Kurt screamed, lunging and slamming into the bars.

Marshall sighed.

These swings of temperament still took getting used to. In his last visit to the medical facilities, Marshall asked the doctor why Kurt wasn't in an asylum. Double homicide, the doctor replied without elaborating.

Marshall looked at an ugly scar on his hand, the result of an incident weeks ago. He upset Kurt in the food hall.

"I'm sorry, Kurt."

"I'M GONNA GET YOU, MARSHALL! I'M GONNA GET IN THERE!"

He strained with his arms through the bars, desperate to get at Marshall.

"Please, man. Leave me alone. Please."

He didn't leave, still pressing against the door and grunting wildly.

"I wanna be alone for a while."

Kurt started slamming his head hard against the bars.

The metal shook with each head butt, a strangely lyrical noise ringing in the air. Blood streamed down his face as he smashed into the metal, over and over again. It gushed from his forehead and cheeks, dripping steadily down the door. Marshall covered his ears and closed his eyes, trying as hard as he could to block his senses. Something, he didn't know what, made him open his eyes.

Marshall looked down.

Blood splattered from the bars, ever closer and in thicker drops as Kurt bled more. He shuffled as far away as possible, watching the red tide come slowly, inexorably for him.

Kurt had slowed but still attacked the bars with venom. He looked shaky on his feet. Marshall turned away, his hands still pressed against his ears. It was no use. The noise rang out like a drum, heralding the awful spectacle. The blood was here, it was here. Getting so close he could smell the iron, the sweetness, above even the artificial bleach that stung his nostrils. He lifted his feet up off the floor and began to cry.

The orderly finished mopping up the blood, although the floor still had a reddish tint. Marshall was lying on the bed, not moving, unblinking. He heard keys jangling and hard-heeled shoes coming nearer. He still didn't move.

“Come on, killer. Time for lunch,” said Trent.

Marshall looked at him, then the floor. He couldn't get it out of his head that the blood was everywhere, even if it was only faint. Kurt was now caked all over the floor; Marshall couldn't help but press his feet into another man's blood.

“Get your ass moving, you dumb sonofabitch. Food ain't waiting for you.”

“Gonna give me to the wolves soon as you can, huh?”

“Ain't got a clue what you mean,” Trent replied, his voice laced with irony.

“An' don't call me killer – there's plenty here deserve that name more than me.”

“Shut the hell up and get a move on – *killer*.”

The bloodstained cell door swung open and Marshall walked through it, slipping slightly on the mopped floor. He felt queasy at the thought of falling; he took a breath to compose himself. The guard shoved him in the ribcage with his baton.

They walked to the food hall, the guard a few paces ahead. Marshall was struggling to keep up, his injuries making it awkward to move properly. He couldn't breathe through his nose after it was broken his second week here; deep gulps with his mouth helped reduce the warm ache that spread over his thighs.

"Jesus Christ, you're slower than my mother – and she's had two hip replacements. Come on!"

"I'm in pain, dumbass."

"My heart bleeds, killer. And to think most of these guys actually feared you. What a *joke*," Trent sneered at Marshall.

He shoved him again, which didn't bring a reaction. Trent seemed disappointed.

They entered the hall.

Moving towards the other guards, Trent left him to fend for himself. Marshall picked up a tray from the stacked pile and shuffled into the long line waiting for canteen food. There was an acrid smell of boiled cabbage and weeks' old fat hanging in the air.

He sat on his own at the end of a large bench, picking at the plastic lump meant to be scrambled egg on toast. The bread underneath was charred, crumbled carbon spread across the plate like black snowflakes. A tray slammed on the surface opposite him. He didn't look up. Instead, Marshall toyed with the rubbery egg, which bounced around playfully on the cremated bread.

"Well look here, if it isn't my little friend. How's the food, homes? Good to get your *teeth* into something, huh? Oh, that's right. I smashed those nice white pearls of yours into pretty small bits, didn't I?"

He didn't need to look up to know who it was. He tried to see where the rest of the gang was out of the corner of his eye. They were a good distance away, which made him relax a little.

He thought back to that night when he caught them, one of the few he felt he'd gotten completely right. Where he achieved what he wanted to. It felt so far away now, the smell of cabbage wafting in his face.

"You gonna talk to me, hero? You gonna grace Jose Marquez with a reply?"

Marshall nodded without looking up. Jose smiled slightly, his gold teeth gleaming.

"You got some scars there – phew-eee! Any of 'em go to the bone, homes?"

Marshall's eyes flickered slightly towards Marquez' glare. He tried to fight it, the feeling, holding his fork tightly. Jose saw it and pounced.

"You disrespectin' me, motherfucker? Show some RESPECT!" he barked, standing up.

He leant down and placed a hand to the side of Marshall's food tray. In one swift motion, he pulled his arm sharply across, flipping the tray high into the air. The plate and food spiraled away from the plastic board as it followed its arc down towards the ground, where it landed noisily. The food hall went silent, all eyes on Marshall.

He sat there, staring at the tray. The broken plate. The mess. Finally, he looked up at Marquez, who was smiling in a way that was both gloating and goading.

Marshall flipped the fork up so quickly that Jose was still grinning when Marshall plunged it deep into his left thigh. As Marquez opened his mouth to scream, Marshall twisted the fork around, tearing more flesh. The move shocked Marquez into silence, leaving him gasping for air as he put all his body-weight onto his right leg.

"There's your respect," Marshall hissed as he sat back down.

Marquez growled angry threats through gritted teeth, whistling sharply for his gang to help. They moved from across the hallway, moving in on Marshall. Some guards on the perimeter of the room edged forward, but Trent signaled for them to hold off.

As the Marquez gang neared, Julian, the largest of them, tripped and fell onto another inmate. Almost instinctively, the prisoner he fell on reached for his fork and thrust it at Julian's face. The giant of a man didn't sit back and take it, using his forearms in wild sweeping drives that clattered into several more prisoners. The rest of the gang moved to attack the inmate stabbing at Julian but were set upon. Punches were thrown in random directions, cutlery wielded with angry intent as more and more got involved.

Trent sighed, disappointed. Conceding the need to step in, he pointed towards Jose. The guards rushed in with batons flailing. Marshall sat there as a wave of uniformed men piled in, adding to the carnage. It was a riot.

Marshall had seen enough. He rose slowly and shuffled towards the doors closest to him. He turned to look at the madness he had started. Noticing Marquez hauled up onto his feet, he stared at him.

The gangster, now handcuffed, spotted Marshall. A determined grimace etched on his face, he leaned down and pulled the fork straight out of his leg, tossing it nonchalantly to the ground. Pressing on his right leg so that he was standing with even weight on both feet, Marquez stood proud. He drew his finger slowly across his jugular, before pointing and smiling grimly at Marshall, who turned and left.

"You got a visitor, Marshall," called Reeve through the bars.

Marshall lifted his head from the bed.

"Tell them no."

Reeve opened the door.

"I can't."

Marshall sat up, confused. Reeve led him out, helping Marshall along by propping up his arm.

"What do you mean, you can't?"

Reeve looked away annoyed, tutting as he shook his head.

“Because I can't, alright? I wouldn't lie to you. I just can't. Everyone's gotta boss; everyone's got someone they answer to.”

They went the rest of the way in silence. When they got to the meeting hall door, Reeve stopped. Marshall looked back at him.

“I guess yo' not keepin' time or anythin', but it's actually fifteen minutes before general meetin' time.”

“I don't understand.”

Reeve smiled.

“Yo' in there on yo' own. It'll be jus' you an'...an' yo' visitor.”

With that Reeve held the door open, motioning Marshall to go in. Once he was through the threshold, the guard shut the door but didn't come in. Marshall stared at the visitor's hall, which seemed cavernous with just him inside.

He couldn't see the visitor door open past the Plexiglas shields, but he heard the hinge squeak and the latch close, followed by footsteps. He shuffled over to one of the chairs, picking up the receiver in anticipation. He laughed in shock when he saw who it was; now he was more confused than ever.

“Hello, Marshall.”

“Hey.”

“Sorry about all this.”

“It's fine. Glad to have someone to speak to.”

“Actually, it will be me who does the talking.”

Marshall's smile dropped.

“Oh. Okay.”

“I realize we haven't met yet, which is strange for me. I feel like I know you very well.”

“Same here – know your face well enough.”

“Normally we would shake hands at this point, but clearly that's not going to happen any time soon. Sorry.”

“That's okay, Mr. Greenburg.”

“Alan, please. Call me Alan.”

Marshall smiled once more, politely this time. He was glad of civilized company.

“So what can I do for you, Alan?”

Greenburg scratched his nose; he seemed to be composing himself.

“The question, I suppose – at least on a very superficial level – is why I'm here. But it's not just that, as you may come to understand. Everything is linked, often by imperceptible strands. And so the real question is not me, no: it is you. Or, more succinctly, why you are here.”

“Okay. Why am I here?”

“I'm glad you asked. You are here because of me.”

The receiver slipped a little in Marshall's hand as the meaning behind the words began to dawn.

“The blackouts, the General, your therapist, the assassination attempt. I did it. I found out the trigger words your black ops masters used to control you. I've been using you like a puppet.”

Marshall wanted to scream, to cry, to punch through the Plexiglas and snap Greenburg's neck. But he also felt weak, not in a bad way. This was no explosion; it was the draining of truth from his leaky past. He laughed silently, without humor.

“You.” It was all beginning to sink in. He shook his head. “*You.*”

“Yes. It was me.”

Marshall sat motionless, trying to absorb the words. It felt like this had been a long time coming. He searched his mind for a starting moment, the birth of disaster. There were distant memories – juvenile power struggles and blood splashed over scorched sands. He realized when everything was really set in motion and it felt like a bad joke.

From the start, the very beginning.

There was little energy left in him to fight anymore. He sat thinking it over, helpless. The answers - solving the riddle - offered no solace. Marshall knew *how*, finally, but he didn't much care for *why*. It had all been in vain – everything done, everything achieved. He stared numbly through the thick Plexiglas separating them, the receiver held limply in the palm of his gaunt hand.

Facing Greenburg, the architect of his ruin, Marshall felt little anger. His whole body was still, frozen in this instant. He'd fought for moments like this his entire life...now one was here and it was unbearable to face. A weak smile etched his face.

This is it, he thought.

As the notion passed, melodic words filtered through the receiver, drifting hypnotically into his brain. Everything was becoming much clearer. His past lay unbridled in his mind's eye, a picture book of forgotten horror. It was enough, now. Marshall stood up, turned and then –

As Greenburg left the prison he turned up his coat collar, the snow beginning to drift heavily now. He was walking along the narrow, exposed concourse when he noticed a figure headed out of the blizzard, coming directly for him.

“How *could* you? How *dare* you?” Shahina cried.

Greenburg stopped, his mouth wide open.

“How dare I? We both know this had to end sometime. I should have done this a long time ago.”

“What you have done is ruin everything. I was so close! You may think you have all the answers, but I assure you that is not the case. There was a time when maybe you understood, but look at you. Skulking around. Pathetic. I have waited years for this, years! What did you say to him?”

Greenburg's eyes welled up as snowflakes caught in his hair.

“I gave him closure. I gave him peace,” he shouted, prodding his chest with every word.

“You gave him *nothing*. You gave him a lie that will be crushed just as quickly as he himself. It cannot be real to him, you understand. He may not be intelligent, but he feels things. His gut will tell him this was not you, that it never was you.”

“Why persist? Isn't it enough to have him rot in that hell?”

Shahina's eyes grew wide, filled with wild fury.

“NO! It is *never* enough! You have spared him only what he deserves. This is his punishment – not the beatings, not the threats, not even the shame. The not knowing – that was meant to be his reckoning, and you ruined it. I can barely stand to look at you.”

“He's suffered enough.”

“Says you, a man too weak to save even his own wife. A man too powerless to convince even the sniveling Siegel to put down his rifle. You are man, but infinitely less than man. Your father's shadow will consume you – not because he was a tower, but because you are a worm.”

Greenburg stepped forward and went to slap Shahina's face; she moved backwards so that he swung at thin air.

“You have forced me into this. I have to go in there, now. I have to tell him, because the fairytale you concocted will give him something he never earned: hope.”

“And what will you do tomorrow, or the day after? What of *life*?”

“Life,” she said as she pulled a knife from her coat, “is what you make of it.”

Greenburg stared at the blade and then looked up at her. He laughed a little, thin tears trickling down the creases around his eyes.

“You know, I couldn't do it myself. After Linda died, I thought about it. She was the only thing in my life that made me forget how shit everything is. You were right about my father – he wasn't a tower. He was an awful human being. Linda made me see, made me notice there's more than just winning. More than success or failure. There are more important things. Which is why losing her hurt more than losing, and why I couldn't bear to end my life when she wasn't there anymore.”

Shahina's arm twitched, water dripping from the knife's edge.

“These things...what I have done. They are beyond you.”

He smiled at her; they seemed to understand one another.

“Yes. Always were, always will be. I can't make those kind of moves. It's just not in me. You did it all with such...purpose. Never strayed, not once. You remind me of Judas.”

Shahina smiled back, the knife held firm.

“Your obsession with Judas amuses me.” She pondered what he had said. “Most people would think that an insult. Not me. Judas saved the world. One man damns himself to make another a martyr, and no-one sees the irony of his sacrifice.”

“I do. I always have. But you're not making a martyr out of Mason, it won't happen.”

“Correct. A question: what made you think I was making a martyr out of *Mason*?”

He judged her tone too late; the knife came hard across his throat before he could put his hands up. Blood sprayed from his neck as he fell to his knees gasping for breath. He tried to speak.

“Mason...isn't...so...”

Greenburg pressed his lips together several times, trying to finish the sentence. He finally collapsed backwards, falling with a muffled thump onto the fresh snow. Shahina watched as blood pooled around both his shoulders, speckled with fresh snowdrops. She turned and walked away from the prison.

A few minutes later, Shahina came to a sleek black car. She knocked on the window.

“Ma'am?”

“Get fresh clothes from the trunk, and bag these up,” she gestured at her splattered top, “then go and collect Greenburg.”

“Yes, Ma'am. Where should I dispose of the body?”

Shahina sighed impatiently.

“We have been over this, Bachon. You take him back to the mansion, then you go and burn my clothes.”

“Where will you be?”

Shahina looked back toward the prison, barely there through the white drifts.

“The time has come to end this.”

Chapter Thirty-One

The final turn - life in stasis, pregnant cessation,
turned slowly to a **bitter end**. I am become death,
destroyer of men...

Eastman Correctional Facility
Tupello
Present Day

Marshall sat on his bed, a smile on his face as he idly whistled an old tune Grandma taught him. He turned to the calendar, considering a plan. Weights, yes. And dips – crunches too. All he had was time, it made sense to fill it. There was a knock on his cell door.

“Hey, Reeve – what's up?”

“Yo’ not gonna believe this.”

“Surprise me,” he said with a contented grin.

“You've got another visitor. I can tell them no if you'd rather j-”

“Don't. Today's been good; my luck's in. I'll see them.”

“You do realize it's general visiting hours...”

“I said I'll see them.”

The guard opened the door and escorted Marshall down towards the hall. Marshall could hear the almost reverential murmur before he reached the door; the hushed tones of people wishing for things that could never happen. As Reeve opened the door, everyone turned. Trent bounded over.

“I'll take it from here,” he said as he wrestled Marshall from Reeve, pulling his arm sharply. “Found a real nice spot for you and your visitor, killer. Got some old pals to keep you company.”

Marshall felt a pang of panic when he saw where Trent was taking him, but he was surprised how small a feeling it was. Above all else, he was calm, peaceful.

“Hey, Marshall. Sorry about before, I just go-”

“It's okay, Kurt,” Marshall said as he was thrown into the chair to Kurt's right.

Marshall didn't look to his other side.

“What's a matter, homes? Am I too pretty?”

Marshall didn't react and didn't look up, hoping that Marquez would get back to his visitor after a while. A minute passed; Marquez pushed air through his teeth in a dismissive way before turning back to the screen.

At the far corner, the visitor door opened, barely registering under the din of so many voices.

He picked up the receiver long before she reached her chair.

“Hello,” she spoke softly.

“Shahina, it's so good to see you. You won't believe what happened earlier! Alan Greenburg came in here an' he t-”

“I know what happened earlier.”

He frowned at her.

“How do you...?”

“What he told you – does it make sense?”

“Yeah. He had the money, the means. Definitely had motive, too.”

“But did it feel *right*?”

Marshall paused, her line of questioning making him uneasy. He scratched his stubbly chin as he pondered how to answer.

“I-I don't know. Haven't really thought about it, to be honest with you. None of this feels right.”

Shahina smiled.

“Do you want the truth?”

He studied her eyes, looking for some hint of meaning. The truth...what *wasn't* the truth?

“Yeah.”

Her voice low, Shahina chanted words into the receiver. Marshall recognized some – similar to Greenburg's, yet slightly different. The feeling came back; his arms and legs drifting away, only sensation in the outline of his skin. Then Shahina said another word, this one separate from the rest, unique, and Marshall was plunged into darkness.

The black didn't last.

A few seconds passed before he had a memory – or a shard of memory. It sliced through him, an echo of something done which couldn't be undone and then it was gone.

Broken pieces of the past showered into his mind, not in any order but more like puzzle pieces being forced into the wrong spaces. Marshall watched, horrified, as he did things he had no knowledge of; committed atrocities he'd never tried to forget because he simply didn't know they had ever taken place.

And then, and then...

An image broke in his mind, splintering into segments. It was a struggle to keep it all in; he felt his brain exploding. But he saw something, a jolt that would've made the hairs on his neck stand on end, if only he could feel his body. He saw something, then another thing, then he saw someone.

He saw her.

Shahina.

Her, but not her. Another time, younger. In his presence, the memory broken but undeniable. Their pasts lay interwoven. She had known of him, his crimes, for years; only now was *he* catching up. The pieces, though in the wrong places, made sense. It was all there.

Marshall finally knew the answer – but he didn't want it spelled out, shown forever as an unbroken loop in his mind. Greenburg wasn't the reality and he wished above all else that his last memory wouldn't be the truth revealed in all its awful linearity.

“Shahina,” he forced words through his mind, hoping they would become actual. “Make it stop. Please, enough. Make it stop.”

The broken images ceased and darkness pervaded.

“As you wish,” her voice echoed.

Marshall was back in the prison, out of his head and into his body once more. But what he saw was not what he should be seeing. He was awake, alive, conscious. Yet his body shifted in ways he did not want it to, did things he had not commanded.

He caught a glimpse, just a second, through the Plexiglas. It was in her eyes, had been all along. He noticed the dress she was wearing; it was pale blue. Marshall wondered if it was the same dress, but then he realized it didn't matter. He knew what it meant, why she was wearing it.

Marshall's head turned as he swung around and struck Jose Marquez hard across the back of the head. Before Marquez could respond, Marshall shifted across and slammed Kurt's face into the Plexiglas screen, causing a scream from the visitor's side.

Then he stood, doing nothing, waiting.

Arms to the side, limp.

Marshall didn't need to see Kurt's face to know what was coming, or Jose's either. He didn't need to see Trent's gleeful smile to know what happened next.

"Please, Shahina. Please," he choked through tears as men rushed toward him, arms outstretched.

This is it, she mouthed through the screen before rising to leave, brushing a curled lock from her face as she exited the room.