

Deal With The Devil – Prologue

Now, I'd like two eggs, over hard. I know, don't tell me; it's hard on the arteries, but old habits die hard — just about as hard as I want those eggs. Bacon, super-crispy. Almost burned. Cremated.

--Special Agent Dale Cooper, Twin Peaks

A Prologue, Taking the Form of a Recollection by Withrow Surrett

Ann Fletcher was out on patrol in the 800 block of Dupree Street when she opened, investigated and forcefully closed her first case. It was approximately ten o'clock in the evening and she had another mile and a half of streets to hike before she could call it a night. That was a lot of ground to cover in an urban setting – lots of short segments of road, lots of cross streets where people paid only glancing attention to stop signs, lots of uneven ground and few sidewalks and a general air of uncertainty from one block to another - but she was long since accustomed to the task. Her shrink called these “meditation walks” and had prescribed them to her when she refused psychoactive medication to treat what he called depression and she called being bored as all hell. She had to play a certain amount of patty cake, though, to keep her appointments going at the VA hospital so she manned up and went out for walks every other night after she finished her shift at Durham Tech. She got herself psyched for them by joining her Neighborhood Watch and treating them as a short shift of guard duty more than exercise or meditation. It wasn't like she could just not do it and then lie to her doctor; lying wasted everybody's time and she had come to see time as the most precious thing she had left.

It was the middle of the night, she was walking by herself – hair cropped very close still and tucked under a ball cap, wearing blue jeans and lace-up boots and a black fleece with her dark-skinned face and her narrowed, attentive eyes shielded from the glare of what street lights worked in her neighborhood – and she noticed the door of 812 Dupree was ajar. The lights were off inside but the flicker of a sodium bulb at the corner was enough to tell her what she needed to know: there was a problem in that house and she was very likely the only person in the world who had the chance to notice.

With the care and caution of a highly trained professional – but without a moment's hesitation otherwise, not even a flicker of a thought of calling 911 instead – Ann slipped over the railing on the end of the front porch, under and past a dark window into some unknown interior and to the door frame. She strained to listen and heard the clinking of metal on something else – a different metal or a very hard wood or something. There were clanks and scrapes and something jingling and Ann knew all too well what looting sounded like. She figured it was

probably a burglar. She knew the people at this house had been out of town – the box at the end of the drive leaned a little to one side when the mail built up; a dog that had barked at her every night hadn't been there two nights ago; the flickering blue glow of a TV hadn't come from inside, either – so there was no danger of harm to the family but she couldn't stand the thought of someone just stealing out of convenience. There was something a lot worse about a crime, from her perspective, the more petty and random and unfocused it became. A personal vendetta was something she could understand and appreciate; bad luck roulette was *not*.

Ann snuck the door open, slipped past it and set it back at as precisely the same angle of openness as she could manage. She started silent roll steps forward and towards the back of the small two-story house, towards stairs and then up them. There was a bedroom in the back and the wobbly streak of a flashlight being used. As she climbed the steps she would test each with a hand, first, looking perhaps, had anyone been there to observe, like she was going up them on all-fours; that distributed her weight and let her detect loose boards before stepping on them. She was up to the top in no time at all without a creak or a pop or anything else to give her away and when she stepped into the bedroom – lots of dingy whites and faded colors on aged quilts, a grandmother or the same general type, maternal and dusty and routinely lathered in enough rose water skin lotion to leave a little of the scent behind in her bed – she didn't bother with a lot of preamble. There was a guy in a pair of sweat pants and running shoes and a Philadelphia Eagles sweatshirt going through the jewelry on the top of the dresser to separate out costume jewelry and sweep the rest into a pillowcase. Her first thought was that the Eagles' logo was far too reflective to work on a stealth suit.

“Put down the jewelry, put your hands on your head and lay down on your stomach.” Her voice was a confident alto, forced lower than its natural range with a gruff aggression she had acquired from years of use. The guy looked at her, threw the flashlight at her – she dodged – and then he threw a small wooden rocking chair, sized for a child and holding a rag doll, through a window and leapt out after it.

Ann had the hair's-breadth slice of a second for which she was trained to decide yes or no on giving pursuit and then she dove out after him.

The back window had shattered unevenly and the burglar had cleaned out most of the edges himself but he had survived the landing and was running across the back yard. Ann leapt far enough out the window to overshoot the debris on the ground, rolled on the side of her subordinate arm and came up in a crouch. The guy was trying to climb the fence to the next yard and doing a surprisingly quick job of it; he was over before Ann could catch up to him and she found herself slowed down by the surprising flexibility of the aging wood of the fence. It was almost spongy to the touch and could only barely support her weight; she was surprised it didn't

disintegrate under the other guy but maybe he got luckier with which boards he grabbed or something. She wasn't spending a lot of time thinking about it and when she got over the fence she saw him swerve to the right and then the left to run around the side of the house. Ann was off and after him, running in slow, measured, easy strides, preemptively taking breaths timed for maximum oxygen and heart rate regulation. She wasn't at the absolute peak of fitness as she had been when she was working but she was as close as she could get and hold down a day job, and that meant she could easily run a couple of blocks without breaking a sweat or being noticeably out of breath.

Around the side of the house she went – Fleetwood, which was a dead-end and had no traffic – and when Eagles went across the street his feet were pounding. He wasn't used to this kind of exertion. She was deer-fleet as she bounded after him and every now and then his head turned and he checked to see that, yes, he was still being chased by a shadow that wasn't ever supposed to be there in the first place. She didn't bother crying out to him to stop; he'd failed the first test and that was the only one she'd give him.

Directly across Fleetwood was a paint-chipped A-frame house that was up a couple of cement steps, elevated above the street. The sides of the house were dark but the living room was lighted and he stomped up the steps, across the yard and through the front door. Ann heard the door bang against the wall of the entryway and someone scream and a man shout before she sailed through the door in a long stride. An old woman was staring and her husband was going for the mantle – he wouldn't make it to the old rifle before both she and her quarry were gone, they could have *walked* through here and beaten him to it – and then she flew out the door at the back of the kitchen and around an empty above-ground pool she figured they'd gotten for the grandkids in the spring of some earlier, more optimistic, more prosperous year. The guy she was chasing pushed through a high hedge that was patchy with holes so she did the same.

Another kitchen, another house of faded and aged people screaming in fear, just like the last one but in reverse. They shot, one after the other, down the front steps and into another street, across a line of pseudo-woods separating the back of a city park from the street, and in the clearing, by the moonlight, she could see that he had dropped his sack of jewelry somewhere. No worries; that just saved her from having to get fingerprints on it when she caught him. They ran fast and free across close-cropped grass that had been mown to within a millimeter of its life as autumn bent closer to winter, before the frost came and dew got heavy and the grass stopped growing altogether. She could hear her burglar breathing hard, rattling. He was probably a smoker. This would be over soon.

He surprised her by vaulting the chain link fence around the large yard of a small house someone was using as a daycare. Plastic jungle gyms from Roses and a small herd of those toy cars a toddler can sit in and push around with his feet were scattered around the place and he

tried to pick one up and lob it backwards at her but it was nowhere near her when it came down far short of where he must have thought it would and all that turning of momentum backwards just slowed him down even more. Among the several topics she imagined he had failed in school was clearly physics. She was closing the gap between them and he only had seconds left. Finally he hit the other side of the yard, went over the fence at a run and into the open garage of a low brick ranch with Christmas lights already up – multicolored “icicle” lights along the front gutters and electric candles in every window – and she heard more screaming. Time to shut this bastard down.

She followed him, past the power tools of a previous decade and a number of rather skillfully crafted bird houses, into a laundry room and then a den where two kids were shouting their lungs out and an older woman was brandishing a frying pan – a real frying pan, and Ann let herself admire it for the gumption it showed – and a big man with rough hands was blocking the burglar's exit down a hall towards some other door, window, whatever exit he could have hoped to find. All of the people who lived here were making sounds but none of them was *saying* anything intelligible and the burglar was frozen in the chaos so Ann took her chance while she had it: one hand on his right bicep, the other on the back of his neck, she levered the burglar around and slammed his head into a wall paneled in fake pine boards. The guy's face broke through and he made some muffled cry before she yanked his right arm back and around until she heard something rip and snap; maybe his bone, maybe his shoulder, whatever, she wasn't interested in diagnosing it as long as he was disabled. Then she yanked him back out of the wall by it – blood flecked the boards as she flexed his body for him – and swept one foot around to kick him in the right kneecap. Something else snapped before he went down in a wailing heap. Ann dropped to one knee by his right side, rolled him onto his stomach, yanked both wrists behind him and pinned them with her weight.

The kids kept screaming but the adults in the room stopped, eventually, so that the man stared and the woman kept brandishing an iron frying pan. Ann studied the burglar long enough to make sure he wasn't trying to muster meth-strength or something – he had that slight moth ball smell – and then let her eyes flick over to the man of the house. They looked at each other for a long second. He turned, finally, to the woman: “Call 911, Dora.” He was a huge slab of beef, tall, skin the color of toffee, what hair he had left turning gray. Dora was a little younger but not much. Young to be a grandmother, though. They must have been kids when they got together. They'd managed to make a little life together, though. The birdhouses revealed a soul that could see the value in doing something well for another's enjoyment. She lowered the frying pan and then swept – in a pink housecoat with fuchsia roses sewn down the front – into the kitchen and Ann heard a phone pick up.

There was absolutely no way she would be able to explain this to the police. There was

just no way. She shook her head at the man and she heard Dora say, "Yes, I need the police. I'm at..." but the guy hadn't been quick enough to say something. The street address was out. The police would come. Ann had broken almost as many laws as this guy had. She had stopped him, though. He was a criminal; she wasn't. She was just the neighborhood watch.

She yanked a lamp off a table, ripped the cord out of the wall socket and then out of the back of the lamp in one tug, her arms flexing, her whole body singing out in joy for this chance to run and chase and *fight* again, and she tied the guy's wrist in a knot not even a boy scout could recognize or undo. Then she hefted him over one shoulder, held him by his feet, stood up, tested her weight; she could move with him like this, for sure. She thought about his Eagles logo and wrenched to twist him around to one side, then over, so that the logo was on the inside of the fold she had made of him over her shoulder.

Even as the guy cried out for her to stop, Ann ran back out through the laundry room and the workshop garage and to the street and across it and into the park. On her way through she grabbed a used shopping bag from Target and in the park she turned it into a gag around the guy's mouth. He could still breathe but he couldn't vocalize. Then she set off to cut through streets and dark neighborhoods and a bike path that was technically closed at night, towards downtown and the Durham Bulls Athletic Park.

Twenty minutes later, Ann had trussed the guy up in a couple of extension cords she found at the park and he was tied to the front of the huge animatronic bull that overlooked the stadium and which was lighted at all times. She'd worked fast and she figured it wouldn't take long for someone to notice. She was right. While a couple of police officers were interviewing Clyde and Dora Hanford about the anonymous melee that had burst into their home off South Alston Avenue, many of their colleagues were swarming the DBAP and a firetruck was bringing down an apparent kidnapping victim who, when he was conscious, was only too happy to confess to his crimes if it kept him away from that lunatic who'd chased him away from the house he was robbing. The next day a writer in the *Herald-Sun* made an allusion to the repeating logo found on the shopping bag and the location where the burglar had been left for police to find and dubbed the anonymous crime fighter The Bull's Eye. It was a joke, but it stuck. Durham, North Carolina, had its first superhero.

Ann went home and slept well for the first time in many months. She did not bother to linger over old photos of herself in Delta Force days. She simply walked in, changed clothes and went to bed. The silence of the house usually kept her awake for a while after she tried to close her eyes but this time it couldn't get its hooks in. Without conscious thought, she later realized, he had decided to make her patrols a nightly endeavor.

Deal With The Devil – Chapter One

Since Knowledge is but Sorrow's spy, it is not safe to know.

--Sir William D'Avenant

The first indication I had of a problem in the city of Durham was something I realized while watching a belly dance show at a theater downtown. It was a smell, actually: that of another predator in the room, of a type I could recognize immediately as a potential competitor.

Even us gay vampires watch belly dance in ultra slow motion. It's a trick we can do – well, most of us – where we speed up our perception of events and details so that we see things move real slow compared to how they're seen by all the other sad sacks around. It's a useful trick when you're swooping down off a fire escape onto the back of unsuspecting prey, yes, but it also makes live entertainment a hell of a lot more fun. There is an unbelievably satisfying perversion to going to a performance of, say, a stage illusionist, watching him or her do a few tricks and then using one's own supernatural powers to slow down time during the next one in order to observe them in the act of palming the coin or pocketing the live baby chick or otherwise demonstrating the *lack* of magic behind the feat they seem to have executed to the perception of everyone else in the room. It feels like trying to find the Christmas presents early and succeeding: sneaky and fun and at the same time always a little disappointing. Once the pleasure of revelation has faded it leaves behind a shadow of regret. You realize it's possible to scratch an itch so hard you leave a bruise.

Most of the time, though, we use it to experience a genuine appreciation of what we're watching – an appreciation deeper than I think any human audience could possibly experience on their own. Dance is the best example of that, though I think lots of things work: races, especially foot races and horse races, though sometimes cars work, too; football is *crazy* good slowed down; ocean waves crashing on a beach. Really, used purely as an enhancement of the spectator experience, the best targets are any situation in which power – strength, agility, whatever – must be used in a way that mimics or otherwise creates an illusion of delicacy. I've known or heard about vampires who would sit and watch spiders spin webs because, dangerously close thought that might come to being a living stereotype, it afforded them an opportunity to meditate on the patience with which one might spin out a plot or an idea or a vendetta in a way that is subtle and complex and almost entirely invisible while inescapable. Personally, I'm not so damned in love with myself that I'm willing to stamp CLICHÉ on my own forehead like that, but I do take their point that it is a different thing to watch someone dribble a ball down the court in the blink of an eye from what it is to watch that athlete use all the big muscles of the arms and legs and back in concert with all the little muscles and tendons around ankles and wrist and neck and eyes and

fingers to control a ball in a sweeping, unplanned, unmarked and constantly self-updating zigzagging run down the boards of a court in a basketball stadium. I don't know the first thing about basketball – I mean, honestly, it's a fucking game, we're not children here – but I know how beautiful all that thoughtless self-control looks when not just seen but *examined*.

That's all to say that I was sitting in the first balcony of the Carolina Theatre of Durham, downtown, watching a touring company called Bellydance Superstars, when the smell of another vampire was carried to me from the first floor by a slight updraft caused by the simple physics of body heat in a venue with over a thousand seats.

I was already sitting with two vampires – Seth and Beth, whom I tend to regard as the rhyming opposites – because the three of us like to go out and just be sociable sometimes. It's nice to see the sights, stay a part of the world, generally do things that *people* do. So, we'd gone to see the belly dance show because we can all do the slowing down perception thing and we all enjoy using it to watch the human form do incredible things.

Belly dance is always a safe bet for that, too, because it's all about very controlled movements that alternate from slow to fast and the dancer's ability to frame the experience for the audience, suggest shapes and movements that might or might not really be there and generate a specific perception on the average audience member's part. That night was no different. We watched – probably slack-jawed – as dancers whirled and twisted their joints so that parts of their bodies could snap into a specific posture on exactly the right beat. The music wasn't all prerecorded, either. There was a drummer who would come out and join them to provide the accompaniment and he and they would create this intoxicating, playful tension in the air as they tested one another and pushed boundaries – their own and one another's. The magic of belly dance – any dance, I guess – is that the human body is a collection of curved shapes, all stuck together, and yet these people would stretch and bend those arcs back into straight lines, melt back into curved forms and then straighten again into wholly new geometries that weren't native to the human body but were a pleasure to behold.

We were sitting and watching arms glide up and around to suggest lines as straight as a wooden board while lower bodies shook and shimmied too fast for a normal gaze to detect individual movements, a pendulum on high-test crystal meth. In one routine, two dancers stood on a set piece, in the back, to create a living statue of Shiva Natraj. When I got home, later, I looked that up online and read it's an aspect of the Hindu deity Shiva that acts as the god of dancing and specifically the one that performs the dance of creation. Heady stuff – perhaps even arrogant by some readings – but they were showing tremendous stamina by standing perfectly still, only occasionally shifting positions during the course of the Indian-themed dance being done by another pair of performers.

Beth is a dancer by trade – she runs a strip club, which I'm sure some people would try to wall off behind caveats but bodies in motion are bodies in motion and anyway she doesn't own the place so her relationship to it is complicated at best and all that's beside the point – and she was sitting in entranced fascination. She's in fantastic physical shape but she has the least interesting face in human history and mouse-brown hair she pulls in a ponytail and what she does have going in the shallow attractiveness column she tends to tuck away under layered sweatshirts and sweatpants or dresses with as much style as a flour sack trimmed in lace that's been glued on. I don't know why; she's got some serious issues going on and I don't just mean that she could use some self-confidence or self-acceptance or both.

Seth looks like a young punk of the tall and muscled variety instead of the tall and typical taciturn rail-thin speed freak folks generally imagine when they hear “young punk.” He doesn't look like someone in skinny jeans and a leather jacket six inches wide at the waist. He looks like he lifts a lot of weights and cuts his own dirty blond hair with a buzz cutter and never comes any closer to smiling than a little smirk that might or might not be good natured based on the outlook of the person who sees it.

I'm a huge fat-ass and I like the balcony at the Carolina because the seats feel bigger and the tiered rows feel like they have more room to get comfortable. It's also the best view of the stage for a live show and the acoustics are the best up there and all in all it's an ideal seat no matter where up there you are. I find it wonderfully ironic that back in my day those were the seats reserved for blacks. They got shoved upstairs, segregated from the “normal” people and what their cracker neighbors didn't even realize was that they were giving up the best seats in the house just to sit around and feel smugly *white* about everything. I was dressed in black, but that's because that's basically always what I wear. I had on white and silver checkerboard shirt and a black trench coat and pants so dark gray they were black in most light. I had on old black jump boots I'd about worn out by then, but not quite, and the big mop of wavy black hair on my forehead was flopping over in a fashion that was regrettably close to being back in style. I'd liked being something of an anachronism, but no such luck anymore. At least I could still get balcony seats. I needed to feel a little bit like an outcast, all the time, everywhere, or I never quite knew what to do with myself.

We were staring in silent fascination – each experiencing the spectacle individually, but at the same time sort of shared – as dancers struck something not unlike the Warrior Pose of yoga and held it so evenly, formed such a perfect straight line from hand to arm to shoulders to arm to hand, that from the tip of one finger to the tip of its opposite one could have laid down any perfectly straight board they might want and not left a big enough gap between wood and flesh to let a beam of light through if shined at it from the other side. I could hear that none of us were

breathing and all of us had our lips at least slightly parted. Imagine the difference between *I Love Lucy* and HDTV and you're starting to get a taste of an idea of how far apart our experience *can* be from yours. It isn't like that all the time – imagine trying to drive across town like that, with each second feeling like a minute or more – but when we do use that ability it does tend to be completely fucking mind blowing.

The smell of an unknown vampire from the orchestra level, though, snapped me out of my meditation on the incredible posture and muscle control before me; instead I leaned forward very slowly and started flicking my eyes around the seats below us. I didn't immediately see anyone or anything of interest so I glanced to either side and saw that Beth still seemed to be lost in the moment – that's how we refer to it sometimes – but Seth was back in reality and visually crawling all over the place, too. He and I locked gazes for a fraction of a second and he gave me a curt nod: he had smelled it, too, and it wasn't one he recognized, either.

I leaned forward – extremely slowly, just in case that would camouflage me amongst all the other fractional movements going on in any given moment of perception – and looked across more of the floor and Seth did the same. Beth didn't seem to have noticed or cared just yet, and though the two of us sat there gawking as hard as we could, no one seemed to do anything out of the ordinary. The odds were, and we both knew it, that he was probably sitting very still and watching the performance, too – or, perhaps, that he didn't have the ability to dilate time like most of us do and so he was sitting there watching it as a human would. I'd pity him a little if that were the case but we all wind up with such a weird grab-bag of powers that, well, he probably had something to make up for it. Shit happens.

The problem for me in this was that I hadn't recognized his scent which meant he was new in town. Hopefully he was just a tourist – maybe he'd even come in just for this one belly dance performance – because if he wasn't then he and I had to have a conversation and those talks were rarely fun for everyone. Sometimes people would ask around, call ahead, make themselves easy to notice or otherwise try to be polite, but not always. Vampires have worked out a system of subtle signs they can leave in public to indicate that they are new in town and looking to connect to whatever the local social scene might be – it's not entirely unlike the hobo signs of earlier times and now that I think about it I have to wonder if they somehow got the idea from us, but I'm a rambler and big into the free association so maybe that's neither here nor there. At any rate, I hadn't noticed any of those signs lately but... well, now that I thought about *that*, Durham is in my turf but it isn't exactly where I spend my time.

See, I'm in charge of the vampires of North Carolina. It's a big state, a huge state, and when I say I'm in charge I don't mean that I'm so conceited I think I can actually know everything that's going on, in all places, at all times. What it *does* mean is that I reserve the right to *find out* what's going on in any given place at any given time. There are a couple of towns where

someone I trust is basically my proxy – I have a nutso cousin Roderick who runs Asheville in the west and a woman named Sara whom I've come to trust in recent years has pretty much put together an island of autonomy in Greensboro – and there are a lot of places where none of us would ever dare go, but all in all, I have no hesitation telling someone that North Carolina is mine. Where I *live*, though, is Raleigh and though Raleigh is only twenty minutes from Durham by any number of highways, well, Raleigh is big and it's where the vampires in my part of the state are concentrated. Durham used to be a really run-down, depressing place, with horrible city and county governments and too much crime, too much sprawl, too little to give a shit about, but in the last few years it's really pulled itself together and is slowly turning into the place to be. That's half of why I'd started coming to shows in Durham instead of sticking strictly to Raleigh: the show and the theater are great in their own rights, make no mistake, but Durham can be a draw in its own right, just as a nice place to hang out and wander around downtown, and so I'd figured I'd better start being over there more to kind of do a better job of keeping an eye on things. I wasn't exactly on patrol, *per se*, but I wasn't exactly *not* on patrol, either.

And now you see the first of the shallow parallels between the Bull's Eye and me.

My inability to spot the interloper, which I was calling him in my head immediately because my knee jerk reaction was to view him as at best a rude guest and at worst an aggressive and uninvited invader, was starting to grate on me after not very much time at all, so I turned off the time stretch and let time rush into the chronological vacuum created whenever I use the ultra slow motion. There's this weird kind of hiss and pop sound and then, boom, everyone goes from sounding like they're very far away and under water to sounding normal again. It was just in time for the dance piece going on right then to wrap up and the applause to start and as the house lights went up for intermission I turned to Seth and said, "Sorry, but I just can't sit here and enjoy myself now."

Beth had rejoined the here and now, too, seated between us, and was completely oblivious to what was going on. "She's very beautiful," she said in a kind of dreamy exhalation. I looked over, followed her gaze to the dance floor – empty now, curtain descending – and Beth went on. "If we turned her she could dance forever." She sounded like she was high on the good stuff and I half smiled and half sighed.

"No dice," I said. "Remember that." I held up a finger and caught her eye by waving it in front of her and then used it to drag her vision back to me. "Remember. Seriously. No turning anyone."

"I know," she said. She sounded a lot closer to the here and now – she never got more than about spitting distance to it, though, most nights – but her voice was a little sad. "Still, it's a pretty thought."

I dipped my forehead towards the stage. "No," and I put one hand lightly on Beth's shoulder as I said this, "It's that *she* was a pretty thought." I smiled at Beth and Seth's face – always so still and emotionless – was so blank it spoke volumes. I've never really known how old Seth is and when asked directly he usually simply doesn't answer, but sometimes I think he's very, very old indeed.

Intermission was a chance to go get some popcorn and a beer and I am never one to turn down fresh movie theater popcorn or a cold one. My maker taught me to eat after she turned me. It's not something most vampires can still do – I mean, sure, they could put food in their mouth and chew it and make it go down their esophagus but they would just eject it again pretty much immediately – but my sire knows how useful it is and she made me sit and eat little nibbles of soft, pliable, inoffensive things in the nights and weeks immediately following my turning. That was decades ago now – the early 1950's – and let me be the first one to tell you that there was plenty of bland white pap around to practice on at the time. If someone had asked me what... I don't know, what Indian food was like, I would have thought they meant, you know, Wild West type Indians and said something about tortillas and rattlesnakes. There wasn't a tremendous amount of multiculturalism back then. At any rate, I was perfectly happy to learn to continue eating food because I had never been one to shy away from the plate when I was among the living and I had no intention of giving up one iota of pleasure in the ever-after, either.

I got downstairs and bellied up to the counter and ordered my food and, when it was given to me, I walked outside to this courtyard of bricks and paving stones and concrete hell. I settled in on a bench of shaped and shapeless cement borne of some damned 1970's urban planner hack's pale excuse for an imagination – curves and ferns and all the comfort of a cargo container – to work on my food when I got that... that tingle. You know what it is: that sense of being watched. So many movies and TV shows and things hinge on that experience but the fact is that it *happens* sometimes. I once read a theory that it has to do with low-grade, subconscious telepathy going on, as the watcher's brain gives off signals that are recognized in the brain of the watched, but that seems a little far-fetched to me. I've also heard a theory that it has to do with subharmonic sounds or something that people generate that tip one another off to their presence. I don't know, it'll all wind up being quantum mechanics, probably. Whatever it was, I felt it and it's not the sort of thing a vampire feels very often and when they do, well, they know it right away. I tried not to react, though, at least not visibly. You don't survive your first fifty years or so by being jumpy or quick to overreact. Instead, I sat there and ate my popcorn and drank my beer and as I felt those creepy crawly eye tingles on the back of my head and in the hairs of the back of my neck I focused instead on how I could turn around and look without giving away that my watcher had blown his cover. After all, I figured there could only be one person who would be

trying to spy on me: the interloper, who had undoubtedly smelled me in the lobby when he came out for intermission, himself.

Hell, that was half of why I went to get a snack. Well, okay, maybe a third of why.

I had almost decided that I wouldn't need a reason to turn around – I was going to finish my popcorn and the intermission was going to be over – when I heard Seth call my name from across the plaza or promenade or whatever damned fiction of useful space someone had bestowed on it in some past era.

“Withrow!” Seth didn't sound angry or agitated, just letting me know he was on the approach. I appreciated that. Still, the part of me that was once a mortal man wanted to jump out of my skin. I turned around and looked across the plaza perhaps over-much, as though not sure exactly where or who had called out to me. Seth strode towards me, dressed tonight in anonymous gray slacks grown careworn and a slightly undersized t-shirt that made him look like a guy trying too hard to look tough. That was probably some twisted and over-complicated form of camouflage for him. I'd seen him fight; he could have killed everyone in the building, half of them before they'd known what was happening.

I started to say something in response, something generic and innocuous and forgettable, when the spidey senses all of a sudden just... went blank. The interloper who had been staring at me, watching me, probably scoping me out as a potential threat, was apparently no longer interested. I left my mouth hanging open and scanned the periphery of the crowd – belly dance hobbyists in jingling wraps carrying little plastic cups of wine, their boyfriends with cigarettes, their kids running around – but I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. I even stood up and got real obvious with my looking, but no, not a single ping on the old radar. He was gone.

Seth didn't bother to ask what was going on; he just stood there and scanned the crowd, eyes moving methodically from one face to another. “Was he out here?”

“Yeah.” I clucked my tongue at nothing, scolding myself halfheartedly. “He was watching me. But the moment you called my name he took off.”

Seth made a little hrmph noise from deep down in his beefy – and extremely attractive, I had to admit – chest. Too bad he didn't roll that way; not that there's much point to it for vampires anyway, but still, sometimes the coffin's a little lonely on a cold night. *Anyway*, he didn't like that the interloper had studied me and then taken off once he heard my name. “Possible follower of the Transylvanian?”

I drew a breath, considered my answer and then shook my head. “Nah. I think Roderick's probably cleaned them up sufficiently that there wouldn't be anyone left to care that much.” A couple of years before I'd had to go up to Asheville, on the western end of the state, and kill off an old fuck of a vampire who'd started his own brood on the side like a stereotype of an ancient European vampire lord straight out of some redneck Dark Ages.

"Could be one who wants to make a name for himself locally," Seth went on. "There are people around today who care more about the Civil War than most of the actual Confederates did in their own time." He shrugged. "Pick someone or something tangential to the current power structure, mark it as the source of something good or bad and then go wipe it out to establish a rep."

I glanced over at him – standing on my bench made me just slightly taller than him, a rare advantage – and smiled a little. "Jesus, man. Voice of experience much?"

Seth allowed one corner of his lips to curl upwards for half a second. "Just thinking out loud."

"Sure," I chuckled. I didn't give a shit how many other vampires Seth had toppled in his day. He was my second in command and he was apparently perfectly comfortable there. If he decided to turn on me then I would never see him coming, and we both knew it, and there was no point sitting around being so paranoid about it that I'd wind up helping make it happen. "Anyway, I figure he was watching me, seeing if I showed any sign of knowing he was there, and when you came out he decided to hit the turbo boost and go the hell home." I drained the last of the beer in my bottle and chucked my popcorn bag in a trash can. "Enjoy the second set."

"You going after him?"

"The scent is fresh," I said, and I hopped relatively lightly down from my bench, all three hundred pounds of me. "And daylight's not getting any farther away."

"I'll tell Beth you said goodnight."

"Thanks," I smiled, genuinely fond of both of them and able to show it in some small way since none of us were sitting in our usual city. "But I doubt she'll notice I'm gone."

"I'm sure she doesn't mean it personally," Seth murmured.

"I know," I said, "And I appreciate the gesture." I held out my right hand and Seth, with only the necessary amount of hesitation, took it and pumped it once up and down before letting go.

"It's been a long time since we've had trouble right around home," he said, voice low. "I hope we don't have it again anytime soon."

"Don't worry," I said, shaking my head. "I doubt he's one of Bob's, either, and if he is then we'll just kill him, too." It was the thing I knew Seth was thinking, and about which I should have worried the very least and yet had actually worried by far the most.

Bob had been the boss of North Carolina before me, and a right fucker, and the fourth in a long line of Bob's that had come before him. I got the gig by taking the last Bob out. Then I took out his chauffeur – for fucking real – and his spawn and burned down the house he'd lived in and put out the word that anyone with a claim to the title should come and talk to me and they might want to bring with them every friend they had because I would be only too glad to dust every

single vampire who was loyal to that self-satisfied old ball of crap. I killed him on the side of a practically abandoned stretch of dark road one night over ten years ago, and that was when Sara – the one from Greensboro, remember – and I became allies because she was there to help. Plenty of people referred to it as the *coup* but in my heart of hearts I thought of it as a successful slave rebellion. We had been expected to kowtow and suck it up and give Bob all the best hunting rights and ask his permission to zip up our pants every night and I had had more than my share of that by the time I'd been in Raleigh for forty years. There weren't any little Bob's left to pop up and make a bid for revenge. I had spent years making sure of that.

I'd killed so many of Bob's line I wasn't sure I could tell Seth – another vampire, my second in command – how many without sounding a little crazy. He'd never know the miles I put on my old Firebird just chasing rumors about self-important little pipsqueaks who happened to be named Robert or Rob or Bob or Bobby and how many whimpering little lives I'd ended just to make sure there was no chance that any would ever turn out like the Bob of the vampires of Raleigh.

Seth studied me as I let all that run through my head and I wondered if he were telepathic. That would be a shitty thing to find out the hard way, I said to myself, and then I realized that if he were telepathic then he'd just heard that and even though he didn't show any sign of anything I couldn't resist letting myself laugh a little, just once, which got something like quizzical uncertainty out of him. That's the way it is with us: always playing the weird little angles against one another, even against the ones we almost sort of think of as our friends.

"Anyway," I said, "I'm going to go look for him. See you around."

"Later," Seth mumbled, and he strolled back inside as I moseyed down the sidewalk and around a corner and into darkness, nostrils wide, trying to find a hunter in the streets of night.

Deal With The Devil – Chapter Two

I'll shake my cutie pie fist at a waitress / when I'm sick of the way that I've been.

--The Stills, "Animals + Insects"

Durham started out as a tobacco town. When I was alive it was the place where Chesterfields got made. You probably don't remember Chesterfields, but they were a big deal when I was a kid and during my twenties. I remember the slogan: "Blow some my way." These days I don't even know if they're still made. Plenty of vampires smoke – not exactly a big risk of cancer when you're dead – but it's gotten so damned inconvenient. It used to be a great way to remember to breathe or to cover for not having misty breath on cold nights, that kind of thing, but now it's just not as useful because you can't do it any damned where you like. I guess that's for the best. I don't have any special love for carcinogens in the food chain.

I set off up the hill on Morgan Street, headed northwest through downtown. Durham is a town of huge old tobacco plants, some renovated and turned into condos, others sitting there waiting for a second career to arrive. There are more of the latter than the former and the empty ones are the tallest by far: huge slabs of brick and concrete standing darkly in their own shadows, skyscrapers compared to the rest of the two- to four-story buildings that make up Durham's downtown. It's not a real city, it's just a town, but a town with a lot of history and a lot of money and a huge, renowned university sitting behind miles of low rock walls just off of downtown. The tobacco company that made Chesterfields used to be owned by the same people who started the college that turned into Duke. Duke does a ton of medical research now, so Durham is called the City of Medicine. A city of medicine framed in tobacco buildings is just about right, in a lot of ways, for the South, for North Carolina, for the twentieth century.

Morgan Street curves around, at the top of the hill, towards Main Street. The scent of the interloper seemed to turn right down Main, towards the part of town that catered to the University: restaurants and a record store and what passes for nightclubs around here. I sighed and stuffed my hands into my pockets. Colleges are like vampire flypaper. The time was when a college was the best possible place to crash for a few years, but not anymore. They seem so good on paper still, though, and the bars and tiny rock clubs and countless parties that pile up around them like suckling piglets look like the easy pickings we're all always on the lookout to find, but they aren't. Going that way meant walking through welcome shadow down a street undergoing some sort of optimistic resurfacing, framed by overhanging tunnels between abandoned factory buildings. I couldn't quite figure out what a tunnel so small a man would have to crawl down it

might be doing up there, four stories above the street – what its original purpose had been. I imagined coal cars full of Chesterfields being rolled from one end to the other, a team of men hunched over in a too-small space shoving it and their counterparts at the other end waiting to empty it into some great machine, everyone's mind on the carton of free smokes they could get at the end of the day to give away to their friends.

It didn't bother me even a little to consider that the intruder might be waiting for me in those shadows. I like being able to be direct about things, even if it means walking into an ambush.

By the time I'd walked down to the other end of the old Liggett Meyer factory I was back in the light and there were people all over the damn place. The crush of people and the smell of food coming from the restaurants at and around Brightleaf Square were too much for me to be able to sensorily dissect in search of one specific scent. I walked on past them all, but the fish place alone was enough to scrub the air of any useful trail. It was like trying to find a fingerprint under three coats of paint, and I gave up trying. There was only really one big thing on up this road, and it was Duke and its false promise of easy collegiate prey.

The reason colleges and universities are such terrible places for vampires these days are manifold, but I'll run them down briefly. First and foremost on the list of reasons is the Internet. Facebook is forever, as I once heard someone say on TV. Once upon a time a leach who'd been turned when very young could spend decades passing as a student in the isolated ecosystem that would build up around a college. Live near campus, go to parties and make new friends every four years; easy, right? It was, to hear people talk about those times. The high churn in student populations means one could have the best of both anonymity and identity: a persona one maintained believably and which was then forgotten by countless generations of students on a four-year cycle. No more of that, though. Now everyone stays Facebook friends with their old college chums forever. I guess a really enterprising vampire could maintain online identities for each of their various personages, maybe recycle them every few years, but it's a lot of work to maintain a permanent identity without the Internet getting involved – transfers of property, establishment of new identities and supporting legends, mortal paperwork, birth certificates, death certificates to be used to transfer “inherited” property from one identity to another, and on and on and on – and keeping one's self in front of one's old friends, unaging and unchanged, is stupid and dangerous; maintaining a fiction of aging is a ton of work for very little reward; absence altogether from the online social scene is suspicious in its own right, in a way. Basically, those people a vampire could count on to go somewhere else and forget all about them in four years simply don't forget anymore.

Reason number two is the modern obsession with cameras. Some of us show up warped in

a camera's image; some of us only show up warped if the camera uses a mirror, which is more and more rare these days; still others of us don't show up at all. All those legends of a warped image when reflected or mechanically captured are true, to some degree or another, for some percentage of the population. Even those of us who show up just fine in a camera run the risk of becoming what's called an OOPA – an out-of place artifact. A guy who shows up in the background on a surveillance camera and looks exactly the same as he did in a snapshot from a frat party in 1963 runs the risk of those two images being seen by the same person. Is it a small risk? Sure it is, but it's a risk nonetheless, and it's aggravated by the absolute omnipresence of cameras in daily life. Every kid on that college campus has a camera in their phone and they take pictures all the time and then post them online to sites with lousy privacy policies and blammo, one's picture is everywhere and nowhere; everywhere in that it can be found in an instant but nowhere in that no one is necessarily *looking* for it. Just knowing it's out there, though, is enough to give me the screaming heebies. Even if the kids didn't all run around with cameras in their hands at all times, colleges have grown increasingly paranoid. You don't have to have too many instances of shootings, in the era of 24 by 7 news and endless analysis and fear mongering, to convince the Board or the Trustees or the Deans or whoever that a system of surveillance cameras would be to everyone's benefit; especially so for those who might bear legal liability in a civil suit if someone's precious snowflake gets shot twenty times by their crazy ex-roommate's equally crazy ex-boyfriend or some shit. To be honest, it started with the rape whistles that they started handing out in the '80s. When half of campus is walking around wearing an alarm you pretty much have to knock them out from the get-go and that's a lot harder and less pleasant than you might think.

So, despite being covered in nubile and attractive men and women who are quite comfortable going to a party, making out with a total stranger and waking up the next morning feeling drained and remembering next to nothing, cameras and paranoia and social media have conspired to make a college one of the most dangerous places available to vampires. If they only knew the favor they'd done themselves.

Once I made it past restaurant row and a couple of bars and a gas station, I was standing right next to the campus of Duke University. I'd hoped I'd get the scent back by the time I got away from the entertainments on offer, but no such luck. I was smelling nothing but crisp autumn air and willing teens, and I sighed and clambered over the wall at the corner of Main and Buchanan Streets to take off down the gravel walking path that borders Duke's East Campus. I was just killing time by then – no point in trying to hoof it back to the Carolina for the rest of the second set and no target left to track, so why not take a walk around Duke and kill some time? It was a lovely evening and who knew, maybe I'd find the opportunity for a bite to eat on my way. I

know I just listed off all the reasons why colleges and universities are the worst place imaginable for a vampire to live or hunt but, well, undeath doesn't exactly make the forbidden fruit less appealing. Forbidden fruit is kind of the whole point. Mainly, though, I think I just wanted some time alone. Vampires have plenty of that, of course, but now that I knew there was a stranger in town, I knew I probably had a problem to solve. The moment of respite I could take now was probably going to get pretty lonely waiting around for others to show up over the next little while.

Duke's campus is very heavily wooded, and Duke – or the Duke family, maybe, I don't really know the details – is responsible for huge swaths of protected forest in and around the town. Some of that acreage isn't anywhere near the Duke campus but a lot of it is and a walk from one end of Duke to the other – from East Campus to West Campus – would take me through a huge chunk of pretty and very quiet and very dark places. I set off at my usual plodding trudge, slipping past a few of the freshman dorms and then cutting past the steam plant – world's fanciest steam plant if ever one there was, I assure you, with a recently renovated facade and special train tracks to bring in the coal the university burns to boil water in the plant. I assume it's still in use, anyway. They have to heat the old buildings somehow, after all.

Once I was past the steam plant I walked under a highway and the forest started to really open up around me. The street there, through campus, is a curving, two-lane road with a generous sidewalk and a handful of dim street lamps and basically no buildings, just woods and more woods. A footpath ran uphill to the left, towards some rundown housing I was sure was overpriced by virtue of its proximity to campus. A university bus went past me at one point, all moaning engine and groaning suspension. Otherwise, no one at all had seen me; no one would be around to see me on a Friday night. I walked for a few blocks, past some old houses that the school had bought from members of some earlier generation of faculty and converted into offices for small programs, strangely isolated from the rest of campus, little islands of administrivia in someone else's woods: an office for “graduate life,” whatever that means, over here and an environmental studies program over there, all trying to turn old bedrooms into offices and someone's ersatz dining room into a place to store paperclips and printer toner. They were lighted like snow globes in a dark curio cabinet, surrounded by shadow and fighting it off with fluorescents and keycard locks. Not all of them were in use; on a couple I noticed that the signs out front were blank and the interiors were completely dark. A disused building, especially one that looks like a house, has a special aura of emptiness that it gives off. Someday a psychologist or an anthropologist or something like that is going to figure out why, some mundane explanation for a small detail we don't realize we have the capacity to see and correctly interpret, but until then I like to think of it as an aura. It's a lot more fun that way.

The night was beautiful – it always is in autumn – and I was taking my time and enjoying myself. My anxiety over the intruder was dissolving. Maybe he just didn't know what he was

doing. Maybe he was new. Maybe his maker got killed right after turning him. Maybe he's just plain dumb. Maybe I would find him and it would all work out. Maybe he would try to challenge me and I could get rid of him in a fashion so messy that no one would try that again for fifty years. There were a lot of ways this could turn out OK and I was running over them in my mind, playing out scenarios in which I drove him off, killed him, made an ally of him, welcomed him as a subordinate or a peer.

And, of course, that's when I just barely detected his scent again.

I stopped dead in the street, closed my eyes, opened my ears and took slow, deep, even breaths. I pushed my senses out as far as I could strain them and I couldn't find anything but that one faint trace of a vampire I didn't recognize, the one whom I'd smelled at the Carolina, having been here at some point in the past. I wasn't even entirely sure it had been tonight, but he'd been here and it was the closest I had to a clue so I stood there and sniffed for all I was worth.

The trail – the faint echo of the *ghost* of a trail, but you don't wind up in charge of a state by being lousy at this stuff – led off the same way I was already going and, I suspected, right into the large, beautiful and civilian-packed Sarah P. Duke Gardens, a massive botanical space where it would be a very, very bad idea for anyone to hunt or live or otherwise risk discovery. Vampires stay out of huge, beloved, public spaces for the same reason hookers stay off of Main Street. I sighed and shook my head to myself, fluttering my eyes open again. He had to be a kid, I figured. He probably had no idea what he was doing.

At least a couple of major campus thoroughfares curve around the outer edges of the Duke Gardens and I walked down the side of one until the scent took a sharp right onto a dirt and gravel path over a wooden bridge and into the darkness. I followed the faint, old trail of predator's scent and... yes, definitely blood, sometime relatively recently, maybe yesterday or the day before; anyway, I followed it over that bridge, past a storybook babbling brook and around the side of an oddly-shaped little stone building that, according to its sign, was a snack bar during daylight hours. Then the path arced again and we – the aroma of the past and I – plodded through the Gardens while moving slowly and keeping my ears and eyes open for anything that might start or jump or otherwise take off running. It turned out to be just me and the squirrels, though, and whatever other tiny things ran around the Gardens at night. I didn't see or hear or smell any sign of any life form higher than a rabbit. I was a little surprised that there weren't some drunken teenagers out in the bushes at this hour, but I was sticking to the main paths – as my quarry had done in the past – and so maybe there were countless couples coupled in the underbrush outside the range of my senses. Eventually I was led up a path that turned out to be tiered into rough, long, semi-natural steps, then some tree roots, and then I climbed a half a

dozen small gray pavers to find myself standing on another street. Across from me were the business ends of a couple of random campus buildings: classes or maybe offices of some sort. There was an ambulance outside one of the buildings, parked between a loading dock and the largest stand-alone air conditioning unit I had ever seen, and I figured that to be the infirmary or whatever colleges call such things these days. I crossed the street, weaved between traffic barriers designed to keep the hoi polloi from intruding on the parking spaces of the tenured and up some steps that emptied, much to my ignorant surprise, onto a quad that looked like it could be on any Ivy League campus and date from anytime in the last century: trimmed hedges, stone walkways, mown lawns and the more natural and useful foot paths worn by students on every college campus ever created. Collectively they were bordered by buildings of almost identical and slightly antiquated design: more huge gray and occasionally beige rocks set together with mortar, windows tall and narrow and shielded from the elements by being set far back into the stone facades. I couldn't imagine it was ever very bright in there during the day, but of course I wasn't in any hurry to find out. Some were clearly more modern than others – the stone was lighter in color, from fewer decades of accumulated pollution no amount of pressure washing could ever really remove – and over the huge banks of double doors on the largest building of all, the one to the right, the one out beside of which there was an ambulance parked, a sign read DUKE HOSPITAL – SOUTH ENTRANCE.

“Good God,” I muttered. They had an entrance to the hospital – half or more of the reason for that whole “City of Medicine” title – right there on one of the main quads of the campus. The trail of scent went directly inside and I chuckled a little. The intruder, whoever he was, had pulled a standard leach trick: he'd gone to where there are plenty of bloodbags and made off with a few. Maybe he was smarter than I'd thought. Maybe we wouldn't have any trouble after all.

I let out a long breath, relaxed a little and then had another look around. I'd lived in Raleigh for years but I'd never come to Duke to just walk around. It wasn't something I did much. I tended to stay around home or go downtown in Raleigh itself, like most of us do. Durham has always been kind of devoid of vampires and I've never really known why. Some towns are like that: they just aren't attractive to us. At some point Durham had become that way and we'd stayed mostly out of it ever since.

I decided to walk towards the huge bell tower not too far away, figuring it was probably the “chapel” I'd heard about: a cathedral built by Protestants and called a name that suggests they were a little embarrassed by it or a *lot* putting on airs. There wasn't anyone on the quad except for the occasional distant footfall of someone leaving an office late. I didn't even hear the burble of distant parties in the offing and I figured any Friday night on a college campus would be rocking. A few dozen yards from the hospital, towards the chapel, I was walloped by the

reappearance of the scent of my intruder. He'd come out of the hospital at some point and gone across campus. He had a good head start on em, from the theater, in that he knew where he was going; he'd had to kill some time in the hospital, though, getting blood bags or whatever he'd been doing, and that meant I'd done some catching up. I took off on the trail and marveled at how beautiful and dark and still the campus seemed to be; here there was peace and quiet and it deepened the closer I got to the chapel. A structure like that imposes its own order on a place, its own set of rules, and people follow them without even realizing they're there. As I passed by a building that had a sign out front reading Perkins Library, though, I couldn't help but notice something unusual: a door propped open with a rock, and the scent of my prey hanging around the place in some indefinite manner, like maybe he'd gone in but maybe he was just nearby but maybe... it was hard to tell. He might have had some ability to disguise or throw off or turn off his scent, I thought; we all get some unique ability, long story, and that would be a pretty good one. So, I knew he'd been near here, at least, and I had an open door and, in my second shallow (or perhaps not-so) similarity to the Bull's Eye, a propped door was nothing if not an invitation to investigate.

I noticed that the sign on the door said that the library was open 24 hours but then, taped to its inside glass pane, a second sign printed on a laser printer read FALL BREAK HOURS and showed that, actually, there *weren't* any; the library was closed from Thursday afternoon through Sunday morning on the assumption that everyone would be out of town. That only made me even more curious as to why the front door would be so haphazardly open, so I shook out a coat sleeve and used it to cover my palm and fingers while I pulled the door open very quietly and then brought it back to rest against its makeshift doorstop behind me without a sound. Inside, I could hear something interesting: a dull thud, with a light echo, repeating very slowly.

THUD.

THUD.

THUD.

Then I heard the voice of a young man say, "Damn it! Why won't you break! Damn it, damn it, damn it! Fucking coated glass!" I arced both eyebrows towards the sky, rolled onto my toes and started creeping very slowly and very quietly towards the middle of the main floor.

From around the side of a reference desk I could see the back of a twenty-something guy wearing the standard college apparel: blue jeans, black tennis shoes, a t-shirt in the dark blue that is Duke's main school color. He had tawny, close-cropped hair that had been trimmed with clippers into that close, shapeless non-shape a lot of the kids these days were wearing. I couldn't see his face, but I could hear in his voice that he was just desperate to get into the huge glass display case in front of him, like something you'd see protecting a delicate sculpture in a museum.

I couldn't see what was in it, though, just that whatever it was it was lighted from below. I mentally clucked my tongue; a thief stealing from a University library is either really dumb or really smart. On the one hand, there's plenty of security around; on the other, the authority of the campus cops usually ends at the edge of the school's property and if the relationship between the school and the town aren't so hot at one time or another then the townie cops might be in a huge hurry to help out their on-campus "colleagues."

The kid then turned around so that I could see him in profile for a moment – good looks, strong jaw, but a meanness in his expression that spoke of something really terrible having happened to him or something really, really good never having occurred in the first place. It was the look of someone who's pissed off, not someone who's just desperate or greedy. It also gave me a chance to see what was in the display case and it was a little surprising: a blue and silver devil costume made of something that looked, improbably, like satin. The Duke mascot is the Blue Devil, a devil in a blue and white outfit, but the mascot is a guy in one of those big, foam bodysuits with the oversized head so no one thinks he's actually Satan or a pirate or whatever your local school mascot might be. The outfit in question had an informational marker on the outside of the case and the kid picked up a chair and hefted it sideways, lining up for a swing, with surprising ease. "I wish I could wait," he said to... well, to the Blue Devil suit, apparently. "I wish I could do this with my own hands, but it hasn't been long enough. No matter. I'll use the tools at hand." Then he swung the chair and the glass splintered inside its thin protective anti-shatter sheath – bulletproof glass, I realized, and this kid had just managed to spiderweb it with the leg of a chair that split apart from the force of the impact.

Whoah. This kid was *strong*.

He then reared back and punched the splintered glass in the very center of the web of fractures, unshielded, and a hole opened up like a mouth ringed in jagged teeth. The kid then started tearing at the edges of that hole with his bare hands, expanding it and knocking out other sections and finally he was standing in front of the suit with nothing between him and it. I could hear the smile in his voice when he spoke to it again. "I cannot wait to show this school its new Blue Devil."

Then he paused, seemed to be thinking about something and added, "Maybe... I am the Blue Devil and I welcome you to blue hell?" He said it again a couple of times, with minor variations: "Welcome to Blue Purgatory? No. No. Stick with the brand they know: Get a load of the Blue Devil now!" He laughed at that, then paused and clucked his tongue. "No... just, 'I am... the Blue Devil!' Yeah. That works," and then he reached forward and lifted the mannequin wearing the uniform – suit, whatever you call it – from the case, set it aside, and started to take off his own clothes.

Never a dull night, I guess.

That's when the smell of his blood hit me.

He'd sliced open one of his knuckles – only one, though, which was itself shocking – when he punched out the glass and the smell of it was like... I'm not sure how to describe it to you. Take all your favorite smells: baking bread, pumpkin spice, the cologne of your best friend, autumn leaves, spring flowers, jasmine, mint, curing tobacco, a charcoal grill, a fresh orange, rain, pine sap; roll them all up, not into one smell but into one *sensation* of smell, one emotional response. I'm a vampire, I love the smell of blood, yes, but this blood was something else. This blood was *special*. I smelled this blond-ginger, athletic, whiny, under-dressed for the weather kid's blood and I smelled life and youth and vigor and agency and desire and anger. What I didn't smell, much to my surprise, was fear. Vampires are good at smelling *that*, too, and I didn't detect a bit of it. Well, maybe a little, just around the edges, just where the part of him that as a small child was told we do not steal, no matter what, was hiding from the rest of him. The rest of him was just power and a want to *exercise* that power and I wanted something, too: I wanted that blood and I wasn't even hungry that night.

I realized with a small amount of surprise that my fangs had dropped and I was salivating. Normally we try so hard to be more, you know... discreet.

The kid had stripped down by this point and realized his hand was bleeding. Licking the blood off – oh, Jesus Hambone Christ in the merry month of May, did he *have* to do that? - he walked off to the side in exactly as casual a fashion as one might expect of a beautiful young person who thinks they are alone. I was trying to fight my fangs back into my face and thinking about baseball wasn't helping any. I saw my chance to look at the plaque on the display case while the kid was gone, though, so I sprang up from behind the reference desk and shot across the room. The small rectangle of brown plastic read, in white beveled letters:

DUKE BLUE DEVIL UNIFORM C.1952
MACHINE-SEWN SATIN AND COTTON
GIFT OF THE DUKE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION



The suit itself was a kind of foppish dark blue top – shiny, and I wasn't entirely sure that I bought that it was real satin, maybe sateen instead, I don't know – with a silver-white oxford collar and puffy sleeves that came to tight cuffs of white. The pants were the reverse, mostly white but with these frankly beautiful blue flames running up the legs, like the mascot's calves were being consumed by fire. There were no shoes but there was a matching dark blue cowl with eye holes and a slightly beaked nose and big, plush devil horns on the sides. It was, I had to say, a damned good-looking suit and it probably looked great on a guy with the right physique. This kid? He fit the bill. It looked like it had been made for him.

I heard the bathroom door open in the distance and I shot back around to behind the reference desk and then under it. Sock feet padded back up to the display case and I peeked over in time to see the kid slide the top off the mannequin with a reverence that bordered on the religious. He wasn't just stealing a uniform here, or a historical object of interest to a certain limited set of aged alumni; he was literally donning a new persona. It was... well, it was a lot like watching someone be turned. Standing there watching it in secret, spying on him like this, felt dirty and voyeuristic and I couldn't even have begun to look away. Also, it didn't hurt that he still smelled like a million bucks.

He slipped the shirt over his head and onto his chest and then very, very gently tested the fit of the pants, just on one leg, to make sure he wasn't doing anything bad to the fabric. I was surprised it had held up this well, but someone had probably been tending to it in a private collection somewhere and then a bunch of grad students had spent a semester preserving it once it got here and maybe there was some modern stitch work under there, where no one would notice, to keep the thing together, you know? The pants seemed to withstand his initial probing so he very, very tentatively slid the other into it and then pulled the elastic waistband up around his midsection. Christ, it *did* look like it was made for him. It fit him almost perfectly. I could tell it had been tailored for someone else, but the fact that it had been *tailored* and yet it fit him this well was noteworthy. That was neither here nor there, though, because he had lifted the cowl and was looking at it, eye to eye, and his breathing was very shallow.

I thought he might have something to say, a slogan to try on for size, something, but he surprised me: he slipped the cowl on without a word and almost hurriedly, like he knew that doing that – putting on the actual mask – was a line he knew he wouldn't be able to *uncross* once he'd crossed it and he was afraid he'd lose his nerve. The cowl went on, he adjusted the way it sat on his head for a moment, tied the chin straps under his jaw and wobbled his head around to make sure it would stay put. It did, and he let out a breath I don't think he realized he'd been holding.

Now, it's worth noting that I don't love a thief but neither do I hate one. Glass houses and all that; I've certainly broken and entered more times than I could possibly begin to count. I

hadn't smelled the intruder in here at all, the whole time, but that didn't mean he wasn't around somewhere, taking into account the way climate control can mess with scent tracking and the possibility he had some weird scent-dispersal power, that kind of thing, and this kid smelled like sleeping late on a Monday morning which is what *everybody* wants. So, I decided that fair was fair, and maybe I was going beyond what I would normally do because the kid smelled so good, or something, but I stood up and made sure my fangs before I drew a breath and cleared my throat.

The kid in the Blue Devil uniform was tying a pair of black leather jump boots, squatting, back to me, and when he heard me he stood and turned to face me in one long, graceful movement that was... not what I expected. It was almost Olympian in its elegance, and the suit... I have to admit, the suit looked fucking great on him.

"Listen, I don't know what all you're trying to be about with this, but you're in real danger." I let a hand sweep take in him and the busted display case and the opposite thumb jutted towards the propped open front door. "There are some electronics that just came on a few seconds ago and I would guess those are a silent alarm, from the door being propped, that's pretty common with physical security systems. More importantly, though, there's this..." I struggled to find a way to phrase it emphatically but discreetly. "There's this really bad dude who's around... somewhere? I'm not sure where. Anyway, he's probably really, really interested in you, and -"

The kid's weird smile, breaking out on the part of his face exposed under the cowl, made me slow down and then he interrupted outright. "The Bull's Eye? I know. A bad dude, indeed." He gave this snorting little laugh, or maybe a chuckling snort; it was a kind of a strangled guffaw. I think he hoped it would be menacing or maybe indicate that the topic was but a trifle to him, I don't know, but he pointed at me with that finger-like-a-gun thing and said, "But do you know who's a much, *much* badder dude?" He grinned now. "Me. In fact, I'm the worst of them all. I'm... the *Blue Devil*, and I am going to *destroy* this school and *destroy* the Bull's Eye with it if she gets in my way!" Then he actually, for real, lifted his chin and gave me an honest to the gods villain laugh, like something out of a Hanna-Barbera cartoon, before growing abruptly serious. "But who are you? A campus cop?" His face got a lot less friendly. "One of the Duke pigs come to shut me down? Some dressed down security guard?" He was snarling the words, now, and his face had grown grim and his hands were kind of flexing a little.

"Now, listen kid, I ain't nobody's cop so just take it easy." There are a lot of little tricks of body language one can use to calm someone else down and they mostly involve reflecting a calmness on one's own part. People don't chill out when someone yells at them to chill out; they relax when they see others relaxing. I stuck my left hand into my pocket and I gestured with my hand out, flat, palm down: a pose of ease, a gesture that is neither commanding nor supplicating. Trust me, I've had decades to practice this shit, and I know what works.

"I said... *I. AM. THE. BLUE DEVIL.*" Then he went from standing still to sprinting much

faster than most of the humans in the world and maybe some of the newer, weaker vampires, shot past me, and he was out the door.

My mouth was still open. OK, so the body language *usually works*. Maybe not always.

Deal With The Devil – Chapter Three

I swaggered over there / Saw a house and a funny-looking man.

--The Attack, "Strange House"

The Bull's Eye was on patrol again a few nights later when she found The House. She had taken to thinking of herself by that identity, because it sounded good and she needed something other than her life as a janitor at Durham Technical Community College, something more like the blank slate that a new identity provided her when she chose to pick it up and put it on. She'd gone out every night since catching the burglar and busted up a couple of other smallish crimes: she chased off a car thief, then left a piece of paper under the windshield wiper with three concentric circles drawn in red marker to make sure she got the credit, for instance. In that case she absolutely did get the credit, and she later learned that the guy whose car it had been had offered the card for sale to the *Herald-Sun* as though they would pay for something on which she'd simply scrawled a name they themselves had helped to create for her.

She had spent a little money – she had enough, not too much and not too terribly little, but just enough to get by on one salary now, and an early pension from the army – and bought herself some new clothes for patrol: black cargo pants, a black cap, a black head wrap to hide her shoulder-length hair and black fleece tops that were reversible so that she could turn them inside out and they would be various extravagant colors, easy to see and hard to square with a description given by a witness. She could, in seconds, go from a panther stalking the night to a lady out for a walk, if needed, and that was exactly what she wanted.

The House was just a normal, two-story house in the mill town style: wider than it was deep, white clapboard siding, a metal roof, satellite dish bolted to the railing on the front porch and pointed at an unlikely angle. There were a few hundred just like it scattered around Durham's oldest neighborhoods, the places where they hadn't been razed by highway projects or "renewal." They were historical artifacts now, but many of them were also still someone's home. The street in question was an otherwise anonymous street of houses built in varying eras and with varying degrees of optimism by and in their eventual residents, but this house wasn't alone in being of its style or time. There was nothing special about it to most people but The Bull's Eye saw things of interest: broken down cardboard moving boxes sitting by the recycling bin, windows with thick curtains that were drawn shut and four prominent NO TRESPASSING signs posted at the edges of the front yard. Whoever had moved in was new and scared of the people around them. She wondered if they were a new frontier in the ongoing gentrification of downtown or if they were simply new to being upper lower class. Those signs were the last refuge of the person who had been shocked by something and retreated into their living room – well-appointed

or poorly so, white or black, invested in fantasy or indulging in it – in hopes the world outside would change to their liking without their being involved. She slowed down as she walked past it, then stopped, watching it casually, just giving it the once over.

One of the curtains inside twitched aside for about half a blink of an eye, then closed again. If she hadn't been watching, she would have missed it.

She stood stock still for a few seconds – she had slowed between two trees, on a block where there was no working street light, and she was clad in the Roses discount store equivalent of a catsuit. She should be effectively invisible to anyone inside the home – they had lights on, glass windows and no light on *her* – but someone inside had looked right at her and then hidden again.

The word stuck in her mind: *hidden*.

The only question that occurred to her was whether it would be okay for a superhero to break into someone's home on suspicion that they were *odd*. Wanting their privacy wasn't a crime. Looking out their own window wasn't a crime. Still, something about it bothered her. Something she couldn't quite name was needling the back of her neck. She knew from her training and her years of service that one should listen to the spidey senses when they go off; the gut is almost always right. She just didn't have an excuse to *act* on what her gut was telling her: that something on the house was wrong and she needed to find out *what*.

Well, they had just moved. She weighed the possible outcomes – angry, shotgun-toting neighbor answers vs. no one answers, to describe the ends of the spectrum of options – and decided it was worth the risk of ringing the doorbell. She stepped out from between the aging oaks – beautiful, but so old they were on the verge of dying of old age and the city hadn't yet decided when or if to replace them – and strode confidently onto the front walk, up the two wooden steps to the whitewashed front porch and pressed the small, glowing, orange button. Inside a harmless and generic chime sounded, two thirds of a major chord, and then she heard the doorknob move and was only a little surprised she hadn't also heard footsteps. Whoever was answering had been standing there.

On the other side of the screen was a tall and very thin boy – probably a young man, more accurately. He was white, dark brown hair, thick black eyebrows, clad in worn out blue jeans and a light gray sweater. He had so many bags under his eyes he needed help getting the groceries to the car and he was gaunt and almost gray in the dim light of a TV inside, a street light in the next block and The Bull's Eye's utterly human night vision. “We don't want any. We're on the Do Not Call list, doesn't that cover this stuff, too?”

Ann blinked and said, “I'm not... Wait, I'm not selling anything.” She hesitated; she hadn't actually thought this through, which was careless and ignorant of anyone with her training. It shook her a little. “I'm... the welcome wagon.” She cleared her throat. “Neighborhood watch.

You know. Just coming by to say hello, see if I could help with anything.”

The guy had only opened the door about the width of his own nose and he stood there, doors locked, grating through a metal mesh, then said, “OK. We're fine.” Then he closed the door and Ann heard it lock again. Ann stared at it, then shrugged: gentrification. She didn't have anything else to say about them. Something still struck her as off but it could easily enough be written off as paranoia after the other night, too. She had spent two days “sick” from work, waiting for the cops to show up and arrest her. She had watched every newscast, in rotation, for anything other than what appeared to be a positive buzz from every stations' usual motley crew of people on the street. Nobody quite knew what to think about her but nobody liked burglars, either. She was certainly the lesser of two evils at the moment, which is better than she had thought it would be.

She was halfway down the front steps when the door unlocked and the guy called out to her, only he was in different clothes: khakis and a Duke University t-shirt and some of those ridiculous rubber shoes everyone was wearing at the time. She turned and then did a double-take. “Please don't go,” the boy said. “My brother's just having one of those days.”

“Twins.” She didn't realize she had said it outloud until she heard it and the The Bull's Eye got her hand halfway to her mouth to cover it before deciding it wasn't worth the effort. “Sorry. I... I didn't expect that. I was explaining to your brother that I'm from the neighborhood watch. I just wanted to say hi, check in, see if you needed anything.”

“No,” he said, and though he didn't look as bad as his brother he also seemed to be running on something less than a full tank. “No, I think we're fine. Thanks for stopping by.” Without any preamble at all, face as blank as a new sheet of typing paper, he locked the door behind him and turned off the light in the front hall. She could hear him pad away in his stupid shoes and no conversation or commentary from inside. They simply settled back into whatever they were doing here in their quiet little exile amongst the downtrodden.

The Bull's Eye couldn't believe she'd just been cold-shouldered by weird twin brothers who were, themselves, utterly out of place in a neighborhood she would patrol. She could find out more about them, though. It would just require finding the right people to ask, and for that she'd have to come back tomorrow.

The next day was one of those bright October days when the temperature is just fine but the light is all too sharp, like glass that's cracked and going to shatter the next time it gets hit. I don't see those days anymore myself but I remember them from many years ago and for those of us who don't, well, high definition television does a lot to refresh the memory. The Bull's Eye was off from her job on Saturdays, so she got up early and walked her usual route, dressed this time in one of the reversed fleeces so that she looked more “normal” in her own mind: blue jeans,

bright pink fleece, white tennis shoes. She wore the ballcap because, honestly, she couldn't imagine going on patrol without it but this time she wore a blue and white and orange Durham Bulls cap instead of the black one she reserved as part of what she considered her uniform. As an aside, why is it so damned hard to find anything without a logo on it these days? Your generations have no idea what power you've given up by abandoning anonymity, but that's neither here nor there; I'm supposed to be talking about the Bull's Eye, not modern society's lousy job of slapping some new paint on consumerism and calling it individuality.

What the Bull's Eye knew was that everywhere you go – whether it's a street in Durham, North Carolina or a village halfway up some gods-forsaken mountain in Afghanistan – the kids are the ones who know what's really happening. They always know the most but when someone is an outsider they always want to talk the least. That had made her job hard sometimes in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in other places she'd sworn never to name, but here she hoped the reverse would be true; she was an African-American woman who could look like anyone else on the street and the guys about whom she wanted to know more were the ones who didn't look or talk or act the way those kids had grown up to expect of their neighbors.

Even though she might look like them and the other people they knew, though, they didn't know her in specific and these were kids who had been raised in the simmering cultural war zone of a neighborhood continually on the edge, unsure whether it's going to climb back out of the economic trenches or tumble over into being an explicitly “bad” block on the grid of crime reports and newspaper notice. That meant becoming someone they knew without associating her with nosy questions first. She took a book and sat in the small park that took up a couple of cleared lots a block away, reading for a couple of hours. A few kids were there pretty much continuously, but plenty came through for a few minutes at a time. She didn't bother to approach any of them; she was just making sure they had seen her before, for when she did decide to ask.

The next day she did the same thing, and by the two hour mark she figured she had established herself as enough of a presence – kids adapt quickly – that she could approach one. He wasn't having any of it, though, and took off as soon as she approached and opened her mouth. She blinked, and stared after him. She'd gotten that reaction before, sure, but in places where no one spoke anything other than Pashtun. She wasn't sure what to do at that point – having a kid run off when she approached, that was a confidence shaker. Her next two attempts were more hesitant and that didn't help any – she got the same results, either kids who took off or kids who just pretended she wasn't there. Finally she noticed a kid of maybe 13 or 14, just old enough to be trying to look bored at the park, and she walked up to him.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” he replied.

“I need some information.”

The kid was dressed in a generic black hoodie with an indecipherable pattern of swirling and swooping art, everyday objects with thick contrails all looping around one another across the chest. It probably had a lot of significance in some fashion, but it was all just shapes to her. He was wearing black sweatpants and near-featureless black shoes from a discount chain that failed in their attempts to masquerade as a more stylish brand he squinted up at her in that sharp autumn sunlight. "You a cop?"

"Farthest thing from it," she said. She folded her arms over her chest and struck her battle-ready-soldier pose: feet apart, shoulders squared, not backing down, not taking no for an answer. Thugs in the biker bars found in movies and storybooks try to intimidate their prey by leaning in close and invading personal space; good guys intimidate their prey by becoming a wall that can't be climbed or tunneled through. Goons promise a fight; white hats let their opponents fill in the blank where a threat might have been. "I just need a little info, that's all."

The kid looked her up and down – she had half a foot on him, and she meant business, and she wasn't a cop, and maybe he figured why the hell not do something today that he didn't do yesterday. "What's in it for me?"

The Bull's Eye considered this for a moment. She honestly hadn't thought that he might ask that, or that anyone ever would. *What's in this is getting to walk home with your head held high*, she thought to herself, but she knew that didn't convert well on the local exchange. "Five bucks," she said. The kid snorted. "Ten."

He thought about it for a second and then said, "Let me hear your question. That way I'll know what the answer's worth."

The Bull's Eye shifted her weight and started to slip into her reflexive response – suggesting that there is no room for negotiation – but she stopped herself before she opened her mouth. She was trained to deal with hostile populations and this population didn't *have* to be hostile. She eyed him up and down one more time and said, "It's that house." She was betting she wouldn't even need to say which one specifically. She was right.

"The new guys." The kid didn't ask it, he said it. "Twenty bucks."

"Ten or nothing." She knew how this part worked. She pulled out her wallet and took ten dollars out, so he could see the money he was turning down. "Not a lot of time to decide. Plenty of other kids in the neighborhood."

He watched her hand, and then she sighed and started to put it away. "Okay," he said. "Ten."

She smiled. No reason not to be nice about it. "Deal." He held out his hand but she shook her head. "When you're all talked out."

He shrugged. He thought she was being paranoid, and she was, and she knew he would very likely never understand how someone who'd fought wars that never had names because they

never officially existed would look at the world around her. "They're new. Moved in a couple months ago. Nobody ever stays very long in that house, but they've stayed the longest of anybody. Two white dudes, and we don't get a lot of that. Weird, too. They're twins. Nobody wants to talk to them and they don't want to talk to anybody, either." He shrugged again. It was the resting state of the teen male.

"Why doesn't anybody want to talk to them?"

"They're weird, I said."

"What's weird about them?"

The kid was uncomfortable, didn't want to say, so she folded the bill. "Sounds like you're a long way from talked out."

He opened his mouth again and looked away for a second, then back. "They're all... they're like cigarette ash. They look gray in their skin. They look like something's eaten at them, all the time. Every family that moves in there looks that way, one by one, and then they go away again, but these guys got that way and then just stayed sick. My mom says there's radon in the house, that there's radiation in the basement making them sick, but my grandma says the place is cursed *and* has radon in it. All the kids know that those guys aren't alright, and nobody wants to catch what they got. There's a sickness to them, and they don't seem to know or care, and we just leave 'em alone and they do the same."

The Bull's Eye knew the sound of a meth house when she heard it. "Do they ever have company? Maybe a lot of people coming by at night for just a few minutes?"

"Hell no," the kid said. "They aren't some crack house. Nobody ever comes and nobody ever leaves and they just sit in there in the dark. Sometimes they watch TV, most times they don't. No friends, no visitors, no parties, no nothing."

"They sound like pretty ideal neighbors." She smirked a little, but deep down she knew she was feeling something that jibed with what the kid had said, a wrongness that she felt way down when they had answered that door.

"No way. There's something bad about that place. We don't go there, the little kids don't go there, nobody will go trick or treat there on Halloween, nobody goes there to sell candy bars for school or none of that shit." He shook his head. "There's something wrong with that house and if those guys stick around then there must be something wrong with them, too. It just makes sense. Most of the people who move in there seem nice or whatever, but then they leave again real fast. These guys weren't nice when they got here and they haven't gotten any better since."

"What wasn't nice about them when they got here?" She looked up and the sun was high overhead. She had hours of light left, and she was warm in the light, but she knew the night would come sooner or later and something about that ashen skin and those sunken eyes, in the night, made the back of her brain twitch.

The kid sighed and kicked a rock. "They were... it was like they were hiding in there. We'd see them peek out the curtains sometimes. I mean, we went and looked at the place, you always go look at a place when somebody new moves in, and they would peek outside and they had to see us but they never said hey. They'd just close back up and not look again for a real long time."

"Did they ever go out?"

He paused, then: "Once in a while. Once in a while they go somewhere together and they're gone for a little while – maybe a couple of hours – and then they come back, but that's it. The kids say they're going grocery shopping because they bring back huge bags from the store, like lots of bags, more than two people need."

The Bull's Eye knew how questioning someone worked, so she pushed again a point she'd visited already once before. "And they never have visitors?"

He started to say something else, then stopped himself. "It's... No. No visitors. They're just weird."

"Tell me what you were about to say." She didn't hesitate to press the moment. She held out the money, out of his reach but towards him. "Whatever you're about to say, that's what I am willing to pay to hear. The thing you choose to hide at the last moment is the truth someone will be looking to find. Remember that."

He blinked at her, not getting it, not understanding, but then he said it in a very low voice, like he was worried someone would hear them on an empty street next to an empty park. "Some of the kids say that if they're out late, if they stay up when they shouldn't and they watch out their window or they sneak out the house, that they see a man in an old coat come walking down the middle of the street – not on the sidewalk, just walking out in the street – to that house, and he lets himself in and he's in there for a while then he leaves again. I never saw it, so I can't say, but the kids who claim they've seen him say he's the bogeyman, that he's real bad, and they're real scared when they see him, and that he looks at them when they see him because he knows they're looking even if they're inside, in their room, in the dark." The kid shuddered suddenly, drew a breath and said, "I want my ten bucks."

"You earned it." The Bull's Eye handed it over, turned to leave, then stopped and turned back. "Thanks, kid. What's your name?"

"That costs extra." He paused before saying, "You're the Bull's Eye, ain't you?"

She smirked. "Have a nice afternoon," she said, but she didn't go anywhere. The money had disappeared into his outfit somewhere. He turned around and walked away and around a corner. She smiled to herself: the Bull's Eye had just worked a connection on the street. *Damn*, she thought to herself. *Bad-ass*.

Deal With The Devil – Chapter Four

I like to read a murder mystery / I like to know the killer isn't me.

--Erasure, "Love to Hate You"

I realized almost immediately that the blood I had smelled when I was tracking the intruder – whoever he was, still a mystery I needed to solve – had been the... well, I confess the title had stuck. I had started calling him the Blue Devil. His declaration that he would destroy Duke and destroy the Bull's Eye with them if he had to was not exactly what I had expected. When I saw someone stealing a historical artifact I figured, you know, pirates from the Ebay Islands or something. I hadn't figured on some weird personal vendetta.

I found myself thinking a lot, the next few nights, because I had several problems to confront: there was a new vampire in town who might or might not be up to no good but his unwillingness to seek out other locals and make himself known wasn't a good sign, and his blatant attempt to hide from me only made it worse. That was problem number one.

Problem number two was more difficult to define: the Blue Devil and his absolutely delectable aroma. I know that sounds weird or incomprehensible or, I don't know, a little middle-class-problems, maybe, but it really did bother me and here's why: his blood was like fang Viagra and that was going to cause trouble sooner or later. If he were just some guy who seemed particularly ripe for getting snacked upon, well, whatever, but he also seemed to be stronger and faster than people were supposed to be. If he were some kind of supernatural – a ritualist of some sort, or gods help us a shapeshifter, all of which do exist and about which I know less than next to nothing – then that could create a lot of problems when he finally wound up on the wrong side of the bite from a vampire in my town. Somebody was going to blow their cover out of desperation to get to him or they were going to get to him and he was going to blow them to pieces, or something like that, sooner or later. Neither of these were okay options for me. You don't wind up in charge by doing nothing and you don't stay there by doing nothing. You stay there by solving problems, in part out of the kindness of your own dead heart and in part because when you solve problems you show people what might happen to them if they *became* a problem for you: namely, you'd *solve* them.

Problem was, I didn't have any clues to go on. That's when one landed on my lap almost literally. I'd been sitting in my living room in Raleigh, flipping channels, petting my dog – I have a doberman named Smiles who guards my place during the day and, I guess, technically qualifies as a hell hound since I feed him a little of my blood every now and then to keep him nice and

aggressive – when I flipped to the late news and they were talking about a carjacking in Durham. The talking head reading from the teleprompter had unlikely hair that made him look like he was running for county commissioner in 1987: perfectly sculpted and combed, just the right shade of salt and pepper, framing his face like a NASCAR driver's helmet would do. I turned to that channel in the middle of his report, but what I caught ran like this:

“...at which point the cab driver was able to find a payphone and call police. The Durham and Duke University Police Departments are cooperating in their investigations of the incident, as the taxi cab in question was driven across town on Main Street, onto East Campus and then onto a residential lawn. The carjacker appears at that time to have used it as a battering ram to destroy the historic Stagg Pavilion, also known as the East Campus Gazebo, built in 1902. Upon exiting the vehicle, apparently unharmed, the carjacker was described by witnesses as being dressed in an elaborate costume, possibly the same 1950's mascot uniform stolen from Perkins Library last weekend during Duke University's fall break, and he was screaming that he was the Blue Devil.

“In other news, the Durham vigilante known popularly as The Bull's Eye has been credited with interrupting a gas station robbery on South Alston Avenue in that city. Police say one witness described a black-clad figure who disarmed the robber and knocked him unconscious before fleeing the scene. Durham Police have repeated their invitation to the Bull's Eye to come forward.”

The image cut to a uniform addressing someone slightly off-camera: “We want to repeat that the Bull's Eye is advised to come forward. All of Durham is inspired by her example but she isn't a trained professional and may bring harm on herself or another inadvertently.”

The uniform zoomed out and spun, in the magic of local news video editing technologies, to become a young African-American woman in a suit, addressing the same cameras. “The District Attorney's office may be forced to issue charges against this person for having broken many of the same laws as the persons she's turned over to police in one form or another. Our door is always open, however, to discussion with this person and we want to remind her – or him – that we have the same goals.” A reporter said something muffled by the distance from the microphone and whatever poor assistant DA they'd dragged out in front of the cameras smiled a little. “I can't comment on whether or not we would trade clemency for the Bull's Eye's testimony at some of the trials of the criminals she or he has caught, but as I say, we're always open to conversation.”

The camera cut back to the newsreader. “And now, the weather tomorrow, tonight. Sam?”

I paused the TV – I don't know how people did anything before DVRs – and sighed heavily. It was bad enough that the newspapers were abuzz with Durham having a superhero; now it had a villain, too, and one every vampire in the Triangle would cut off a hand to get to once they they got a whiff of that incredible blood.

My fangs had dropped just *remembering* it.

My problem was, what, exactly, was I supposed to do about the Blue Devil? He wasn't my problem, he just *could become* my problem if some vampire went after him. The responsible thing to do would be to warn everyone off of him; simply put out the word that he was crazy and off-limits. Of course, if I just *said* that, it would be like sticking him up on the Blue Light Special: everyone would want a piece of that and at yesterday's prices. I had to be able to explain why he was bad news but I wasn't totally sure myself. I just knew he was aggressive and possibly strong and definitely fast. If I were to dissuade my constituents from pursuing him like hounds after the hare, I would have to be able to tell them why and it couldn't be some bullshit reason I'd made up. Too many of us can tell when someone is lying or when they aren't sure they're telling the truth. I had to be certain if I was going to convince Old Shoe.

The other thing I didn't like to admit about this, but it was as true as anything else, was that even if everyone totally did what I said and stayed the hell away from this Blue Devil kid... I was probably *still* going to have to do something about him. The fact is, vampires do not last long in circumstances that keep mortals awake and alert and afraid, on the lookout for the odd and unusual. We tend to be an odd and unusual lot and our ability to pass in society is, in most cases, uncertain at best. That's part of why I've never actually met anyone incredibly old: the vast majority of us don't really manage the transition from one era to the next with what you might call *ease*. We wind up anachronisms and the idiosyncrasies of our behaviors give off some subtle weirdness vibe and sooner or later there are mortals with torches and pitchforks and bundles of garlic and holy water. I couldn't have that, and I couldn't have some mortal paragon of athleticism with a bone to pick against Duke or the Bull's Eye or anybody else running around keeping the herd psychologically off-balance. It doesn't take very many carjackings or purses snatched or dead kids in the bathrooms of dance clubs for people to go into panic mode and walk around with the pepper spray in their hand rather than in their bag.

Put simply, what is notably weird is also *dangerous* to our kind and it usually falls to me to stamp out that which is dangerous to us.

I would have to stop the Blue Devil and find out what made him so attractive in case it could happen to someone else, or in case one of us ran into him in a bar and went absolute ape shit to get a taste of that.

What I didn't really want to discuss with myself just yet was that if the Blue Devil qualified as unacceptably weird and noticeable, was the same true of a *hero*? I admired the Bull's Eye's gumption for being willing to do something in her neighborhood, for her people; it was in no small measure because I found myself doing the same for mine sometimes. On the other hand, if carjackings and purse snatchers made people a little too vigilant, I had to wonder to myself if a hero would make them a little too proud. Vampires thrive in a society in which people are just

enough afraid to be downtrodden, and I knew that, and I didn't enjoy acknowledging it but it was something I had to accept if I were honest with myself. We all rely on someone else's unhappiness, somewhere, somehow. For most people it's the two dollar a day anguish and psychic violence of the sweatshop products they scrape to buy down at Walmart; for me and mine it was the cheap, certain fear that there are monsters out there, in the dark, every night, just waiting.

I couldn't solve a damned thing just sitting on my fat ass watching the TV news, though. I packed up a messenger bag with a couple of books and a few tools of the trade: a pack of smokes, a couple of cigarette lighters, a pack of gum, a box of plain white chalk, a box of strike anywhere kitchen matches, two zip ties, two bungee cord ties, a pair of bird-watching binoculars and a roll of duct tape. You just never know what you'll need in the world, but each of those is something I've been glad to have when I really needed them. I'd once had a young vampire in Seattle tell me I packed to go out for the night like a Dungeons & Dragons character and I told him to put a fucking sock in it.

Where I live – well, my main house, what I think of as “home” – is a good forty minutes from the campus of Duke University. Raleigh is only about twenty minutes away but we were in opposite corners of the map from one another and once I was over at Duke there was the whole ridiculous question of where the hell a body could park. Colleges used to have things like visitor lots but these days, overcrowding and in-fill and the way college towns tend to press against the borders of their largest employers like kids at the window of a candy store had made every parking space precious like a gold claim. I drive a beat-up old Firebird from the '70s – for one thing I like it and for another there's a hell of a lot of daytime paperwork involved in buying a newer car – and trying to find a space where I could berth it for a while was proving a challenge. The parking squeeze had shrunk spaces in what lots remained. Tiny little teacup imports were fine but my big brick of American steel looked like the Titanic in comparison.

By the time I had found someplace to park and gotten oriented in terms of where I was on a map of campus, it was nearly one in the morning. Still, a campus is a campus and kids are kids. I could hear people walking, radios, TVs, music, NPR's overnight broadcast of the BBC, other cars, doors opening and closing, cigarette lighters flicking on and off – all the sounds of life on a University campus. I set off walking towards that same “chapel,” its tower lighted like a beacon in the night. I didn't know exactly what I was here to find, but I knew I had to be here to find it. I figured if nothing else I could just walk around and try to catch a whiff of either my intruder or my fucked up supervillain. Either would do nicely. The crisp air of autumn is perfect for hunting – the scents that can compete with prey are fewer and easily distinguishable. Nobody ever mistook blood for decaying leaves or the warmth of life for the cold blade of water crystals somewhere

high on the wind.

I spent probably twenty or thirty minutes just meandering around stone pathways, sidling past kids standing outside in old sweatshirts and jeans trying to smoke cigarettes and text with cold hands at the same time. None of them spoke to me or especially noticed me, even. Kids at that age are tremendously self-absorbed, and to some degree I was relying on that. After enough walking, the places with people in them – the dorms where fraternities had whole floors to themselves and were throwing parties with poorly-concealed kegs locked away in someone's room, the paved courts where a few kids were playing basketball, the thin slices of residential parking perched on pockmarked roads overlooking stretches of carelessly perfect forest – became the exceptions rather than the rule of my experience of campus. I went to college, yes, but it was closer to a century ago than it *wasn't* and those weren't particularly happy times. I didn't like myself and I liked everyone else even less. I had few friends back home and few at school and I threw myself into my study of painting. I developed a little talent, enough that my maker noticed me, and that was that. I graduated and died almost immediately thereafter, and there I was. The life in which I had inhabited a place like this had been jettisoned like a booster rocket: spent, useless, just dead weight trying to hold me back from eternal night. These kids were just like the ones I had known in those days – my last *days*, as such – in that they didn't pay me any mind. I was just another pedestrian they probably couldn't even see in the darkness.

I loved it more than I can possibly tell you.

As I've said, Duke established a huge preserve of forested land, stretched around and through and even a fair distance away from the campus itself. There are seven thousand two hundred acres of forest they've preserved and a shocking amount of it is right there on campus itself. The streets are sufficiently winding to help create an illusion of remoteness, too, so that if you walk long enough you can stay on campus entirely and forget that you're still in a city of a couple hundred thousand people. I would glide silently out of a wooded path, pass through the courtyard of a dorm, cross a street, pad alongside half a dozen spaces into which eight or nine cars had crammed haphazardly – in at least one of which two kids had steamed up the windows in the manner familiar to teens the world over, a find I might have considered irresistible on some other night – and then slip unnoticed back into the yard of some bequeathed home of a professor from the 1940's, turned now into an office of something or another, into the trees behind it, and find a deer path that let me track the edge of campus and observe it without anyone having much of any chance to observe.

Soon enough that led me to the edge of those Duke Gardens again – the ones I had walked through when tracking the scent of the intruder – and in the light of a full moon they were breathtakingly beautiful. There was a large pond and a bunch of graveled paths and trees from all over the world and all of it was just stunning when barely lighted. Everywhere the eye fell, there

was a huge flower that had closed for the night or another that had, in turn, opened. The whole place was lush and even as autumn approached and parts of it shed their leaves and let them fall away, sprinkling the ground like a carpet covered in confetti at the end of a riotous party, the place breathed life. I stopped short at the tree line because it would have felt almost... I don't know, I hate to say sacrilegious but that's the word that comes to mind, so I'll just say *wrong*; it would have felt *wrong* to go stomping out into the middle of it with my big black boots leaving prints all over everything.

I had a meditative few moments there, watching the gardens open up under the night sky, when I saw him: the Blue Devil was here, too, standing on a bright red Japanese-style arched bridge that spanned the pond in a back corner. From here I could tell it was a shielded little spot, quiet, perfect for a reflection and shielded from being seen by cars passing on the streets that bordered the nearest corners of the gardens. I was probably two hundred yards away but I was sure it was him. I very slowly removed the binoculars from my bag and verified it: he was sitting what we used to call "Indian style": legs crossed in front of him, ankles tucked under, elbows resting on the blue sateen flames that climbed his legs. He was in the full uniform, just sitting there, looking at himself in the surface of the pond.

It occurred to me that there was no way he could see himself in the pond – his reflection, I mean – but it was a full moon and there weren't a lot of other lights to create a high-contrast environment to screw with mortal eyes, so maybe I was wrong. Still, better safe than sorry, so I slipped around the edge of the tree line, up onto a dark street, around a curve and back into the trees. Ten minutes of slow, purposeful walking later I was back in the trees of the gardens but I was behind him and maybe twenty yards away. I moved down, balanced preternaturally on some small, smooth stones and tiptoed up to the end of the bridge. Then I stepped onto end of it – he was halfway down it, just as close to the end I wasn't blocking as the end I was – and waited to see if he would notice me.

"I love this place," he said. His voice was low and a little slurred, weirdly, like he'd just awakened from a deep sleep. "Loved, I guess I should say."

So. His hearing or his vision or both were way ahead of the average human being. Not good, but in some ways it made things easier. Sometimes we think of humans as just another kind of cattle, yes, but sometimes we remember the humans we used to be and we feel something like guilt. When we're dealing with something else in the world that qualifies as "weird," the moral and ethical playing field is a lot more level. "It's a beautiful garden," I said. Our voice were very quiet – an unlikely pedestrian on one of the streets nearby would never have heard us. "I'd never been here until the other night but I think I'll be back. It's a really special place."

He was still staring at himself – cowl and all – in the lake surface. "I don't mean the

garden," he said. "I mean the school."

"You phrased it in the past tense," I said. I took one step onto the bridge, just easing up and then leaning my weight against the railing. "But here you are."

I'm only here in the immediate, physical sense. I'm just here to finish something. I used to be here..." He paused, and lifted his head to stare at the stars instead. "I used to come here to make things."

"And now you come here to do what?" Another step. I wanted to get closer. I wanted to get close enough to close the gap between us before he could cry out. "Destroy things?"

He smiled, sort of. The corners of his mouth jumped around for a second before he grew serious again. He started to turn his head towards me but then stopped for some reason. "Not things; people. Buildings. The school itself. You have no idea how I loved this place, and to think they did this to me?" His voice dropped. In a vampire that statement would have turned into a snarl. The beast is never very far away for us and something about him, about the way his social skills skittered and shuffled atop his interactions like a loose piece of paper with a roach underneath, told me that he was surprisingly similar for a human being.

"What did they do?" I took another step, then another, using the syllables of what I said to train his mind away from noticing by giving him a different pattern to focus on and identify. I still remember the time my maker said to me, when teaching me to hunt, that the tongue is also mightier than the sword, in that a well-said word with the former can hide the latter's unsheathing. "Did they hurt you? Did they do something to make you mad?"

"No, they said I was mad already." He smiled again. I took one more very casual step. I was fifteen feet away and I knew that with another two steps I could be on him so fast he wouldn't realize it himself before my teeth were in. If I had to get rid of him for being too delicious, well, I might as well enjoy the task. It seemed a shame to let him go to waste. "They took everything away from me after that. So I'm going to take away everything of *theirs*. But do you know how hard that is?" He all of a sudden had the aspect of a guy talking to just another guy, griping over a beer about the boss and his girlfriend and the cat lady downstairs. "I try and try to think of something really bad I can do to them and that's not that hard but all those things, they make *them* into the *victim* and I can't have that. I'm just letting them win, then. No, I need to do something that will really tarnish them, something that will associate their icon with some great tragedy. I need to make people feel... *uncomfortable* when they think of this place. That would be... that would be nice." He smiled again.

"You do realize that, you know, people *know* you stole that outfit, right? I mean, nobody is going to see you do something terrible and think, 'Oh, sure, Duke did that.'"

He looked at me like I was the biggest idiot in town, like he couldn't believe he had been reduced to having to explain this to me. "There are highly complicated causal relationships that

happen at a quantum level. It would be impossible to explain it to you in a simple conversation but suffice to say, there's more to the idea of sympathetic relationships than you could possibly comprehend. Like may in fact affect like after all." I had taken one step while he spoke, and I decided when our eyes met – when I realized that he also realized what I was doing – that I didn't have time for the last one. There were a few milliseconds in there in which both our eyes narrowed, then I moved on him.

My teeth came out and I leapt forward with all my weight behind me, hands out, ready to clap one palm over his mouth and plant the other in the middle of his chest to knock him back, neck exposed, and as time slowed down for the attack I noticed with tremendous surprise, bordering on shock, that he was bringing up his right fist. He caught me square in the jaw and rolled as I spun into a heap in the spot where he had been. The Blue Devil was up in a flash and on his feet even as I was just starting to spring back up to mine. He was grinning, now, eyes little slits behind the cowl, perfectly normal human teeth bared just a bit.

"Sometimes, when I come here, I think maybe I should just give it all up," he said to me before throwing a punch I easily dodged, answered with my own, which caught him but he still managed to roll with it enough to tumble onto his side and then back up with a swiftness and grace no human being could possess. "Then I run into someone who reminds me what this place is like. Nice fangs! Are you a vampire? I wouldn't have guessed the Bull's Eye to be a *vampire!*" Then he took off running, for the other side of the bridge, and despite having the reaction times of a type of immortal hunter, he was just ahead of me the whole way.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I am pleased to report that really was my first reaction: acting to preserve discretion in the name of self-interest rather than trying to just cold kill the guy.

He didn't look back, but I could hear him: "I'd love to stay and chat, but I've got some calls to make." He held up a cell phone, mashed a couple of buttons as he ran – we burst through the trees, onto a street, a car swerving with screeching tires and I just couldn't wait to hear this "witness report" on the news tomorrow night – and as the screen lit up green, phone dialing, he tossed the phone up into the air in a perfect arc such that it came back down just as I ran under it, palming it and dropping it into a pocket. "Maybe you should call the police," he cried out, his voice full and, I remember thinking, full of nothing short of glee. "I hear they'd love to talk to you!" The phone's light went off in my pocket, the call completed, and I heard a massive explosion in the distance, then another, then a third. I stopped short at the sight of that lighted chapel tower, from the cathedral on campus, as a huge stained glass window in its steeple – one of those rose windows, you know – erupted outwards as though it had been punched out by a giant fist of flashes and smoke and fire.

That second of me slowing down was all he needed. I stared at the place where the tower

had been for just a moment or two, and when I looked around he was gone. I could hear footfalls pounding away but they echoed off the trees and the buildings and car alarms were going off from the explosions and I could hear people screaming and I couldn't have chased that kid if I'd had two hearing aids and a head start.

Now what in the hell had he meant by vampires' existence explaining a lot?

Cops and fire trucks were headed for the sites of the explosions as fast as you could say nine one one, so I took off at a run. Mostly people were running towards the explosions, which was roughly in the same direction as my car, and that was good: bombers are usually identified by witnesses as the one person running *away* from the explosions they set off and I had no desire to stick in anyone's mind in the same fashion. I ran alongside a few people from the back of the hospital – that entrance onto the quad, remember – and some scared kids who wanted to see what had happened and a guy who was wearing boxer shorts, flip-flops, no shirt and an oversized camera of some sort on a strap around his neck. He started taking pictures as soon as we rounded the corner of Perkins Library, running across a paved driveway towards a small pick-up and drop-off lane about fifty yards from the front of the chapel. The rose window was a heap of rubble and sabre-sized shards of glass on the lawn in front of the huge wooden doors of the entrance, with something like smoke wafting off of it but I could see the grit and knew it was pulverized mortar. The explosives up there had been no joke; they had blown the top of the tower off so hard the shockwave had turned to powder some portion of the century-old mortar holding the window in place. There was a column of smoke coming out of the gaping wound in the front of the tower where the window had once been and a few stones and gargoyles teetered dangerously. We all skidded to a stop and the kid brought his camera up.

"I'm with the *Chronicle*," he panted as he started grabbing photos. I had no desire to wind up in the student newspaper, no damned way, so I said something about going to find a payphone to call 911 – sometimes I forget we're in the age of the cellphone and half these kids wouldn't know what a payphone was except as a dim memory from their childhood and maybe something they saw in old movies on TV – and kept running before he could get me in a shot.

I drove off of campus and into downtown Durham, parking on the street in downtown and stepping into a bar that should only have been open another hour but had a bunch of television sets tuned to soccer games in the UK. There were a few guys sitting around watching the matches, wearing actual English soccer jerseys, but not a one of them was from Great Britain and I kind of loathed them on sight.

"Mind turning on the news?" I was addressing the bartender, who was watching himself polish a glass instead of one of the games. "Something just happened over at the school."

He nodded towards a back room. "There's a TV in there. Go for it." It was a little room with some tables crammed into it, no one at any of them. I could smell, from the difference when I walked in there, that once upon a time the outer room had been for smoking and this had been for *non*. There was a little standard definition TV mounted in a corner, tuned to some classic sports channel that was showing a bowling tournament from the 1970's. I reached up and mashed the buttons on the front until I got it over to a real channel, one of the local ones, that had gone to interrupt the late night talk shows with a breaking news alert. Two bombs had gone off in the tower of the chapel but a third had also been set in the basement of the Divinity School – a classroom building next door, set into the same hill as where the chapel sat – so that the bottom of the building had basically been blown out from underneath itself, causing the whole thing to collapse. To do that with just three bombs – to cleanly eject a massive window framed in stone and mortar and then collapse a building next door – took real skill. It took somebody with brains and, usually, a lot of experience. Duke had managed to piss someone off real bad and that person was really, really smart. He had also come remarkably close to saying something along the lines of "as above, so below," a phrase I had heard before.

Those two things at least gave me some ideas of where to start my search.

Deal With The Devil – Chapter Five

Pinocchio's now a boy who wants to turn back into a toy.

--Rufus Wainwright, "Vibrate"

The Bull's Eye had been the person who stopped the robbery the other night but she had not seen the police department's or district attorney's plea that she turn herself in and testify. She didn't watch the news much anymore; she had patrols to do. Tonight she was on patrol again, as she was every night, but she had made sure to head back by The House to see if there was anything going on that night. Over days she had approached more kids in that neighborhood and been able to track down that the strange visitor who came there did so, on nights that he did, sometime around one in the morning. So, she dressed warmly and went out on patrol and when she got to that house she kept going for a block before cutting across the street and up a string of old oaks and taking up a position behind one. The strange visitor came from the same direction every night, so she put the house between her and it. People were usually a lot more afraid of being followed than they were of being *anticipated* and many times in her career, in many places, she had used that to her advantage when choosing an observation post.

She settled in, arms around herself, and waited for one o'clock to arrive. She had decided that if no one showed up by two, she would leave. Last call was a pretty popular time for petty crime, but she could give up the hour before it to see what was going on in that house.

At five minutes past one, she got the strangest tingle up her spine and she knew that he had arrived, whatever he might be.

She eased out, inch by inch, from the very center of the tree she'd used as cover. Very slowly, with her cap on backwards to keep her hair from falling over her face and to keep her hat's brim from being the first thing anyone saw, she moved enough to let one eye see around the edge of the tree's trunk. A block and a half or two away, walking down the middle of the street – just as the kids had said – she saw a middle-aged man in a shirt and tie and dark pants. He was wearing a coat or a jacket or a parka of some sort, but she couldn't make out more than that in the dim light and at that distance. She eased out far enough so that her other eye could see, too, but she didn't really see anything new; her left eye was the best, anyway.

The guy didn't seem to see her. He didn't seem to see anything. He was just walking along, hands in pockets, though he did once – just once – stop in his tracks and look up and to the side, towards a house, where the Bull's Eye saw a curtain jerk shut in a hurry. *Good God*, she

thought to herself, *It's like he really can tell when they see him.*

That was enough to make her pull back, so that she wasn't looking anymore, either. She figured if his peripheral vision were that good she wasn't going to risk it. Instead she leaned around the other edge of the tree so that she could see the front door and porch of The House, the one where the white twin kids with the sunken eyes and the poor manners lived. The Bull's Eye heard their metal gate swing open and shut, on the front lawn, and the man took two jaunting steps up onto the porch. He walked with absolute confidence and certainty. *Like he owns the place*, she thought to herself, and then she made a mental note to give that some thought later. From here she could see him better: nominally caucasian but of the same muddled features as every other Southern "white" guy who probably had a little of everything in his background. He was wearing a North Face jacket and dark slacks of some material other than denim. His shoes were dress shoes but in the comfortable, versatile style of all-purpose black shoes from the same sorts of chain stores where she had bought her own patrol uniform. No rings, no obvious signs of privilege other than the jacket... and dark sunglasses, even here, even at night.

He paused for a moment as though he might have seen something. She stayed where she was, knowing that if he had noticed her in his peripheral vision that her movement to hide would give her away more quickly than staying stock still and blending into the landscape. He never moved to turn towards her and after a few tense seconds he rang the doorbell. A few seconds passed, then a few more, and the door opened. He stepped inside with a familiar smile, the door closed behind him, and the street was again exactly as it had been two minutes before.

The Bull's Eye gave them thirty seconds to do any peeking out the blinds they might want to do before they relaxed, then she slipped out from behind the tree and around a house three doors down from them, into that house's back yard. From there she could approach The House from the rear, at an angle, unlikely to be noticed by the usual front-back-side-side means of keeping watch the untrained use because they see it on television.

A minute and a half later, she had crept forward on rolled steps and gentle balance and was molded against the corner of the house. There was dim light coming from the front, as though the lights were on in the living room, and she crouched to slide past some dark windows to get there. The curtains were drawn in the front but these windows had cheaper blinds, not curtains, and the blinds had left about an inch of space at the bottom from being closed incompletely. The string was probably bound up somehow so that it couldn't go any lower, and they had probably said, well, nobody's ever going to walk right up and *look in*, and this was what that had gotten them.

Sometimes it was too easy.

She drew two deep breaths, counted to five and then raised herself to a crouch in one smooth movement, peeking in that tiny gap. In the living room she saw one of the twins – the more sallow one – sitting in front of the television. A white guy in a suit was cracking jokes on the screen, smiling real big, and she imagined the audience was eating it up as noisily as they possibly could. The kid wasn't watching. He had his hands in his face and the knuckles were wet with tears. He was sobbing, trying to stay silent, his whole body clenched like a fist as he was wracked with ragged breaths he tried to keep from being heard.

So, the action – whatever it was – wasn't happening in the living room.

She slipped around to the back corner again and eased far enough from the exterior wall to look up and down both sides of the house that she could see from here. Nothing, just dark windows, so she risked it and ran at a half-squat to the other back corner. From there she could at least see the opposite side of the house and, there, she saw that the rooms were all dark except for one. It had a mismatched set of curtains in the window and they hadn't bothered to close them. Inside, by the dim light of a night light beside a clock radio, she could see them making out. The visitor was kissing the neck of the twin who had been more together, healthier looking, when she visited them the first time. She was a little surprised it was something so tame as an affair, she had to admit. The way everyone carried on was a little more than she would have expected of having a couple of frontiersman queens move into the neighborhood.

The twin whose neck was being kissed abruptly fluttered his eyelids and slumped in the other guy's grasp, going as lifeless as a rag doll. The visitor noticed, pulled away after a moment, and that's when the Bull's Eye had only her Delta Force training to thank for allowing her not to scream: blood was gushing from the kid's neck, and the guy's lips were coated in it.

He licked the wound once and it was gone, like he'd just erased it with a magic wand. A little something like color returned to the kid's cheeks and he convulsed once. The Bull's Eye realized with something not entirely unlike embarrassment that the kid had just orgasmed. The visitor dropped him onto the bed with remarkable carelessness, then stood up and walked into a bathroom and started washing his face with in the sink.

Holy shit. That was all she could think. She had seen a lot in her time in the army, but that was the craziest shit she had ever seen, *ever*. Now she understood why the kid in the living room was crying: either he was next or tonight it was his brother's turn instead of his. Either one would be enough to make a man weep.

There were three things that the Bull's Eye knew immediately about this situation: that she did not believe real vampires existed, which meant that a psychopath was attacking and injuring people in her neighborhood and she was pretty sure that wasn't okay no matter how into

it the victims were by the time it was over; that she had no idea what to do about this situation, either to clarify it or to put a stop to it; and that she had to do something about it anyway. She took advantage of the visitor's time spent cleaning up to run back across the yard, confident that no one would ever notice her, and back to her post behind the tree. She had to wait until the guy was away from the house before she followed him, just in case there was a confrontation and the guys inside were in fact so into this that they attempted to defend him from her.

Two minutes later she heard the front door open and close, those same jaunting steps down the front walk, the metal gate, and then he took to the middle of the street, back to her, walking away.

The Bull's Eye stepped out from behind the tree, padding along behind him, intent on finding out exactly where he went. She intended to learn everything she could about this guy while she let her mind spin on the rest of what she would need to decide.

They crept along, he walking down the middle of the street, she slipping from tree to tree, deep in shadow, never stepping into one of the few pools of light cast on crumbling urbania by the occasional street lamp. Little houses of all the styles marketed to lower-middle-class families for the last hundred years were stacked up practically on top of each other, all around them, all on lots that were raised above street level, every lawn in a state of care as different from the ones around it as could be imagined. The pavement was broken here and there by pot holes that would never be filled and the sidewalk was just as cracked and scarred. The Bull's Eye had to step carefully and let her eyes bounce between her prey and the sidewalk ahead of her but she managed to navigate it without stumbling or making any sounds she could detect in her own right. The guy didn't seem to notice her following him and so she kept up, maintaining a distance of anywhere from thirty to forty yards. It was a long way back for trailing someone but she'd already seen him attack someone and there was zero reason to think he would hesitate to do it again.

Finally, after three blocks, he got to what seemed to be his car: a beat up old Dodge hatchback. She could have remembered the model name if she'd tried; a friend of hers had driven that in high school. It was a piece of junk car, always had been – had been when new off the lot. One day its engine simply fell out while she was driving down the road. Its motor mounts had rusted through. It had sixty thousand miles. The Bull's Eye had no idea why all of this was coming to her now, flooding back, and she tried to focus on the fact that this guy's car didn't look to be in any better shape. He stood by the door, key in hand, unlocked the driver's side door and then turned to face her directly. She was thirty yards back, standing in darkness, and he was standing feet from the front of a gas station. He was in a high-contrast area, in terms of lighting. There was no way he should have been able to see her, but he could. There was no pretending he

had simply gotten lucky with a hunch.

"Did you think I would not detect you?" His voice was heavy and a little drunk-sounding; his accent was incongruously Midwestern. It was the sort of accent she had heard come out of big corn fed Iowa boys and dainty "mainstreamed" black women from Des Moines who had lost all trace of their heritage when they spoke and sounded just like the white girls they knew in school; she hadn't heard it since when she was in the Army. She didn't know what she had expected to hear, but it wasn't a voice so... pedestrian, with a wording so oddly stilted. "Our kind can hear a drop of blood in a bathtub from two floors away."

Great: it's not just a kinky sex thing; he's crazy, too. That made things simpler.

"You should raise your hands over your head," she said. Her voice was perfectly calm. She had said the same words, in half a different languages, to men who were pointing guns at her. This was just another day at the office. "You should keep your hands there while I restrain you. If you cooperate you will not be hurt." She withdrew a set of zip-ties from one of the pockets on her cargo pants and held them up where they could be seen. "Do you understand? Nod to indicate that you understand what I am saying."

He smiled, and he had way too many teeth. Well, OK, he only had two that really stood out, but that was way more than she had expected. He launched himself towards her like a car doing a hundred miles an hour and his mouth was open and she could see those... fangs. No getting around it, that's what they were. All she had time to do was drop and roll to try to trip him up by impacting his feet and shins with her body. She had to dive towards him to do so, which is not something instinct is ready to allow without extensive retraining.

The adrenaline rush came right on time, just like clockwork, so that when he pitched forward and rolled into a somersault and then stood, turning around, she was also already up and smiling.

"You moron," he hissed. "I'll kill you right here on the street so that when they find you in the morning you'll remind everyone – *everyone* – that they should mind their own business the *next* night." There was a blur and something hit her in the back like a wrecking ball. She fell forward, all the wind knocked out of her, and he was standing there with his fist out. He was still grinning, but she didn't understand how he did that. She was disoriented, as though she had blacked out for a second or something, because he had simply been in one place and then another. He raised a boot; she rolled out of the way and stood. He blurred again; this time she spun when he did so and saw him abruptly appear behind her, grabbed his arm and twisted it around to use his momentum against him. He sailed over her shoulder, forward, but turned in mid-air like he'd done it a hundred times, like they'd *practiced* this, and landed on his feet, facing her.

"..." Her lips parted to say something but her own training reminded her that he would try

to take advantage of her ongoing disorientation and she dropped, sweeping a kick around her for almost the whole three hundred sixty degrees. That caught something and he was knocked off balance and fell onto his back. She let herself produce one choked guffaw as she tried to get up and moving – whatever his deal was, he was really strong and impossibly fast and she couldn't win this fight, she knew, so she needed to do something like disable his car and call the police, anything that would get more firepower involved – and there he was, right in front of her, his hand around her neck. He lifted her off the pavement and he looked so *satisfied*. She could feel his fingers digging into her throat. She couldn't believe her career as a vigilante would end this way. She didn't give a good goddamn about her career as a janitor for Durham Tech, though.

A car made the turn, at the gas station, and its headlights played across the darkness, hit them and the brakes squealed. He looked away – away from her and away from the car, shielding his face – then he dropped her, just let go and let her fall into the street, and he was gone. He vaulted onto one of the raised lots; she heard leaves; then silence.

Feet came running up to her, from the car that had turned, and a man said, “Dude, are you okay? Holy shit! Are you okay? 911! I'll call 'em,” then ran off towards the gas station. She couldn't stick around and deal with that and if she lay very still and took very slow, shallow breaths she could breathe well enough to confirm that everything was still working in her neck. She wanted to get the license plate on the old Dodge – an Omni, that's what it was called, a Dodge Omni – but the headlights of her accidental Good Samaritan were shining on her, still, and she couldn't make out the plates. She ran over to look – surely she had enough time for that, at least – and was surprised to see no plate at all on the car. It was just being driven around with no license plate on it. She blinked. Cops by nature could practically *smell* a beater car with no tags starting up. The guy had gotten off the phone and came hobbling back around the corner, from the gas station lot, and he was saying something about “them” being on their way, so she had to go. No time for a thank you, no time for anything like that. She simply took off at a sprint, not into the darkness like her attacker but into the light, past her confused savior, across Alston where there was at least some light, and into the darkness on the *east* side of that thoroughfare so that at least there was one border of strong light between her and the guy she had been following. If she had been him, she knew, she would have circled around and tried to turn the tables on her pursuer; she hoped the lights and traffic and arriving police would be enough of a wall to keep that from happening.

She didn't like having to *hope*, not one bit.

The next night she finished her janitorial shift at 10pm. She clocked out, put away her supplies and walked out of the building to go back to her house. She wanted everything – surveillance cameras, time clock, everything – to say that she was out of the building and gone

for the night. So, she left. She walked half the six blocks from Durham Tech to her run-down, two-bedroom shotgun with white aluminum siding that rang like a gong when the acorns fell in October, on a quarter of an acre between a farmhouse style home from the 1950's and a cement block ranch from the 1970's. At the three block mark there was an abandoned A-frame halfway down the block; she cut up behind it and changed clothes in the darkness of its abandoned back yard. Chilly work, but necessary. She didn't want anyone to see her and she didn't want to come from any real place. If people simply thought she was a squatter, all the better for maintaining the secret of the Bull's Eye's real identity.

When she got back to the school she was careful to break in rather than let herself in. She jimmied a few windows as she worked her way to the one that she knew was unlocked. Not a lot of buildings were built with windows that opened anymore but one part of this building – the boiler room, with its potential build-up of fumes and gasses – had them. She slipped in through the window, closed it behind her, picked two different locks to let herself into the back of a chemistry supply room, then out into a chemistry lecture hall; within thirty seconds she was striding silently down a hallway towards the large computer lab.

The dull blue glow of monitors at this hour was nothing unusual; they were usually left on overnight. What was unusual was the way the lights flickered as she approached and shadows played out across the hall from the half-glassed door into the lab. Someone was in there and they or someone else was moving around. She dropped to a crouch and crept forward, easing up to the edge of the window and then peeking in.

Two people – a young latino and an older Asian guy – had rearranged the tables around them so that they were sitting in a ring of computers, all of which were playing different screen savers. The two of them were sitting in the middle of the ring, legs crossed, holding hands. She could barely hear them chanting something low and slow and meaningless to her: not Latin, as she would have recognized that, but something that sounded equally esoteric. There were five candles between them on the floor, lighted, and their eyes were closed.

Durham was getting weirder all the time.

Questions raced around her head. What were they doing? Were they hurting anything? If they weren't hurting anything, should she care? Where was she going to find a computer she could use if they were in there doing... whatever they were doing? The obvious suggestion, from within her own mind, was to simply walk in and ask them. But what if whatever they're doing were important? What if she threw them off their game, whatever the game is? And what if that's a good thing?

She reached into a pocket and produced a coin. Why the hell not? She didn't have any better ideas for sources of guidance. It came up heads – flashed in the darkness and she caught it without even having to think about doing so – so she slipped it back into her pocket, stood up

and put her hand on the door knob. It opened with a single turn and swung inwards. Their eyes snapped open and she said – through her solid black handkerchief worn around her nose and mouth like a bad man in a cowboy movie – in a very stern tone, “You boys have got some explaining to do, and then the Bull's Eye needs to use one of those computers.”

They both tried to stand up at once, fell all over each other, knocked over two of the candles and only by the power of geek reflexes managed not to topple two of the monitors on the desks. The Bull's Eye was on the candles in a flash, yanking them up off the floor and letting hot wax run over her fingers without so much as a murmur of surprise. They were both trying to say something but they were talking all over each other and neither was making terribly good sense. She put up a hand and spoke again. “Okay, it's like this.”

They stopped talking, pressed as close to the computer desks on the far side of the circle from her as they could get without moving the desks themselves. She noticed that, and filed it away; it wasn't like the desks were heavy or hard to move. It wasn't like they couldn't just shove them out of the way and run for the far corner of the lab if they really wanted to cower.

“First,” she said, taking a moment to think that and breathe a deep breath, “Are you trying to rob the place?”

Both of them shook their heads in shocked silence. The latino guy looked to be maybe nineteen, just the barest wisp of a beard growing in, thin, good-looking if you're into kids that young; dark jeans, white tank top, black sneakers, eyebrow piercing in the “barbell” style. The Asian guy – Taiwanese, she would have guessed off the bat – was in his fifties, balding, overweight, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and beige cargo shorts and flip-flops. She couldn't stand the resurgence of flip-flops: they were neither shoe nor sandal and made an annoying noise everywhere they went. She despised them.

“Okay,” she said. “Do you know who I am?”

They both nodded yes, vigorously. Great, that meant she was still being talked about in the media. That meant her attacker from the night before could probably figure out who she was. *Damn*. She really needed to start watching the news.

“Finally, and only one of you answering at a time, what are you doing in here?”

They looked at one another for a long moment, exchanging raised eyebrows that seemed to suggest maybe this was *your* bright idea, and finally the older Taiwanese guy spoke – his accent gave him away right off the bat. “We're engaged in a...” He cleared his throat. “Religious practice. It's endorsed by the school.”

She held up the candle, long since out. “I doubt somehow that the school signs off on violations of the fire code so that you can practice your religion. Try again. Strike one.”

The latino looked ready to start crying so she figured this wouldn't take much longer. The Taiwanese guy stood up a little straighter. “Excuse me, but they absolutely have endorsed the

practice of our religion as a recognized student group. The DTCC Techno-Pagan Society is open to all members of the campus community who identify as techno-pagans or techno-shamans, or any other current that is amenable to the practice of techno-magic. My colleague and I are here doing our monthly New Moon ritual and I'm afraid you've quite rudely interrupted us.

The Bull's Eye blinked at him. "The DTCC Techno-Pagan Society? In one of m-your computer labs? After hours? OK, great, but what the hell does that mean?"

He sniffed a little and said, "It means we're neopagans who believe technology has a role to play in ritual."

"None of that is meaningful to me. None of that is words. So, scram. I need to use a computer." She stepped out of the way so that the door was accessible and the Latino kid started to make a break for it but the Asian guy grabbed his arm and stopped him. Looking at the Bull's Eye, still, he said, "Are you really... who you say you are?"

She started to make a smart remark but there was something... she couldn't say what. There was something about the tone of his voice that told her that he needed her to say yes. So, she did.

"Can... we help?" He gestured back and forth between him and his friend who so badly wanted to get away. "We're... well, I mean, it kind of is our thing. Computers, I mean."

She pondered for a moment and then nodded once. "Okay. For now. The second I tell you to get out I want to feel a breeze. Got it?"

They nodded and the Taiwanese guy seemed to grow an inch taller when he smiled. "Of course," he said.

Deal With The Devil – Chapter Six

We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.

--Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*

The phrase “as above, so below” seemed like the better of the two clues. I mean, Duke University is a big place and a lot of people pass through there in a year and a lot of those people are paying a lot of money and making precious little for their trouble. It isn't hard to imagine that a whole mess of them are pissed off at the place at any given time and they're all pretty smart – well, all but the *really* rich ones, I reckon. My point here is, it seemed like the easier thing to narrow down was that line about quantum sympathies or whatever. I didn't get all that but I recognized it as the lingo of a physicist – I listen to NPR in the middle of the night like anybody else – and I figured there weren't that many neopagan physicists around.

That phrase - “as above, so below” - is a line from a spiritual practice called “sympathetic magic.” The idea is that if you affect something that is from, or a part of, or in the image of your actual target, you affect the target. It's the theory behind voodoo dolls and the like. The image of something is supposed to have a supernatural relationship or resonance with the something itself. Stab the doll in the arm and the person gets an aching elbow, and so on. You've seen sympathetic magic a million times in movies and on TV because it's the most visually appealing way to depict wizards and witches and all that stuff. You also see it every time you go into a Christian church, especially if it's a Catholic one: people praying to a crucifix are using sympathetic magic just the same as any witch doctor voodoo priest.

It's also used in the real world by people who are into that reinvented paganism kind of thing. It's not for me, but no significant spiritual belief system *is*; I wouldn't have the god who would take me, to be honest. I think we're in this all on our own and it's up to us to make the most of it. Every vampire does, deep down, no matter how many nights of the month they dress up like Marie Laveau or Jerry Falwell or my Aunt Fanny and claim to be in tune to some higher power.

So, I didn't buy into it myself – beyond its psychological power to shape someone's intentions and maybe ignite a little confirmation bias when they watched for results of their work – but I knew there were people who did. If Duke pissed off lots of people at any given time, that's one thing; not a lot of them would move in neopagan circles, though, and I couldn't believe that neopagan circles would be so large as to be easy to hide in. I only knew a few neopagans, though, and they weren't exactly physicists. They were more like librarians. Still, you start with

the contacts you have, not the contacts you wish you had, and lucky me, it was a book sale weekend at the library in Chatham County.

The Book People. That's what they called themselves. I originally thought that meant they were Muslims – there's this concept in Islam of “people of the book,” which is a fancy way of saying Jews & Christians, who are kind of special because they worship the same god – but they just meant people who are crazy into books. There are seven of them, two men and five women, and they are mostly older. One of them is a young Latina who told me one time that she was the first person in her family to be literate in English. Her accent was absolutely undetectable. It was impressive. The rest of them are various shades of cracker white except for a black guy named Warren who teaches the occasional poetry class at a historically black school in Raleigh. He's a retired sports writer or something. He doesn't talk much, and I've never spent much time around them because the Book People give off kind of a weird vibe, like you're really seriously hell of harshing their vibe when you're around because that's time they could have spent nose-deep in a book.

They haunt book sales. I don't mean that they're just there all the time, drifting around, I mean that they show up at night when no one else is there and they *do things*. I still don't really understand it, but it strikes me as a fancy form of coin-flipping; the only difference is their coin is a library and it has a different face for every sentence of every book that's for sale.

The Chatham County Library book sale doesn't happen at the library proper. They have it at this little Lions Club building in what I guess you'd call “downtown” Pittsboro. Pittsboro – the county seat – is just a traffic circle, a historic courthouse from the 1860's that burned and collapsed a couple of years ago and a secondhand store called Beggars & Choosers that is reputed to be the absolute best place to put together a Halloween costume for fifty miles in any direction. Otherwise it's a slightly self-consciously folksy little place that does a lot of antiques trade and has a couple of historical markers and a few big box stores out by the highway. Nothing much going on, but I always get the feeling that's how Pittsboro likes it. They got saddled with a real shit-stain of a county commissioner a few years ago, this asshole who wanted to sell every square inch of unoccupied land to any developer who would line his reelection campaign's pockets, but he got tossed out the next time around. People in Pittsboro were not ready to see their whole county turned into a planned community. I mean, Christ, the guy who does that woodworking show on PBS – Woodwright's Shop or something – he has a workshop there. It is not a place that is friendly to the average cookie cutter postage stamp housing development where no one's houses are far enough apart to have windows on the sides and there's a tiny Bradford pear in the same spot in every identical front yard. Pittsboro is about 25 minutes of extremely pretty country driving from Durham proper and whenever I go there I am a little stunned that a place so nice can

exist so close to suburbs and small cities and a major media market.

Anyway, the book sale happens at a Lions Club that's not too far from the traffic circle and the burned down courthouse. I'd been before, it happens late enough in the fall that it's dark before the sale ends each night, and that's where I noticed the Book People. They were sitting in a car in the parking lot trying to look nonchalant. The windows of the mini-van they'd driven up in were tinted really damn dark, way darker in the back than I imagined would be street legal, but honestly that stuff is no match for a vampire's eyes and I had seen them sitting there watching the staff lock up behind me while I lugged two of the big bags of books away from the place to my car on the other side of the lot. Let me assure you, just in case you decide to go around playing amateur burglar or otherwise finding occasions that demand stealth, pulling up to a retail establishment – even a temporary one like a book sale happening at a Lions Club – right before closing time and parking far away from everyone else and watching them lock up is a pretty dead giveaway that you're casing the joint to break in later. So, I got in my car, I drove a block away, I killed the lights and sat in the dark and waited for the staff of the library book sale to go past as they left, then I got out and walked back and slipped across a dewy lawn and up to the side of the building where I could peek around at the front and see what they were doing.

They were standing around looking nervous while the oldest of them all, a little old lady with a stark white shock of hair that stuck out in all directions and a slightly off-kilter grin, like a mad puppy excited to see the toy it thirty seconds ago forgot that it already happen, was hunched over picking the lock. Her fingers shook but I think that might have actually helped her hit all the tumblers. I could hear the click and the door swung open and everyone let out the breath they had been holding, piled inside and – I could see when I slipped up to a window to watch them once they'd gone in – simply started milling around.

“Brothers and sisters.” The smooth, mellow voice came from a preppy middle-aged woman with once upon a cheerleader hair and a sweater actually tied around her neck by the arms, like an Izod ad from 1984. “Please take a few moments to select your implements for tonight's ritual. Do not rush, and when a book speaks to you do not shy away because it isn't what you had hoped – or because it's what you feared. You will know the book as the book will know you, and when hand meets spine you will know whether the book in your hand is to be your tool for tonight's working.”

I waited and watched as they walked around – some of them eyes closed and bumping into tables, others walking directly to specific sections like CRIME and CLASSICS and holding out their hands, fluttering them like nervous butterflies, then finally reaching out and jerking a book from the boxes that sat atop each table and looking at the covers. Obviously some of them weren't thrilled with what they got but the lady had been pretty clear: the book they got was the book they were getting. They reassembled in the middle of the room but froze as a car went by outside

and they worried that it was someone coming back; it wasn't, and they formed a loose circle around the woman who had spoken before. She addressed them again, sounding rehearsed.

"As the world is an expression of the god and the goddess, the Lord and the Lady, the Sun and the Moon, so too are the books in our hands the expressions of their authors. Writers craft worlds that call out to them to be created. They are the progenitors of whole realities that insist upon existence. As above, so below; and as below, so above. The gods on whom we call are summoned into being by the world's own need of them, and the world they create has the form it takes because it can take no other. The world and the divine are the hand and the glove, the glove and the hand, each needing the other as a book needs an author and an author needs to read it once it's done. The cycle of creation and destruction, life and death, spring and summer and autumn and winter, is not a repetition but a moving forward, a progression, and we are the ones who witness the spin of the tire, the turn of the press, the brushstroke of the hand that authors that cycle."

There was a pause, and her words had a soothing and strengthening effect on them. They all stood a little straighter and a little more solemn now. The stooped old lady with the mad smile had her eyes closed and a serenity on her face that I rarely saw in sane people. The blonde lady leading them took a few seconds to look around, at each of them in turn, then she spoke again. "Maria is in the East so we shall start with her. Open your book, sister, and with it light the fire of the first watchtower."

The Latina cracked her book open to a random page. She cleared her throat and I heard her read in the halting, slightly uncertain tone of one who doesn't regularly read aloud – that is to say, almost everyone in the world. "Ho, ho! Commander! It's moving! The machines are ready! Fuel, my commander! We must have fuel and nothing else!" Her voice grew in confidence and enthusiasm so that the last sentence was delivered with something like real feeling. She then stated the title with a much more reserved, subdued, almost subservient tone: "*Cement*."

The blonde woman – the priestess, I later learned, named Sarah – turned to the younger of the two men, a forty-something white guy built like a barrel of molasses. He opened his book and read in one breath, all in a go, running the title together with the text, "The cutting-edge on even the most well-made knife is not permanent *Knife Skills Illustrated: A User's Guide*." He looked a little embarrassed by that, but Sarah favored him with a nod that seemed to indicate that maybe this was a lesson worth hearing once or twice. She turned to an African-American woman in her fifties. That woman held up a thin volume and read:

"His movements have the attractiveness of the awkward man who has learned to circumvent this condition by slowing everything down. Catlike in his languid movements, with his slightly hunched shoulders, hands a little too big for his body, like he's never quite known what to do with them." She paused and then said, "*Crime*, by Irvine Welsh." Her voice was gentle and

plodding and wasn't at all unlike the description she had read from the book.

Next, a frumpy white woman in her 30's, in blue stretchy fat pants and a shapeless sweatshirt sweater kind of thing that zipped up the front. In my mind, I immediately thought, *Dyke!* But I'm queer myself, so I get to do that. She held up a thick hardback and read aloud. "Windows there are none in our houses: for the light comes to us alike in our homes and out of them, by day and by night, equally at all times and in all places, whence we know not. It was in old day, with our learned men, an interesting and oft-investigated question, 'What is the origin of light?' and the solution of it has been repeatedly attempted, with no other result other than to crowd our lunatic asylums with the would-be solvers." She paused, then, "*Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions.*"

Sarah smiled a little. "An excellent lesson in humility." She turned towards Warren, who opened his book and cleared his throat.

"You were either with her or you were against her. She believed that her father was not her real father; that her mother had tried to drown her in a pond when she was child; that her pulmonary specialist wanted to have sex with her; that in death she would be met by Carl Jung, the Virgin Mary, and Merlin the Magician; that she had done her work on earth and her work was good; that she was one of those who had been chosen to herald the coming new order of beautiful humanity; that in a former life she had died a water death as a Roman galley slave, shackled to the oars; that men were shits and her children were hostile; that her smoking was her business, so mind your own fucking business; that her son was an artist just like she was; that she and I should go into therapy together." He smiled a little and looked up. "*The Afterlife: A Memoir.*"

Most of them had chuckled a little at the lines about smoking and about men being shits, and Sarah was among those who had. She flicked her eyes to the last person, the hunched little old lady, and she opened her eyes and her book at the same time, eyes falling to the page. Her voice creaked out, "She kept going, her sneakers slapping the pavement, until she came to a barrier of a thousand split-open garbage bags. She crawled over it, taking the time to pick up a few interesting items, like a broken salt shaker and a soggy copy of *National Geographic*, and stuff them into her bag. Then she was over the barrier and she kept walking, the breath still rasping in her lungs and her body trembling. That had been close, she thought. The demons almost got me! But glory be to Jesus, and when he arrives in his flying saucer from the planet Jupiter I'll be there on the golden shore to kiss his hand!" She looked up. "*Swan Song.* Robert McCammon."

Sarah bowed slightly and then turned to look at and address each of them, moving slowly, so that everyone got looked at while she spoke. "Fuel for the engine. Alienation. Insanity. A loss of sharpness. Awkwardness. Strong opinions that may or may not run counter to the facts. Jesus on a flying saucer. These are all stories that say to me that whatever we summon tonight will be able to guide those of us who might be stuck in some rut, alienated from the knowledge of

how to move forward. Are there other interpretations?"

The Latina spoke, and evidently they didn't have to wait to be called on for this part. "I think whatever we summon might be, itself, alienated and stuck in a rut."

Warren nodded his head. "The thing we call on will be difficult to work with. Not of this world. It's going to have its own way of doing things and its own understanding."

"It's going to think we're crazy," the old woman said. Her eyes were crystal clear and her smile was gone. She was down to business.

The bull dyke didn't say anything, but she nodded along. The older African-American woman didn't say a word, just shook her head and clucked her tongue.

Sarah nodded. "You're all in agreement. Let us see. Let us call to the beyond and see what we have summoned with these words." She lifted her hands and started to say something – it sounded like Latin, but maybe not perfect textbook Catholic school Latin – and I couldn't resist.

I turned the knob, opened the door and said, as they turned to me in unified shock, "Don't bother asking. I'm already here." They didn't buy that I was a god, but they could sense that I was something *other* and somehow that didn't scare them. We chatted for a while, playing cat and mouse over the question of my identity, and then they'd asked me for advice about Sarah's work situation. I suggested she take a grad school class at night and see if being a student again suited her. It's always that kind of thing, with people like that: they're a lot more interested in the nuts and bolts of everyday living than they are with pie in the sky and that, quite frankly, makes them my kind of people.

Ever since, every once in a while, I drop in on them at a library book sale somewhere or another in the Triangle. Sometimes they would ask me for advice; sometimes I would participate in their little ritual. Sometimes I would just watch, through a window, and let them wonder if I had been there. I think they think of me as kind of their pet demon; I thought of them as my pet *faithfuls*. I didn't believe in anything at all except myself and only sometimes at that; they believed in everything, all the time, but in a very specific kind of *unified* everything, an everything tied together by some weird hybrid of faith and the supernatural and the human mind's ability to shape the world to its own image of that world and I loved to talk to them about it. Warren called me their 'Q' once, which I recognized as the *Star Trek* reference it was. Vampires watch all the TV they can get their hands on. There's nothing worse than running out of ways to make time pass when you're staring down the barrel of eternity.

That night they were back in the Lions Club and I didn't bother to try to sneak up on them. I parked right next to their van, I walked right up to the front, I made a little boot-scraping noise as I wiped the mud from my feet and then I knocked three times – the same number of knocks as Death uses in old Southern lore – before letting myself in. They were gathered around a picture

book one of them had pulled out of the kids' section of the book sale and were talking about the images it inspired in a kind of free-association game. They seemed to believe, though not in any explicit way they could explain to an outsider, that wisdom could be found by a process not entirely unlike panning for gold: take the indicators of wisdom, the jettisoned meaning and attempted wisdom of countless writers of books of fiction and technical manuals and true crime and how-to's and Time-Life books and sift them, devoid of context, until the words come together to mean something to the reader. In truth it wasn't that far from the practices of Bryan Gison or how the hell ever you're supposed to spell his name. He and William S. Burroughs and a bunch of other of their circle used to cut up pages from magazines and try to paste them back together in some random way to discover new, unintended meanings. Burroughs wrote a whole novel that way – the cut-up method, they called it, I think – and it's one of the hardest things I've ever read. Still, you read anything you can get your hands on, too, when you've got nothing but time.

When I walked in they looked up and Sarah smiled. That was always a little disconcerting and maybe also a part of why I would follow them around and show up at random: not a lot of humans are happy to see you after they've figured out you're more than just some fat dude with a bad attitude. “Welcome, Withrow,” she said. “We're divining meaning from the adventures of a hippopotamus in search of his pants.”

“Story of my life,” I snarked, but I was polite enough to let them finish their little exercise before demanding their attention for myself. A few minutes of quiet sideline greetings from each of them in turn, as the others worked on the storybook's hidden messages, and then they broke out the snacks – wine and cakes, they called it, but it mostly seemed to be gas station junk food and bottled iced teas – and we started chewing the fat en masse. “Listen,” I said, “I don't mean to be all business, but I have a specific, strange request of you.” They all perked up a little. I think they'd kind of been waiting for me to show up and demand something, sometime. They were a little disappointed when I went on and didn't mention anyone's souls or turning anyone's bones to molten lead or whatever they did when they did “real” magic. “I'm trying to find someone and he said something a lot like “as above, so below,” when he was talking to me. Tall guy, athletic, sharp chin, razor-sharp nose, tawny hair, very good-looking with a...” I paused. How was I supposed to explain that he smelled like the ten most delicious bloods I had drank in my whole life, rolled up in one? “A kind of *charisma* that it's hard for me to describe.”

There wasn't a hint of recognition on any of their faces.

“I kind of got the feeling that he might be into the same stuff y'all are, only more...” I waved my hands around, kneading my desire not to offend like a ball of dough that wasn't there. “Science-y. Quantum-y.”

There were a few shared glances that said something like, “Oh, *those* assholes,” and I raised my eyebrows to indicate interest. Finally the older African-American woman, who has

never told me her name, nor has anyone used it when addressing her, and that tells me I'm best off not asking, said to me, "The technopagans. There are a bunch of them around. More than one group, anyway. We can give you a couple of email addresses if you really need to get in touch with them."

I hemmed briefly, then, "That's great, and I appreciate it, but if you don't mind my saying so, y'all kind of seem to hate these guys. What, too nerdy?"

The older black lady smiled slightly. "They're fine, but the current they're tapping into is so... sterile."

Uh-huh. That's what I thought, then I said the same thing.

Warren was already writing down the email addresses, looking at his smartphone to make sure he got them right.

"No emails," I said. I shook my head a little, nose crinkled, and waved it off with one hand like a bad play in football. "Directions."

They all looked at one another for a moment. "Have I ever hurt one of you? This is an emergency. Potentially one of a highly spiritual nature."

Very, very reluctantly, they gave me a street address in Durham.

The technopagan house was on a side street remarkably close to the Duke campus. I brought Smiles – the Doberman – with me this time because, well, because I didn't know exactly what I was walking into. He's intimidating as all hell and extremely single-minded: he doesn't give a damn what happens around him as long as it isn't happening *to me*. We stashed the Firebird around the corner and down a block from the technopagan house and walked so that we'd have shadows and time on our side. I wanted to scope the place out a little before I walked right up and knocked, and I didn't really want them to see where I came from or what I drove. Paranoid, yes, but some of these spiritual types are pretty out there. You may think of crystal-hefting hippies wearing sarongs and praying to hedge rows, but (a) those types punch just hard if you piss them off bad enough, and that's *after* they throw the crystals at you, and (b) some of the "earth religions" people are crypto-Nazis with plenty of guns and worse laying around the place. The vast majority of them are just folks with a belief system like any other, don't get me wrong, but sometimes this stuff is really strongly tied up in a particular ethnic identity and some *portion* of the people to whom that's appealing are coming at it from an angle of wanting to exalt that ethnicity at the expense of others. Those are not nice, happy, Sir Hugsalot Goes To RenFair pagans.

Technopagans – the book people called them that and Sarah said it meant "they like to bring their toys to the dinner table with them," and they all thought that was kind of funny but I

didn't really get it – aren't tied up in ethnicity like that but neither are they necessarily tied up in wanting to hug all the bad thoughts away, either. The older black lady who's still never told me her name said that they were nice enough kids but I was still wary.

So, we approached on the street, walking past a park that was significantly nicer than the one past which the Bull's Eye patrolled – the advantages of being right next to the Duke campus in a city that knows where its bread is buttered – but the house looked dark and quiet and for the most part just like every other house around it.

It was a big, green, farm house style thing, two stories, huge wrap-around front porch, a house that was a monster in its day. It was eighty years old if it was a day, yet another example of Durham's crazy patchwork of eras and styles in its residential areas. It was two stories, painted a medium drab green on the outside with a roof done in tiles that were a dark, forest green. In the eternally uncertain light of Durham's street lamp maintenance and lack thereof, it was almost impossible to see if your eyes weren't already adjusted. This was a quiet neighborhood but still, the people in it had to come and go sometime, and I imagined most of them drove past that place without their eyes ever being drawn to it even once. It was a house that disappeared into the colors and dark shadows of the trees behind it and the yards on either side. It blended, chameleon-like, and it occurred to me that they might have, you know, *made it*. Like, maybe they had magicked it up somehow to make it less noticeable. At the very least, they had been very precise in their choice of exterior paints.

The roof over the front porch had a thick braid of cables running to it from the telephone pole in front of it. As I got closer I could see that there were actually three thick braids of cables, as though they had dozens of telephone or DSL lines. There were also multiple satellite dishes attached to the edge of the roof that hung over the covered porch: five of them, in fact, bearing the logos of different satellite networks including one written in French and one in something that looked like Arabic.

Wow. These guys were *connected*.

I crept into the yard and skulked around the shadows around the corners of the house. I could see dim blue glows emanating from some of the rooms but not all of them and lights that were harshly white and bright by contrast were on in the kitchen in the back. Houses like this always have a disproportionately tiny kitchen, usually because the original kitchen was in an outbuilding that's now gone, and inside it I could see a sleepy-eyed kid in his mid-20's, blond, cute in a scruffy nerd kind of way, waving a coffee grinder back and forth like a martini shaker as it whirred away.

I crept back around to the front and onto the front porch. I listened at the door and I could hear quiet conversation – conversation which abruptly stopped. So, they and I, we were listening to one another in silence. I had to give them credit if they'd managed to hear creep onto

their porch a vampire who's been around the block a time or two and knows how to keep quiet. No reason to play cat and mouse now, though, so I stood upright, took and released a breath and rang the doorbell like a good boy.

It chimed incongruously – something deep and bonging, like a rich lady's doorbell in an old movie – and there was a lot more silence and some moving around on the other side. I tensed my legs in case they decided to open the door and say hello with a shotgun I needed to dodge or take away from them.

The door made some banging noises as various locks were unchained, unbolted, opened and otherwise released. Then the door creaked open maybe an inch – far enough that we could talk, but narrow enough that human eyes probably wouldn't have been able to detect the middle-aged Asian guy who answered it. “Whaddya want?” He tried to sound gruff and instead he sounded crabby.

“Friends sent me. Sarah and the rest of the Book People. I need your help. The thing that happened at the Chapel the other night? I saw the guy who did it and I think he might be, you know...” I waved a hand vaguely. “One of y'all. No offense.”

“He's not one of us and I have no idea what you're talking about,” the guy said. He started to close the door but I had one finger on it and he couldn't budge the damned thing.

“You don't understand,” I drawled. “I said that I needed to talk to you. This isn't a request, and I don't have to stay polite if I don't feel like it. The Blue Devil set those bombs and I think *he* thinks I'm this Bull's Eye person and I need to find out who he is and what to do about him and I need it damned yesterday. I'm asking nice because my mama raised me right, but I'll only ask so many times. Is that clear?”

There was a lot of hesitation and confusion and fear in his eyes. Just as I decided that I was going to come inside whether he liked it or not – the needing to be invited bit is just something one of us very cleverly planted in the mythology a long, long time ago – when the door opened all the way and it wasn't him that did the work. Inside there was an African-American woman wearing an outfit of solid black, almost all of it without labels or any other indication of where it came from, and I knew her right away. She had to be the Bull's Eye; there was no way she could be anyone else. She glared out at me from underneath the brim of her black hat and cracked her knuckles.

I smiled. “Well, that's more like it. I'm Withrow Surrett. I think we should talk.” It wasn't who I had expected to find but I sure as hell wasn't going to turn the opportunity down.

Deal With The Devil – Chapter Seven

Always a lonely boy / You were the one / That they'd talk about around town

--Bronski Beat, "Smalltown Boy"

There was the usual pacing each other in a circle kind of bullshit, of course, but I'll spare you that. She wanted to know who I was and I told her I'm the local boss for a certain subset of creature of the night. She didn't like the sound of that so I said, "I'm a vampire, but the nice kind." She didn't like that, either, and I thought it was going to be because she didn't believe in vampire but it turned out it was because she knew enough to know there isn't a "nice kind." I asked her where she'd found out about us and she said, "A few nights ago, in neighborhood a few blocks from my house. You knocked on the door here, though, and you asked to speak to someone like you knew your manners, so for now I'm willing to be civil." That settled that, then, and she introduced me around: Ramon and Chang, the guys she'd met at Durham Tech; Xi, a Taiwanese-American kid with no trace of an accent who went to North Carolina State in Raleigh, a campus I know well; Dan, a queeny guy with an exaggerated affectation and hyper-nelly voice who went to UNC over in Chapel Hill; Bob, who was a handsome and athletic little stud who went to Duke itself. Why they mostly went other places but lived next door to Duke itself was easy to work out. "They've got an effectively wide-open wireless network," Xi said in his perfectly Midwestern American English. "They never know what's happening on their network."

"Wide open *what* now?" asked Dan, eyebrows wagging all over the place, and at least he amused himself. Five minutes later the Bull's Eye and I were parked on a weird little balcony that hung uncertainly from the back bedroom on the second floor. It felt tacked on and insubstantial but it held when I walked out there and then again when the Bull's Eye joined me. We had our choice of cheap folding chairs and in all honesty I wasn't sure mine would hold me, but hold me it did. She preferred to lean against the railing, like maybe she'd be ready to go over the side and hit the ground running if she needed to, and in all fairness I could respect that kind of thinking a lot more than easy trust.

"So tell me about this vampire you met in your neighborhood." I was packing a box of smokes against the palm of my left hand, a rhythmic slapping sound, the act itself the result of decades of muscle memory. I didn't smoke much anymore, sure, but I liked to when I could and even if the drug had no physiological effect on me anymore, well, the psychological addiction was as strong as ever.

"No. You tell me about the Blue Devil and why he thinks you're me. Maybe I'll like what I

hear. If so, we talk about what I saw.” Her arms were folded, body language all as plain as day. She had no interest in being out here with me but she had to be if she were going to learn anything about her *real* problem: this vampire she claimed she'd seen. Easy money said it was my interloper, of course, but my guess was they'd been in a scrap, given how she was acting. She was afraid I would attack her but she needed to pick my brain somehow or another if she were going to learn anything about *him*. So, fair enough. I could play chopsticks if I had to.

I told her about running into the Blue Devil the two times I'd seen him – the theft of the mascot uniform and then seeing him again in the Duke Gardens the night of the explosions. “Homeland Security and the FBI are all over Duke's campus now,” she said. “It's in all the papers, on the news. If he wants to do something to Duke, he's kind of screwed himself. Those aren't all the sharpest knives in the drawer, the guys in those departments, but there are some really ace investigators who know their stuff and not everyone who shows up toting the badge of a *federali* is necessarily going to be on the payroll of their supposed department, so they'll figure out whatever there is to figure out. His days are numbered.”

“Not if he's smart,” I said, “And he's smart. Took out that rose compass window like it was yesterday's trash and managed to collapse the Divinity School on itself with one bomb. He's got a beef with the school and he thinks if he tarnishes the image of the mascot that he harms the school itself via some mystical association.” I shook my head. “They won't catch him, especially not if they're mostly a bunch of Deputy Dawgs like you say.”

She smirked a little, but she didn't relax. “He didn't say it was mystical. He said there were 'causal relationships.' He also said, 'Like may affect like after all.'” She waved a finger, as though addressing a class or something, then tapped the finger against her bottom lip while she thought. “I'm no scientist, but he also said 'quantum,' right? We're talking about a physicist here. There are certainly physicists who think that there are subtle interactions between things in the world that we may or may not be able to detect but that manifest as mysterious correspondences. He might be, I don't know, way off the deep end of that line of thinking and believe that if he hurts people or himself while wearing the old mascot uniform that he'll harm the University through some quantum connection.”

I flicked ash and thought about it for a few seconds. “The Book People – long story, they call themselves 'bibliomancers' – they said that he was probably a technopagan so maybe you're right. What are the odds these chuckleheads are being honest when they say they don't know him?” I jerked a thumb towards the inside of the house, indicating the two guys who had brought her here.

“The two I met are above board. There's something... it's hard to describe. There's some kind of naïve darkness about them. It's like they think the good guys are more bad-ass than the bad guys. Or something. They know they're weird and they like it.” She smiled a little.

"It's something with which you are not unfamiliar," I replied. "You dress in black and walk around your neighborhood at night looking for trouble to unmake."

"And you dress in black and walk around... doing what, exactly?"

"A question for another time. Nothing too nefarious, I promise." I held up my hand. "Scout's honor."

"Very funny," she said.

"Totally serious." I shook my head. "So, if it's not one of your friends, what about the rest of the guys who live here?" There were three more of them in the house, apparently. I honestly didn't give much of a damn about this Blue Devil guy. My run-ins with him had been happenstance, nothing more, and his misunderstanding about my identity could most quickly be rectified by putting the Bull's Eye on his trail and *off* that of the interloper so that I could go after him myself. I just wanted to make this be her problem and dash. It was that simple. Any suspect who would get her gears turning and get her interested in *that* problem was just fine by me.

"Nah," she said. "Wrong vibe. This feels like a house full of..." She cleared her throat, thought for a second, then went on. I waved some smoke out of the path towards her; it always happens, the nonsmoker always draws it towards them. "This feels like a house full of people who are hunkered down behind a barricade to defend against a siege of their own making. Like, maybe they're worried what people will think of them – these bibliomancers, for instance – and so they've taken cover before the shelling even has a chance to start." She shook her head again. "It doesn't feel like a house that would be home to someone who goes out and makes trouble. They're waiting for it to come to them. Even if it weren't for some sort of paranoia, these are people who believe that the most legitimate expression of their power is to operate remotely, affecting things from a distance. Actually going to campus and blowing something up would be way too... nitty-gritty for them. They want the indirect approach in anything they do or, when they go the direct route, they want to do it from behind as many layers of protection as possible."

I sat and listened and when she was done I took a long drag and then let it out through my nose, curling around into the cool air like dragon's breath. "You sure are good at understanding the other guy's tactics."

She didn't say anything.

"I'm going to guess career military, or would-have-been career military with the career part cut short due to some unforeseen circumstance."

"We're not talking about that," she said.

Ah. So, an exposed nerve. I filed it away. "Fair enough. So what do we do about the Blue Devil?"

"Let's ask the kids inside if there have been any well-known physics students in the news,

someone who might have reason to be pissed at Duke.” She stood away from the railing; she wanted to get away from the place where she'd been asked about her past, and badly.

“It's my understanding that a big school pisses people off all the time.”

“Not someone who's good at a little of everything, white, blond, athletic, pissed at religion and a physics student all at once.” She gestured towards the door with a sideways nod of her head. “After you.”

I still had my teeth in it, though, and waved her off. “Not so fast, there's more to talk about. I'll leave the sore topics alone if you want me to, that's not a problem. You just have to let me know what's off-limits.” I tossed the cigarette and lit another. “Now, you said 'white, blond, athletic...' and I think that's what's been bothering me about him,” I said, adjusting just slightly in my seat. “That sense of being... overly privileged. Something about his manner was a little too sarcastic, a little too biting.” I clucked my tongue.

“No irony intended?” She arched an eyebrow and didn't smile.

“Hardy har,” I said. “No, seriously. He looks like a kid who has everything going for him, who could tear Duke to pieces and get nothing but smiles from the faculty and staff. You've been to that campus, I assume: lots of very smart people who also happen to have all the other signs of wealth worn well: attractive, well-dressed, athletic and handsome, well-spoken, quick on his feet both physically and mentally. It's a finishing school for a certain class of aspirational elites, whether one takes that to mean elites with aspirations or those with aspiration to become the elite. It's a farm where rich kids grow credentials.”

She made a little *hnf* noise that could have been agreement or disagreement, I didn't know, but she didn't stop me so I kept going.

“It just... well, to have that taken away from him somehow, it must have been pretty shocking. Look at all the rich white assholes who go on TV and say things like how queers are threatening their marriages and how the greeter down at Walmart saying 'happy holidays' is an attack on them – they literally think someone acknowledging the existence of other religions or holidays is an *attack* – and all that shit. There's a certain mindset that is wounded by the realization of its own normalcy, its own mortality. There's a certain kind of person – continually rewarded by our society just for being young and white and looking good, allowed to get away with whatever they'd like, for whom money and appearance are golden tickets – who finds the fact of there being an *edge* to their cultural or religious or sexual hegemony, a border past which others exist who are not like them, to be a direct assault on everything they are. There's something about what he's doing, how he's acting, that reminds me of that mindset.”

“So, what you're saying is that Duke kids are over-privileged and he acts like he's probably over-privileged. And?” She eased back into her place against the rail, very slowly, reluctant to stay here.

"There's something special about him. I don't know what it is, but he's stronger and faster than most humans. Take that same oh-so-victimized-by-my-majority-status mindset of the average Generation Y *have*, as opposed to being a have-not, and give it super strength and super speed and super reflexes and enough smarts to figure out complex demolitions for himself and you've got a *real* problem. He's not just an annoyance or just a danger to others: he's a destructive force and he's obsessed with you. He's also got a vendetta. They probably did something to him, defunded him, cut his department back, laid him off, something that he thinks has ruined him. He must have lost his work or something. I mean, otherwise, why not just pack up and move on? No, he lost more than his place in the ivory tower: he lost everything, or thinks he did. That makes him extremely dangerous if he thinks there's nothing left to lose."

"And he thinks he needs a hero to fight his villain." She sighed again, just a little. "I'll keep all that in mind." She paused, and then, "Humans? You don't think of yourself as being a human being?"

I stopped, mouth open. Then, "No. I don't. I think of myself as being *among* humans, and I try to live that way, to stay connected, because retreating into a walled off existence is a recipe for winding up an insane anachronism who sees people as nothing more than cattle. But no, I don't consider myself one of you." I shrugged. "I'm sorry, but that's the honest answer."

She smirked up the corners of her mouth for a second. "No, I know exactly what you mean."

I studied her for a moment. "You were in the military. Something really bad happened. You saw too much, or knew too much, or something like that. Now you're back home and you do this because... because you don't feel like you're one of them, either." Vampires are very good at subtext. It's all a part of the hunt. "It explains how you were able to get into a tussle with a vampire and survive: you have to be very good to do that, and about the only way is to be extremely skilled at hand to hand already. So, do you do this," I pointed up and down, at the costume, at the stance, at everything, "Because it's your job, or because you're bored, or what?"

"Long story," she said. Then she shook her head. "Actually, it's a really short one, but I don't like telling it. I'm here and I have skills. I choose to use them. That's what matters."

"You tend to speak in short sentences. You don't like long conversation, do you? Me, I can talk all night long. I can just yak the night away. I've got nothing but time, after all. I mean, as far as I know, I'm immortal. I plan to be here when the sun dies. Maybe it'll take me with it and maybe instead it'll just be a really, really cold night until the universe collapses back on itself. I don't know but I intend to find out. You, you're not so big on burning time, are you? The only time you get so distracted that you start forming complex sentences is when you're thinking about a problem that needs to be solved."

"Nice armchair psychology. Pick that one up on Oprah or Maury?" She produced a *hff* of

half-hearted laughter as an afterthought.

"See? You retreat into terse fragments when you're confronted with yourself. My kind are good at spotting chinks in the armor like that. If you find yourself facing off again with that vampire you met before, keep that in mind. Don't let him talk or he'll try to hoodoo you." I twirled my index finger beside my own ear. "Don't look him in the eye. Just hurt him. Don't let him draw you into anything at all like a conversation."

"He wasn't that interested in talking last time." She swallowed. She didn't actually rub her neck, but I knew the look of someone who'd stared death in the face very recently. I figured he'd probably tried to choke her. It's easy for a vampire to do quickly and it doesn't give us away in an autopsy. So, he wasn't completely new and he was a little smart, just as I'd thought when I realized he was probably stealing blood from the hospital. Another note in the mental case file.

"He might be next time. So, we're talking about him; let's talk about him. What did you see? What happened?"

She shook her head, but I put up a finger. "Nuh-uh. We had a deal. You set the terms yourself: we talk about the Blue Devil and then if you like what you hear – and I don't see how you couldn't, because I've given you everything I know and plenty of prognostication on top of that – then we get to talk about the vampire you met."

She didn't like it, but she was honorable. Definitely military. Some kind of elite. I could tell that, for sure. Humans always hold their past out in front of them like a map drawn to show everyone else where they just were. She drew a breath and told me the story.

When it was over, I whistled long and low. "You got lucky," I said.

"Yeah."

"It sounds to me like he's farming these twins. He probably hoodoos them up to forget about the drinking when he's done. Either that or they found out they're into it. The rare human who's really turned on by it is also usually pretty ashamed. I mean, they're basically being molested, right? There's a serious power differential going on and someone who's probably or at least *potentially* much, much older than they are is showing up and performing an act of physical and psychological violence on them, violating them intimately. It doesn't have to be sexual but it sounds like for at least one of them it is. I'm going to guess they're the pervy types of victims based on the one in the living room crying while it happened to his brother. Either that or there's some kind of weird twin telepathy thing going on and one of them is feeling the pain while the other feels the pleasure."

She blinked at me in surprise. "That... happens? What, does this happen a *lot*?"

I shrugged. "Not all the time, no. I've never done it, anyway. But there are definitely humans who get into it, who get into the feeling of being that thoroughly dominated and, I dunno, *owned* by someone else. It's a form of retreat, a way of giving up and letting someone else do all

the thinking for a while. It's what they have in common with drunks and religious fundamentalists and anybody else who finds a hole to climb inside and pull closed after them." I chuckled a little. "Now, a smart vampire has mostly willing victims, yes, or is extremely careful. Nobody in his right mind would feed off of the same person every other night. I mean, eventually someone notices that kind of thing. Sounds like the kids in your neighborhood certainly did."

"It's not really my neighborhood, it's just one I patrol."

"Then it's yours," I said. "Possessiveness works just as well as possession for being nine tenths of the law."

"At any rate, so, like, what do I do about them?"

I shook my head. "You don't do squat. You go deal with the Blue Devil. I take care of the vampire. We wound up with each other's problem by mistake. Now we swap and go our separate ways. It's that simple."

She laughed, rich and sharp and echoing. "No. This vampire is operating in... in *my* neighborhood. I don't leave it to another monster to clean up that monster's mess."

"We look out for our own," I said, "And I don't mean look *after*, necessarily, I mean we keep an eye out for each other and any problems each other might cause. If there's a vampire being noticed it's a problem for all of us. I take care of problems. That's my job."

"And do you do that because you're bored? Or because you're here and you have the skills and that's what matters?" She smirked a little again.

"I do it because if I didn't, someone else would. That someone else might turn out to be lousy at it, too, or make life hard for all of us. I do it so that no one else *will*." I held out a hand, palm up, by my side. "If the choice is me or some other asshole, I'll vote me every time."

"What, you're all Libertarians? Ayn Rand fanatics?"

I groaned audibly. "That kind of thinking has a certain amount of purchase among my kind, yes, but I think it's just that those types are even better leaches than we are. I mean, Christ, it takes a real asshole to grow up with all the benefits of a society with progressive social policies making life better for everyone and then, just as soon as you're done with your state school degree or your Pell Grant-funded private school education, you start bitching about taxes and public schools and welfare and minimum wage and all the other things that, thus far, have kept the rabble from rising up around you. If every asshole who's nineteen and self-satisfied is going to pull the ladder up behind himself, we're gonna need a whole lot more ladders and they're trying to burn them all as fast as they can get made." I paused. "Or something. I think I lost track of that metaphor somewhere."

She smiled a little. "How old are you?"

"Ninety, give or take." I don't know why I answered honestly.

"You sound like it." She chuckled again. "Weaknesses?"

"Off-limits. Suffice to say, if you cut off our heads, just like anything but starfish and earthworms, we die. Blowing our brains out with a high caliber bullet will work, too. Is that good enough?"

"Crosses? Holy water?"

It was my turn to smile a little. The classics! It was good to get them out there. "It's possible for someone to believe so hard in those things that they have a kind of psychosomatic reaction, but me, I don't believe in shit. I could drink the stuff." The truth is, it's more complicated than that, but that worked for now.

"Garlic?"

I shook my head. "Remember? Off-limits. Specifics are not happening."

She smirked. "You clam up when you don't like the direction the conversation is taking, too. Now, what are we going to do about this vampire?"

"No, you're going to do something about the Blue Devil and I'm going to do something about the vampire."

"No, we're a team now."

"Who says?"

"I do." She stood away from the railing. "I don't trust you. I like you, but I don't trust you. In fact, liking you might be a big part of *why* I don't trust you. You've been willing to tell me a little about yourself, though, and what you are, and that counts for a lot."

"I wish I could say the same of you," I sighed.

"Delta Force." She blurted it out. "So was my husband. That's how Delta Force works a lot of the time."

"Emphasis on the past tense, I take it?" I frowned a little. It's not common for sorrow to make someone active; it usually happens when they turn it into anger.

"When your spouse dies, in Delta Force, they let you go. They cut me loose. Pension, honorable discharge, the usual. I came back and couldn't find much of a job so I made one."

"This economy can't be easy to come home to."

"You seem to be doing fine," she said. "I guess blood isn't expensive."

"The drinks you buy 'em are, though. Our makers usually set us up with something like a nest egg. It's part of the system. You aren't supposed to turn someone unless you can set them up on their own. Fantasies of vampires working the third shift at the gas station are few and far between in terms of actual execution. Usually, in a situation like that, the vampire *owns* the gas station and takes a few shifts in the winter months for amusement."

"So you've never made anyone?"

I worked my jaw. "It's one of those short, long stories. Suffice to say, she's gone."

"Took off?"

"Turned to ash." I chewed the inside of my own cheek. "I miss her every night. She had... promise. She was killed by one of us. It was a long time ago."

"Less than a human lifetime," the Bull's Eye said. It was the first soft thing she'd said the whole time. "Less than the span of memory."

I blinked. "That's from a poem. I don't know which one, but I recognize meter when I hear it."

"My husband's eulogy." She shrugged. "Life's a bitch. Shall we go find out if these nerds can help us or not?"

"By all means." I stood, flicked my cigarette off into the back yard where the dew could put it out, slid the door open. We were both ready for the change in subject. "So you figure he's pissed at religion in general?"

"The Blue Devil? Of course. Why else blow up the Divinity School? The rose compass on the chapel is easy – it's a big, obvious symbol of the school and something people walk past every day. The Divinity School, though? He collapsed it. He was eliminating it, not trying to make an example of it. He's probably a purely scientifically-oriented person who thinks the Divinity School is a drain on resources or a harbinger of superstition or something like that." She shrugged a little when I looked back to watch her close and lock the glass door. "Seems easy enough."

"But what if it's more that he's pissed they won't accept his views, which are different from their own? What if he's pissed at the fact that it's a *Christian* school and not an, I dunno, technopagan one."

"Because that would be stupid," she said. There was the tiniest of sighs in her voice. "He's smart enough to understand any number of complex systems and if he is a physicist who is seeing everything as being explained by string theory or quantum physics or something like that then he's also willing to accept new ideas. Therefore, it would not have been a challenge to him to accept that the complex political process of running a huge university might favor traditional religions over his own. He would have been capable of working around that or realizing he should go somewhere else, that kind of thing."

"That assumes his mind is working properly and ignores the difference between science and sentiment." I thumped down the steps to the foyer with her behind me taking light little cat-steps. "He's crazy. We shouldn't make any judgements predicated on the idea that he's processing information the same way a sane person would do."

We came around into the dining room, which looked into the living room, where Ramon, Chang, Xi and Dan were sitting with laptops open; Bob was watching Craig Ferguson do his opening routine. "Hey, guys," he said, like we were the other two housemates who were there all the time. I blinked, looked at the Bull's Eye, shrugged.

"Bob," she said, "Can you tell us about any physicists that Duke might have pissed off

recently?"

Bob paused the playback and looked at us. He rubbed his eyes. "Lots of them," he said. We waited for him to elaborate, and eventually he made a little "o" with his mouth and realized we were all ears. "They had some major cuts in their Physics department at the beginning of the semester. Something about misappropriated funds or something."

"No, it was a scandal," Dan drawled. He didn't bother to look up from his laptop. "They caught a physics student working on a project that involved human subjects but it wasn't approved and blah blah blah." Dan shrugged. "So he got booted."

"Can you tell us his name?"

Dan thought for a second, then went back to typing. "Sure. They said his name in the papers, but that's boring. Let me crack the Duke HR department's file server. It should just take a second."

"Wait," Xi said, holding up a hand. "We should take this as an opportunity to say our invocations."

Bob paused the TV, Chang looked up, Ramon continued to stare intently at the screen. Someone tossed something at him – a hacky sack, it looked like – and he started and looked around. "Invocations!" Ramon sounded like someone had caught him sleeping in church. "Right! I'll go get the glow sticks."

They ringed up in a circle around Dan as he typed, chanting what at first didn't really resolve as language for me but then eventually I realized was a mystical chant in some kind of computer speak:

10 WE CALL ON THE GUARDIANS OF THE WATCHTOWERS
20 WE CALL ON THE GUARDIAN OF THE EAST, THE WIND OF INTELLECT
30 WE CALL ON THE GUARDIAN OF THE SOUTH, THE FIRE OF PASSION
40 WE CALL ON THE GUARDIAN OF THE WEST, THE WATER OF CARE
50 WE CALL ON THE GUARDIAN OF THE NORTH, THE EARTH OF GOOD JUDGEMENT
60 WE CALL ON THE GODS AND GODDESSES OF THE MIND AND OF WILL
70 WE CALL MERCURY, WHO ESTABLISHES THE SESSION
80 WE CALL KOIOS, THE QUERANT, THE INQUISITIVE MIND
90 WE CALL ATHENA, OLYMPUS' GREATEST INTELLECT
100 WE CALL THOTH, THE GOD OF KNOWLEDGE
110 WE CALL SET, THE GOD OF HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE AND MYSTERIES
120 GOTO 10, THE CIRCLE IS SET

They chanted this in unison, three times, each of them calling one of the gods and

breaking his glow stick so that it gave off a weird, neon light the first time then passing the sticks to the left, clockwise, as they did the second and third iterations. Then the four who formed the circle around Dan closed their eyes and started producing a low, continuous hum as he hunched over the laptop and hummed.

"That's not even valid code." The Bull's Eye looked surprised, maybe even flabbergasted.

"For computers, sure," I whispered, "But maybe for the universe? Hell if I know."

Five minutes later, paper came stuttering out of one of the printers in the dining room. I walked over and took it out, looked at the picture and then nodded. "Yep, that's him. Geoffrey Hammerton. *Geoffrey*." I sounded it out, slowly, as joff-ree. "Christ. He might as well be named Whitey McFoxhunt."

The Bull's Eye visibly couldn't help but say it. "You know, you, yourself, are not exactly a person of color." She gave me an I-hate-to-say-it sideways glance. "I'm just saying."

"That doesn't mean I have to go around feeling proud of myself for how lily white I am," I said. "Or thinking it makes me better than anyone. I've drunk from enough pretty blond white boys with good teeth and big bank accounts to know they usually think they're pissing gold every time they go to the bathroom and look down."

That got some raised eyebrows from the technopagans and a smirk from the Bull's Eye. "You are an interesting combination, Withrow. Ninety and twelve, all at once."

"Thank you, madam," I said with a big grin. "I do my best to offend everyone. It's great camouflage."

Deal With The Devil – Chapter Eight

Please believe me when i say / This is how it has to end /

This is easy on us all / Well easier than other ways.

--The Cooper Temple Clause, "Murder Song"

The funny thing was, of course, that the technopagans gave us the low down on the Blue Devil but that wasn't who we went after first. Sorry, *after whom we went*. I normally try to speak correctly but some topics don't hold up well under the stresses of grammar. At any rate, we went after the vampire first and that was to be expected; he was the one we both wanted dead and we knew there wouldn't be any disagreement over morals or ethics on that score. The vampire had rolled up into my town – okay, so I lived a town away, but possessiveness, remember? *My town* – and he had done so without so much as a how do you do. I didn't explain it to the Bull's Eye this way but among my kind that's asking to get killed. Well, in most towns. In *my town* it certainly is, absent some serious extenuating circumstances, and a vampire who's walking down the street in the middle of the night and farming two kids who may or may not be into that and hamming it up as the neighborhood bogeyman is not telegraphing a lot of heartfelt hardship.

It was also the one that would be easy, or so we hoped. At least, I *expected* it would. The thing about a bloodsucker's pets – the people they feed off regularly – is that those people get... acquiescent. Especially in their dealings with other vampires. There's something about us – maybe they learn to recognize the smell, maybe not even consciously but in a way that influences them nonetheless – that they spot and they start getting really cooperative. They don't even realize they're doing it. They just do it. Every once in a while one of us has the experience of going out to a bar or on a winter evening run to Target or something and a human will all of a sudden get cooperative well beyond the bounds of normal customer service and get that dreamy look in their eyes, like they're remembering something really wonderful, and the light goes on: Oh. They have a vampire friend. They probably don't even know they have a vampire friend, but have one they most certainly *do*. Often it's funny; sometimes it's a little awkward. It's a little like being at a friend's fancy banquet and realizing you fucked the waiter a few years back and you both just recognized each other.

Anyway, I had figured we could just walk up, I'd start talking, they'd get cooperative and then we'd go inside and wait for the vampire to show up. Most of the time, that would have worked. Well, I say "most of the time," but that doesn't mean this happens often. Usually when one finds one's self interacting with some other vampire's "frequent flyer" then one walks away.

That's the polite thing to do. This wasn't a polite situation.

The Bull's Eye and I rode up around 10pm the next night, hours before the vampire's usual appearance. She was in her rarely driven old blue Cutlass Sierra, I was in the beat-up old '77 Firebird, black the beige vinyl interior, that I've driven since I bought it new for cash at one of those old inventory clearance "midnight madness" events at a Pontiac dealer in Raleigh. We went past The House so that we could park just around the corner. No winding up in a foot chase against someone in a car and no giving ourselves no way out that wasn't in the same direction as the new vampire's own preferred exit route, either. We took up posts on either side of the street and just watched for a little while, maybe ten minutes, but everything seemed exactly as it had been. She did a quick, small hand gesture that I figured was some sort of Delta Force sign language; some habit she'd picked up and probably didn't even realized she'd just lapsed into without thinking. I nodded and we both stepped out and started up the street, across from one another, scanning the houses on our respective sides of the street. In mine I could see, here and there, little faces watching us, eyes wide and crouched to peek over window panes or hide in shadows. *Wow*. So the kids in this neighborhood *had* seen it and really had started sitting up for it. Fascinating. I hoped none of them got any ideas like the Bull's Eye had done. I didn't need a dozen vigilantes to deal with in ten or fifteen years.

We walked back past The House again, just double-checking that end of the block, then turned and swapped sides of the street so that I was on the sidewalk that ran past the house itself and she was across the street watching my back. I didn't love letting her do that, but I knew which one of us was likelier to turn out to be pretty nasty and it wasn't her. I doubt she would have let me watch her back, instead, anyway. I stopped in front, stepped around the gate and stepped onto the front porch without a sound. I may be a big guy, and I may stomp around a lot, but I'm still a vampire. A delicate entrance and exit are our strongest play ninety nine percent of the time.

I raised my fist, rapped three times with my knuckles – heavily, steadily, something many of us wind up doing in the South out of a half-serious nod to the tradition that Death knocks three times – and was surprised at how little time it took for the door to open. I did some math – two nights since she'd been here? Something like that? An even number, probably. I figured the kid who was so into it he loaded his shorts when the vampire pulled out was probably the one who would be in a big hurry to get to the door.

The young man on the other side – tall, very thin, filthy blond, glasses-wearing, bookish and extremely hot – took a look at me and opened his mouth to say something, then stopped. His blank, emotionless expression twisted in an instant to something of hate and disgust. "Get out," he said, voice normal volume but his intonation a hoarse growl, a cry from somewhere deep

instead of somewhere high and shrill. We both blinked at it – he and I, even though he said it – and then he said it again. “GET OUT.” He started to slam the door but I have rarely let that stop me. I stuck my boot just over the threshold and the door stopped short.

“My name is Withrow,” I said, very steadily and evenly, hands in the pockets of my trench coat. “We need to talk.”

None of that was surprising or other than how I had figured it might go. What surprised me was when he tried so hard to close the door that it split at the point where it touched the toe of my boot. He wasn't as strong as me but he was sure as hell stronger than the door.

“I said,” I *said*, but he produced this guttural kind of peal of shock and maybe something not unlike fear and he bared his teeth at me. He, a human being, bared his teeth at me, a vampire. The door tipped forward, his hand still on the knob somehow caught it, and it twisted oddly and banged against the floor as it came down and sideways. He didn't look at it, but he did keep holding on.

“GO AWAY.” His voice was loud – really loud, neighbor-waking loud – so I sighed and put my hand in the middle of his chest.

“Inside,” I said, and I shoved him bodily backwards. What I noticed when I did was that he tried to hold his ground – tried – and though he failed he did so with more strength than I would have expected from someone with his frame or, to be honest, his vital signs. He was nowhere near as strong as a vampire but he was a lot stronger than a person. The Bull's Eye slipped across the street, up the steps and through the door around us before I'd even had time to look. I kept pushing and walked the guy into his own house, then looked at the mostly-broken door and said, “Do you got any of that Wild Glue or whatever it is?”

The other guy, the twin brother – much more calm – sighed a little. “Yeah. Lots.” He was sitting on the couch watching TV, legs folded up under him, a game of Solitaire abandoned on the coffee table in front of him. He hadn't even looked up at his brother's behavior. “Don't worry,” he said as he stood and walked into the kitchen. “He gets like that. He'll calm down.”

I stood there holding the brother at arm's length while the brother I was holding proceeded to glare at me with vaguely wild eyes and make noises of increasing complexity and decreasing pleasure. He could have reached up and hit me or pushed me or something, his arms were longer than mine, but something was holding that in check.

Ah, I thought. The other vampire. He's hoodoo'ed them not to fight back. Smart; also, incredibly cruel to do that much without going all the way to wiping their memories of what was happening to them. The Bull's Eye was standing there in the front hall looking it up and down, swiveling and bobbing a little to check every corner and angle without actually moving. I was about to ask her to take the foaming kid off my hands when a cement block flew past my head and exploded on the wall behind me.

"Now, Scott!" It was the kid in the kitchen shouting. "Fight now!"

Scott's eyes rolled back and his hands came up. Even as I was flipping that switch that slows time, I realized that this kid, too, was faster than a human being should be and his brother was stronger and they both smelled... delicious.

A lot like the Blue Devil did, actually.

The fight itself didn't take long but to me it took *forever*. Vampires don't have working adrenal glands but we still get that fight or flight instinct going and the hyper awareness of what's going on around us when we're surprised by danger that lasts long enough to outlive the initial confusion of being attacked. Scott, the kid on me, the one I'd pushed back inside, put his hands on my face and was trying to find my eyes by feel – his own eyes seemed to have rolled back into his head – and one of his knees came up to go for my groin. I dodged him easily enough and put my hands on his wrists, from underneath, to push him up and away. I had to exert effort to do it, though, whereas most humans are basically rag dolls compared to a vampire. You have to do your share of fighting to find that out – most vampires spend a long time unaware of how strong they really are – and I'd done mine decades ago. I was surprised at how much I had to work to get his hands away from me but once I did I swiveled backwards put one of my black poseur motorcycle boots in the middle of his stomach and held his wrists with my hands, then kicked. Usually that would knock his feet out from under him, maybe pop one shoulder out of joint and often wind up with him flying backwards into a wall – a guaranteed KO, nobody's going to get thrown around in a flash like that and keep fighting – but this time all it did was make us look like we were doing the stupidest dance ever invented. I dropped my foot, his arms burst free of my grasp and I wound up and delivered a punch I had plenty of time to line up with his jaw. That snapped his head back and spun him halfway around but he responded by following the momentum and twisting a full three sixty around to kick me in the side of the head. He was fast, too, so fast that I didn't see it coming. Either I had turned off the slow-mo or he had turned his *on*. Not okay. Not okay at all.

Just like that, we had dropped the choreographed bullshit and were on each other brawling like two drunks outside a dive bar. I was trying to pick him up to drop him on his head behind me; he was trying to beat me to death by pummeling my back and spine. His fists were landing like bowling balls made out of something way down the periodic table.

From under his right armpit I could see the other guy and the Bull's Eye launching themselves at each other at glacial speeds.

Scott finally hit me so hard I heard something snap and I buckled a bit but that turned out to be okay – when I dropped to one knee he pitched forward and banged his own forehead on a coffee table. I knit the bone, whatever it was, as I rolled out from under him and leapt like a cat

to land on his back. My instinct was to drop my fangs and go to town right there, drain him dry and then see how his brother might taste, but the Bull's Eye was in the room and that made that *not an option*. Sometimes I think that's all civilization boils down to: the persistent presence of others preventing us from expressing our most basic whims. So, instead, I grabbed his arms and twisted them back behind him, got my knees on him with my three hundred pounds behind them for emphasis, and I donkey punched him once at the base of the skull. I tried to pull my punch so I wouldn't just pulverize his head but I was going to be just fine with a mild concussion. He fought getting knocked out, struggled and strained even as he started to go limp, and I did it again. That kind of thing is extremely risky – it's far safer to just drink enough from a victim to make them pass out than it is to go hitting them in the head, at least if you want them alive and thinking and conscious afterward, because the brain itself is a marvel of delicacy and you can really, permanently fuck someone up that way – but it was what I had. This kid was as strong as me, almost, and almost as fast, and he knew what he was doing in a fight and I had to get him neutralized in a hurry.

When his face smacked the hardwood floor – cheap, worn by time, in bad need of refinishing – I noticed blood shoot in either direction, probably from his nose, and I let time drop back to normal. That stuff is hard to maintain for long periods of time.

Behind me, the Bull's Eye and the other guy, the other twin, finally got to each other. I guessed they had seen a kind of blur and screeching and then it was over, but they were just getting started. I confess that I did not act as quickly as I could have because I wanted to see what she was capable of. It turned out she was capable of plenty. When the United States Army trains someone for Delta Force they train them in everything – I read a book about them after all of this was over – and I mean *everything*. When she said that the technopagans' chant wasn't valid code that's because the Bull's Eye knew a little programming as part of her training in electronics in general. They are probably the most highly trained, most capable human individuals on the planet. The kid that came at her was strong and fast and extremely agile, more agile than his brother, but all that did was help him try to close the gap between his abilities and her skills. She blocked every attack, bounced on her feet, stayed in motion and dodged several wild swings, then delivered a precision punch to the middle of his chest that had the kid on the floor and gasping for breath in the next second. She hopped backwards, ready to keep going if he stood back up, but he stayed down.

I dropped my fangs to get their attention and said, low, “Now, tell me what the hell is going on with you and your favorite vampire.”

The kid looked at me, at my teeth, and started crying big, heaving, honest sobs, bless his heart. The Bull's Eye shut the door, leaning it in place so at least from outside it would *look* closed. Now they would talk. We both knew it, and we were both glad to have gotten them to

that point without having to kill one of them to prove we meant business. Neither of us said anything, but the way we were avoiding looking at one another said it plainly enough: we had been in this situation before and neither of us loved it very much.

Scott slept it off in a back room. I mentioned to his brother – Adam, he told us – that there was a risk of a concussion but he just snorted and ignored that. I couldn't tell whether he didn't care or whether he thought that wasn't possible for someone with the physical skills of Scott or himself. I wasn't interested, in particular, either, so I didn't push him about it. I just took it for what it was and moved on. The three of us sat down in the living room to talk, like civilized people, because that's what you do when you're done fighting someone half to death: you treat them like a person to try to get them on your side. It's a lesson the Bush administration could have stood to learn, but that's neither here nor there. The Bull's Eye sat at the other end of their couch from Adam – a worn old plaid print on a synthetic fiber of some sort that looked like it came from the dumpster behind a secondhand store, and maybe it did – and I sat in a wingback chair upholstered in orange vinyl. Neither of us were physically restraining or threatening him, but Adam couldn't have gone anywhere without going past one of us to get there.

"It started three months ago," he said. He was staring at the floor, not at us, and his eyes were focused on something much farther away than anything in the room. "It started when we were being worked on by a do... by this guy who called himself a doctor. He wasn't, but he said he was. We figured he was a medical student or a resident or something at the hospital. He had a Duke ID, he had a facility on campus, he had equipment with Duke University property tags on them. It all seemed really legit." He smiled a little. "And we knew, in some ways, it wasn't."

"How so?" I leaned forward a little in the chair. "What were you doing?"

"Scott answered an ad he saw online, on craigslist or something. It was an ad asking for volunteer subjects in a study of the effect of vitamin injections on muscle mass. Scott and I are almost identical, physically, but he's always been the smarter one and I've always had better coordination. I played soccer in high school. He played chess. I think he's always been jealous that he and I could have effectively identical muscle mass and body fat and physical dimensions but I've always been able to beat him in sports. I never cared about him beating me at trivia. It's just... you know, it's the way things are. Every game has a loser." He didn't look up, but he paused.

"You were the one winning the games that were socially acceptable and encouraged," I said. "You were the popular one."

"We were both popular. Twins are viewed as a unit. We were seen as the perfect man with two bodies." He smiled very faintly, like he'd just recalled a fond memory of a dead relation. "Sometimes that's more popular than you might expect."

Neither the Bull's Eye nor I grimaced or otherwise showed surprise. He was right, shit happens and people get into weird stuff. That wasn't the weirdest thing I'd hear today. Hell, it wasn't the weirdest thing I'd heard since we *got* here. The Bull's Eye didn't move, but did continue to watch him as she said, "Fair enough. So tell us about the vitamins."

"They weren't vitamins." He said it almost completely flatly, as though we hadn't figured that part out yet and he was dropping some revelatory bomb on us. "They were... something else. They did something to our metabolism. Our appetites shot through the roof and kept going. At first, with just a couple of injections, we were eating a fourth meal, maybe a fifth, or we were eating *really* big at the normal three. We were never breakfast people but we found ourselves waking up earlier and earlier to make full breakfasts. Then we started eating bigger breakfasts, then snacks, then two lunches, on and on, and we weren't gaining anything. We just kept eating and even though our bodies weren't changing dimensions we were both getting stronger and faster. We started..." He laughed a little, suddenly, and then looked sad. "We started playing ping-pong again. We played when we were kids. We'd play against each other, always, and never anyone else, and I would always win. We started playing ping-pong again at the Bryan Center and we noticed that if we pushed we could get faster and faster and we could maintain a volley for... minutes. And a fast one. Someone said we sounded like popcorn in a microwave. It started attracting attention. I said we should stop playing in public because people were a little freaked out if they watched us long enough to see how fast we *really* got. We would go so fast I couldn't see his hands. If I tried to watch mine then it all fell apart, but if I just let myself go, if I let my hands guide themselves, we would just play and play and play. It was like I could turn off the conscious part of myself and exceed all those boundaries that I'd always pushed against as an athlete. Scott was experiencing the same thing and, in his case, for the first time he could push against those boundaries and get past them. I..." He sighed slightly. "We loved it."

"So you, what, bought a ping pong table and moved across the freeway?" I wasn't actually as perturbed as my question sounded, but I wanted to keep him talking. If he got comfortable enough he might stop thinking of this as an interrogation and the fact was, we had information we needed to get.

"No." He looked up and at me for the first time, but only briefly. "We were roommates on campus. We would do things like play patty cake – two grown men playing patty cake in their dorm room at night – or we would go to the gym in the middle of the night and take turns trying to see how much weight we could sneak into a bench press. We were like kids again, though. Anything fast and dextrous or heavy or anything like that, any sort of physical work like that, we would compete at it. It was like in a racing game, when you can play against your own 'ghost'? Like in Mario Kart?"

I had zero clue what the hell he was talking about, but the Bull's Eye seemed to get it. She

smiled a little, to herself, and they shared a glance of understanding. She spoke. "And then something went wrong."

"Yeah. Sometimes bad things would happen. I was in a soccer game and I got my feet tangled up with another player and I ended up breaking his ankles. Both of them. I didn't mean to, it was just... I didn't know my own strength anymore. I was an athlete in a body that had outpaced me. I couldn't trust myself on the field, and everyone thought I had done it on purpose and they *liked* that. Sometimes soccer is a dirty sport, it's the price of playing a game that thinks it's still competing with football for attention even though football won that one at least seventy years ago, and sometimes players are dirty because they have a chip on their shoulder about that kind of thing, but it wasn't what drew me to the game and it wasn't what I wanted. I told Scott that we should quit the trial, that we should stop going. He didn't want any part of that, and I was scared..." His eyes moistened for a moment. "I was scared of what would happen to him if he didn't have someone there to watch out for him, to watch his back, keep tabs, however you want to say it." The kid wiped his nose on the sleeve of his long t-shirt, like a child. "He loved it. There wasn't anything he had been good at before that he was being prevented from doing by our new..." He searched for a word, and I provided it:

"Abilities."

He nodded after a moment. "Yeah. Once we were... *extra*, that's what we called it, *extra*... once we were extra then he stopped trying all the stuff he had done before. He quit the Strategy Games League on campus and dropped out of College Bowl and basically just sat around doing things like shuffling cards really really fast and putting his fist through scrap wood he'd get from this construction site on campus, where a dorm is being renovated. He would grab all this old paneling from one of the rooms inside, that they had removed and piled up in back to, like, cart off, or recycle, whatever they do with it, and he would just pick up a board and do things like spin it around on one finger, on its end, and then punch his way down it from one end to the other, and he would be so happy with himself for being able to do it. He didn't want to quit. I think if the guy had offered us more, he would have taken it."

"So what broke up this happy arrangement?" My heart bled, really, but the kid had juiced and he knew it. I figured there must be some new kind of steroid or something that the Bull's Eye had worked out, but it turned out not to be so simple.

"The Duke Athletics people. They thought I had taken steroids. Well, they were afraid that the guy whose ankles I broke would claim that, or sue, or, y'know, whatever. So they asked me to take a drug test and when I did it came back with something they had never seen before. They said there weren't any of the, you know, banned substances, but there were 'anomalies.' They wanted to know what I was shooting and I told them all I'd done was get vitamin injections."

I snorted. "Yeah, you and Lance Armstrong and a lot of bored rich people who think

'vitamins' and 'amphetamines' are spelled the same way on the side of the jar. So how hard did the Duke Athletics people laugh?"

His face grew grave and almost haunted for a moment. "They didn't. They asked where I'd gotten the shots. I mean, they couldn't accuse me of anything without some proof, right? That's what an investigation is. So they asked me where I got them and I told them about the ad and about my brother and me going to this lab in the Physics Department."

The Bull's Eye and I shared a quick glance. "Physics?"

Adam nodded. "'Bioengineering.' That's the term. Scott read up on it. He said it was 'constructionist' in that it tried to come up with new ways to modify living things, usually people, for health-related purposes. That's what this guy was doing. He was trying to invent..." He didn't laugh, more like he caught his breath for a second before going on. "It was like in Captain America. He was trying to invent super-serum. The Duke Athletics people got all that when they went there. They went and interviewed the guy and asked to look at his records and he refused, so they got the Department to seize his records and in the long run it all turned out that he had been working on us without..." He waved a hand vaguely, slowly. "Permission or something. He was supposed to go before some board or something and he didn't and that meant it wasn't okay for him to have human test subjects and here we were, human test subjects."

"All because you broke some kid's ankles?"

"It was an accident. It was the first match of the season. I'd been on the field maybe five minutes." He smiled a little. "That was two months ago. The paper never quite got it right, y'know, but they reported that something was happening in the Physics Department and that someone had gotten defunded and had his graduate project shut down and booted out of school. I was kind of relieved, but Scott got an email from him two weeks later, just when I thought maybe things would go back to normal, when things were starting to show signs of wearing off, but Scott was obsessed. He was... I guess he's addicted. And I couldn't send him by himself, now that I knew what kind of situation we were in. And I guess maybe I didn't want to give it up, either, so I said yes, and we kept going. We go every week. The guy gives us injections and has us do some tests for a while and then we go grocery shopping and come back home. We've been living like that. We couldn't take the weird vibe people were reflecting back at us in the dorms so we found a cheap rental in a neighborhood where we thought nobody would care and we moved in and kept to ourselves. We haven't been to class in weeks. Our mom is going to *kill* us. We haven't told her yet."

I grimaced a little. All that crazy shit to deal with and he was still worried about his mom? He was a kid, just a kid, and some other kid had shot him full of gods knew what as a guinea pig.

And, I realized, used it on himself in all likelihood.

"Was the guy named Geoffrey Hammerton? Blond, slim, good-looking?" I tried to describe

how he was dressed the first time I'd seen him, before he stripped down and put on the Blue Devil costume. I left off what else I thought: smooth as marble and defined like a *dictionary*.

"Yeah." He smiled a little. "Geoffrey. He had us call him 'Doc Hammer,' like the guy who writes *Venture Brothers*? It was weird, but it made it easier to trust him with a needle in his hand."

"What did he tell you he was using to inject you?" The Bull's Eye's attention was fully on the kid for his answer. Yes, they get trained in the sciences, medicine, everything. Apparently it takes years. Some vampires pass the time by sitting around reading encyclopedias, cover to cover, whole sets one after the other, and they do things like that: turn out to know a ton about some unexpected subject or show a reasonable working knowledge of countless disciplines. It's sort of amusing in a bloodsucker. It's kind of freaky in a human.

"B-12. I know, we were morons."

"Where do you meet him? Where do you go for the injections now?"

"This building next to Duke. It's... well, it's kind of hard to describe how to get there. It's in the woods. Sort of."

Damn, I was impressed: the Bull's Eye was not only still working, he was doing it from a building that was right next to campus. Hell, with all those woods around it, the thing might be *on* campus, technically.

"You can show us on a Google map or something. Now, the real reason we're here: tell us about the vampire who visits you every night." I leaned forward to give that some emphasis, but the kid's eyes went wide for a moment and then shut like he had fallen asleep. He just sat there, frozen. The Bull's Eye looked at me for a second and I shook my head. I knew what that was, and this wouldn't be the first time I had broken it. I reached over, put my hands on the sides of the kid's jaw, swiveled his head towards me and said, with all the mystical oomph I could pack, all the hoodoo, everything, "*Tell me about the vampire who drinks from you,*" and all the lights in the room dimmed for just a second. Outside, the night got just a smidgen darker and one of the street lights down the block popped and went out. I hoped the neighborhood kids stayed up for this once we went into the house itself. I'd hate for them to miss a show. I could feel him resisting – a reflex, something he didn't even know he was doing and was only doing because he had been trained to it by the interloper – so I pushed again. "*That vampire has no hold over you. Speak as a free man. We are the persons you can trust to help. We are your only hope for survival.*" Again the lights dimmed, flickering off for a few moments though that hardly affected me. The Bull's Eye had stopped staring at me and Adam and started looking around at the special effects. Deep in his mind, somewhere near whatever it is that holds the seat of who we are, I felt another rebound as it bounced off yet more preprogramming. "*If you do not tell us, he will take your brother and you will be alone.*"

Adam ground his teeth together for a few seconds and then the dam broke.

"His name is Mark and we are his favorites." Adam's voice came from somewhere high in his throat, straining, something barely surviving the trip up from his diaphragm. "He owns the house. He rents it out. He says sometimes he cons someone into thinking they've bought the place, but the paperwork is all fake. He usually kills whoever lives here so he can rent it out again but he says he's going to keep us here forever, or at least as long as he can. He says we taste the best. He says we make him stronger."

There was more in there, he just didn't want to say whatever it was. I leaned in. "*Keep talking.*" This time I just needed to encourage; I hadn't needed to break down the mental blocks like before. Shadows flickered around the room, but it was a lot less intense this time. I felt his inhibitions drop much more easily. I let go of his head and sat back a little. I realized abruptly that the Bull's Eye had been holding her breath and now she let it out very slowly.

Adam blinked. "He says he's lived here – in the Triangle, y'know – for nearly a year." Adam shuddered suddenly, blinked a few tears away and then looked from me to the Bull's Eye. "You can't let him take my brother away."

"We won't," she said. I absolutely believed her, too, and so did he.

"Is your brother..." I cleared my throat. "Is your brother, well, *into* it?" If I'd had a heartbeat I would have blushed.

Adam looked down and blinked a few more times. "There's nothing wrong, per se, with that. I just want to know the dynamic. I want to know *how much* to hate the guy. If he's been farming you under threat of death, that's bad enough. If he's been raping you, too, I want to make sure that when I kill him it *hurts*." That was perhaps too matter of fact – the Bull's Eye wouldn't quite meet my gaze – but it was the truth.

"Scott likes it." He licked his lips, looking very pale.

"Just so you know," I said, and I tried to be gentle, "Statistically speaking, identical twins show a higher incidence of sexual similarity than regular siblings." I cleared my throat again. "I'm not trying to pry, I'm just saying, if you found out you liked it, too, you didn't do anything wrong. Hell of a way to come out of the closet, yeah, but it's not your fault you're being taken advantage of. He's doing something we're not supposed to do. It..." I stopped and drew a breath. "There are certain things we avoid doing because they make us... worse. The things we do, some of them feed the person and some of them feed the monster, and what he's doing is the kind of thing the *monster* likes. Feed it enough of what it wants and it takes over. What I'm trying to say is, we're not all psychopaths and neither are you or your brother just because you happened to get caught up in the craziness of someone who is."

"We?" Adam's voice was very dead.

"I mean... well, I guess I mean a lot of things, maybe." I shrugged. "I ain't a therapist, at

any rate. So, you said that *he* said that you make him stronger?"

Adam nodded at the floor. The Bull's Eye was watching him very closely and she looked over and mouthed, silently and slowly, "Mild shock."

I sighed. Just what I'd been afraid of – that the reason they smelled so good was because the stuff did something to them that was transferrable by drinking – for a good ten minutes. I looked at my watch: Mark would be due to arrive in a couple of hours. We had to kill him the very moment he arrived.

Deal With The Devil – Chapter Nine

In this business, until you're known as a monster you're not a star.

--Bette Davis

I had wanted to put Scott and Adam safely away in the attic – I could hoodoo them both asleep so deeply they'd snooze right through any craziness that might happen while the Bull's Eye and I did our work – but Adam wouldn't hear it. He wanted to help, and he knew his brother might be hard to crack open the way I'd done to him but he said he wanted me to try because he would rather have them fight for their freedom than settle for having their servitude swapped around. I told him that I was going to put down this Mark, the intruder in my domain, and then he would be free, but he wasn't taking me at face value and I kind of had to respect him a little for that. He'd been through a lot, and he wanted to do something about it, and I could get behind that. Besides, he and his brother were strong and fast and useful, and this Mark asshole wouldn't be expecting them to fight on his side.

So, I sat down and I slapped Scott awake and he and I went at it for a while inside his head. He wasn't as willing to let go of the experiences he'd had with Mark and I knew there had been a point at which he had stopped considering himself victimized and started considering himself a willing, consenting participant. I don't claim to understand the complicated boundaries of the ethics of desire, so I didn't take that away from him. It was tricky, but I had to try to build in him a sense of the larger context: he was going to be killed by this, sooner or later, and in the meantime it was driving his brother mad. That was what worked, in the end, that sense of having a responsibility to someone other than himself, but it was slow-going and it took me the better part of thirty minutes. The things we can do to a human mind are usually imprecise and hurried – forget I was here; remember that we had a great time making out and I left; drive home and remember only that you stopped to help someone on the side of the road – and we don't get a lot of chances to practice subtle manipulations or memory engineering. That stuff is hard, and tricky, and it's never, ever permanent. Lots of people turn up every year with what's called “missing time,” by which they mean an hour or three that's just missing from their memory. They usually get told that means they were abducted by aliens because nobody knows to tell them it means a vampire played host for a while.

So, Scott and I played ping-pong with his psyche and I was able to persuade him to look at things in another light and he stopped fighting on the side of the mental blocks that Mark had put in place. Once he was allowed to remember what it had been like at first – the horrific pain of

having one's neck literally torn open, even if it was healed basically the moment the vampire got done with him, the hangover that wouldn't go away, the shame of being assaulted and getting off on it, the humiliation he felt when Mark callously turned that shame against him and used it to demand silence, to demand access to his brother, to demand loyalty – then he was willing to sign up to fight. We let them spend a few minutes in the kitchen just sitting beside each other being brothers again. They had a lot to work out, the way I figured it. That would be easier if they thought of each other as people again, and the sooner they started working on *that*, the better.

Plus, it gave me a chance to talk to the Bull's Eye alone.

"So," I said, "There is something we need to talk about."

"Just one something?" She was so damned hard to read, sometimes, in terms of her expression. The training to mask everything must be damned good. I knew some vampires who could have used that.

"Probably not, but there's something that's just come up."

She nodded, made a little *mm* sound that seemed to indicate to go on.

"It's... well, it's hard to explain. I've been fucking around in these kids' heads and something isn't right in there, something beyond the obvious 'no shit, Sherlock' kind of stuff they've got going on." I drew a breath. "Whenever we fiddle with someone's mind, it's like..." I was grasping at straws. I never had to explain this to anyone; vampires just *know*, like a baby knows air. "It's like trying to mash the buttons on an ATM machine that's buried a foot deep in oatmeal. No, it's not that precise. It's like trying to work a light switch under a foot of oatmeal. We kind of have to dip into this weird place, stick our hand in, feel around in a hurry, flick the switch the right way and go. There isn't a lot of time to look around and take notice, but that's okay because more immediate memories, the things we're usually trying to block up – don't look at me like that, the truth is the truth – are new and firm and fresh, and they're right there. They're as distinguishable from their surroundings as the metal faceplate of an electrical switch is from oatmeal."

The Bull's Eye didn't say anything for a moment, so I started to take another breath before she cut me off. "If you ever do that to me I'll kill you."

"I have no doubt of that. Wouldn't dream of it, scout's honor."

"You were not a boy scout."

"You're right, but I am absolutely sincere."

She considered for a moment, then said, "Go on."

"So, faceplates, electrical switches, oatmeal, right? Not these kids. The..." I searched around. "The faceplates are falling apart and the oatmeal is going bad." I worked my jaw and then finally said, "It's not this Mark guy fucking with them, either. I know what it feels like when a human mind has been rearranged too many times by one of us. It starts to go sort of blank

and... smooth. It's hard to describe, but it's not this. These feel like it feels when dementia is setting in. It all sort of starts to turn into undifferentiated mush." I shrugged at her. "I'm sorry, I don't have a metaphor. It would be like trying to explain how to hear sounds. Just trust me, we know this stuff – *I* know this stuff – and there's something bad wrong with these kids."

"Is it going to get worse?"

"I have no idea. Not a neurosurgeon." I sighed a little. "I should put that on my door: Withrow, comma, Not A Neurosurgeon For Nearly One Hundred Years." I smiled. She didn't.

"Duly noted," she said, "And now, for the attack plan?"

"I figure we have the kids in the living room, you behind the door, me just inside it? He walks up, rings the doorbell, one of the kids opens it and we all attack."

She made a snorfle noise, exhaling something that was half laugh and half sigh of pity. "No. I take a position in the trees outside, high up, so he won't notice me. You take a position in a back bedroom. The kids are nowhere to be seen, in a different room. We leave the door unlocked. He will knock, get no answer, get curious and come inside."

"That would make me too wary. I think I'd just leave."

"You don't feel a sense of ownership over both the place and its occupants." She waved a finger, instructive in tone and body language. "He'll be wary, but he'll be lured fully inside. I begin my approach to the house, blocking his retreat. You attack from the front, I attack from the rear, the boys come in from either side. We box him in, flanked on all sides, easy takedown."

I admired it, and said so. She didn't smile in reply, but she did say, in a sharp way that made me think she was pissed at me until I realized it's probably how she said it in the service, "Thanks."

"If we do that, it's going to be easier for you to stake him." She blinked at me when I said that, but I went on. "If you're coming at him from behind, he's got less ways to stop you. He can't grab it and aim it away or take it in the shoulder or something."

"We have to... like, with a wooden *stake*?"

"It will just make him inert, but that's going to make it a lot easier to finish him off."

"How are you going to do that?"

"The boys and I are going to beat the hell out of him to distract him, at first, but as soon as he's got the stake in him it's easy: I drain him of everything he's got."

"Cannibalism?"

"Self-defense." I left off that, yes, it is considered taboo but only because it's so extremely satisfying, and that it would also give me a chance to see what this super-juice stuff is all about. "We tend to be our own best auto-immune system," I said. "Let us kill our own the way we know works."

She thought about that for a second before nodding, but her expression said she hated

having to accept that. "Will it traumatize the kids?"

I waved that off. "Nah. Think of it as aversion therapy. Really extreme, really messy aversion therapy."

The great danger we present to ourselves – vampires, I mean – is that we are creatures of habit. I'm sure Mark was wary the first night or two after his run-in with the Bull's Eye, the first time, but he probably got comfortable again after Scott creamed his shorts a time or two on being drained of blood. People fall back into bad habits like they pay extra, and the worse the habit, the easier. Mark showed up around half past one in the morning, to find a dark house, front door unlocked. He strolled right up the gate – I could hear him on the steps – and even though he stopped at the door and sniffed audibly, he walked inside. He didn't bother with the doorbell, and I had figured he wouldn't; he could smell me, and he knew the jig was up. He was arrogant enough to walk inside, though, and I was standing there slinging a yo-yo up and down its string, leaned against the wall, just as casual as a cat in a bird store.

"I smelled you a block away," he said. His voice was gravelly. He was pissed. He sounded like in life maybe he'd hit the whiskey and the smokes a little too hard, but it was emphasized by his emotional state. I was the intruder, now, and who the fuck was I, anyway? I could read all that, right on the surface, right away. Hell, kids across the street could probably tell it from his walk.

But, I had formalities to observe, and I did. I spoke, and as I did I could see the Bull's Eye drop from a tree in the front yard in utter silence. I didn't hear her at all, so there was a chance he didn't, either. "My name is Withrow Surrectt," I said, voice even and quiet. "I am the boss of these parts, and you've been here for a year without identifying yourself to me. I consider that a crime in my territory. Are you willing to submit to my authority and the behavioral requirements that come with it?"

He smiled. I couldn't see his face, he was a silhouette in the doorway, but from the movement of one side of his face I could tell he had, more accurately, sneered. He seemed to be dressed in a collared shirt and jeans and loafers. No jacket, and it was getting cold enough that time of year that he was pushing his luck just by being memorably unusual already. I hated things like that, the little stuff stupid vampires do when they think what they *want* is to get noticed so they can blow off some steam killing whoever asks too many questions.

"I'll take that as a no," I said. "*Boys!*"

Then time slowed to a crawl, and Scott and Adam came running out of the rooms on either side of the foyer, and Mark and I met in the middle, and I could see the Bull's Eye bounding up the front walk with the sharpened tip of a broom handle in her hands like a javelin thrower in an instant reply. I guessed she was four steps away from being broom handle length from Mark, and

at the speed he was moving it would take me, Scott and Adam everything we had to keep him busy that long.

Scott and Adam came in swinging, their fists connecting with the sides of his head, opposite one another, in a sick crack of knuckles on thinly-fleshed skull. I saw pain on their faces as the blows landed, which is to be expected. Punching someone really does hurt if you don't do it just right. I twisted on one foot, the other coming up to plant a boot heel sharply in Mark's stomach. That was supposed to knock his feet out from under him but, just like with Scott, he was too strong for me. Each arm shot straight out by his sides to hammer each of the boys in the chest and then he grabbed my foot and twisted so that I was listed into the air and spun like a tree trunk at a log roll. I went up into the air, bounced off the ceiling and came back down on my face. I didn't let myself take a moment to hesitate, though, rolling against the momentum so that I spun backwards across the floor as Mark's boot came down where I would have been if I'd just let physics direct me across the ground. I bounced up and dove, hands out, but he slapped my hands away much more easily than I would have expected. Scott and Adam were trying to recover from the punches to the sternum they'd each taken and as one punched Mark in the shoulder the other punched him in the opposite hip. That was enough to knock him sideways and tip him and I swung around to bring up a knee under the side of his head. He rebounded but I pushed everything I had to get to the other side in time to bring the other knee up under the other side of his head. Ultimately, that's what vampire fights come down to: trying to addle the other one so hard you get time to debilitate him in some more permanent fashion.

The Bull's Eye had made it one and a half running steps by that point, so I raised my fist and brought it down on Mark's nose, as hard as I could, before he had a chance to get his balance back. It hurt me like hell but blood shot out the middle of Mark's face and my fangs dropped as a reflex action. I raised my fist again and brought it down again to the sound of a sick wet crunch. More blood, all over my hand, so I did it five more times by the time the Bull's Eye had taken that last step and a half. She reared back, aiming, and drove the broom handle into the left side of Mark's back. It resisted before she broke the skin, then resisted again, but she had her full weight behind it, her face twisted with furious effort, and it occurred to me that this might not be the first time she had impaled someone on a broom handle because she certainly seemed to know how much the body tends to resist that sort of thing. I heard a snap as a rib gave way and then, like a light going off, Mark's frantic scabble to find a way to resist just turned off and he dropped into the same molasses speed as the Bull's Eye.

So did I. The Bull's Eye was standing over Mark, one thud later, with a broom handle sticking out of his back.

"Alright," she said to me. "Do your thing. Do it now. The four of you were a blur when I ran up here but you're panting and that tells me you had to exert yourself."

I checked myself. I was panting. I don't have to breathe, but the muscle memory is strong. I nodded. "Anybody who doesn't want to watch had better turn around," I said, then I hoisted Mark into the air by hooking a hand under each armpit, awkward from the broom handle still sticking out of his back, and hauled him into the kitchen so I could use the counter to brace him. They all followed, and that freaked me out more than anything.

"What," I said, "You *all* want to watch?" I didn't really expect an answer, though, which was good since I didn't get one. I bared my fangs, did the classic vampire hiss – some things we do because we just have to do them when there's an audience present – and said, "Mark, I do not know your origin but I do know your end. Let your death be a lesson to the vampires who stalk my domain!" The light in the back yard crackled and went out. I wasn't just saying it to sound good; I was saying it because I think saying that sort of thing aloud really might do... well, something. Something mystical, I guess, if I'm totally honest with myself. I don't know what, or how to explain why I think that. There was also a more practical reason: it might sound melodramatic in the moment, yes, but there are some things we *say* because we have to, because we have to remind ourselves of why we do things and why we *don't*.

I sank my teeth in, and life filled me up like light in a dark room.

Blood is full of a lot of things. Besides the chemical properties, the things we can taste right away – vegetarian; eats a lot of red meat; anemic – we also get a part of who they are. I'm not big on the mystical-istical hooah kind of stuff, in terms of laying it all out and putting together complicated and specific beliefs about how it works, but when we drink someone's blood we get some of what they've experienced: emotions, memories, what they're thinking at that moment. This guy was mostly thinking a variety pack of *oh shit this cannot be happening* and as his life passed before his eyes it did mine, as well. I had a brief flash of an absurdly beautiful woman, way out of his league, approaching him at a bar in the '70s. She said he'd live forever and be rich, and what he was, it turned out, was lonely and more or less permanently middle class. He had killed her two years after she turned him, because it wasn't all gumdrops and magic, and it had been messy and taken forever and he had hated it so much that he set out to kill a *lot* to try to get himself used to it and to vent the hatred he felt for everyone who was alive, who was still able to go out in the sun, who still had *aspiration*. That's what's hardest for many of us. There are a lot of vampiric failures, a lot of people who decide to watch one more *extremely warm* sunrise at some point in their first decade, because they get stuck being who they were when they were turned and they didn't actually like being that person; I mean, that's why they took the leap in the first place, right? But people are creatures of habit and the static, theoretically immortal undead are creatures of habit times a million. We turn into anachronisms all too quickly in the twentieth – sorry, the twenty-first – century and the first time prey looks at

us oddly because of our dated slang or the unfashionable clothes we wear to hunt or whatever, there's this little internal clock that starts ticking, silently, counting down to the night when we just can't take it anymore.

For me, it was the 1960's. At first I just couldn't handle hippies. I knew it was them or me, basically, and my maker reminded me that if I simply let time pass – and who has more time than a vampire, anyway – that it would, in fact, be *me* who won out. Hippies aren't gone, of course, and it's not that I feel the need to kill them on sight, they're perfectly nice people taken one at a time, but the whole psychedelia thing turned out to be a phase, another step in a cycle of fads and fashions that come and go, and with patience I was able to wait it out. I haven't loved any particular era that's come since then, but I have loved being here for them. That's the important thing, and that's why I plan to be the vampire who finds out whether immortality is for real. If I have my way, the day the sun goes supernova I plan to be halfway around the world, in the middle of wherever it's night at the time, raising a metaphorical glass.

This guy, though, Mark? His unlife hadn't been nearly as interesting and he hadn't been nearly as patient. He was unhappy and he took what small pleasure he could find in turning people into pets and then torturing them to death. He thought of it as feeding, as farming, as the simple pursuit of sustenance, but it was torture and a game and he knew it and he didn't care.

I drew the last of him out – the last, panicked, mentally kicking and screaming part – and as he exploded into ash, the broom handle clattering to the floor, my heft falling forward suddenly against the counter, I turned and spat a mouthful of blood onto the floor, unwilling to consume the dregs of that life. I don't eat just whatever I find around and I was not willing to let whatever poisoned him get a chance to do the same to me. That last spatter of him slapped the floor with a wet smack and hissed away to ash and smoke with the rest of him. Plenty of vampires wouldn't have thought twice about it, but to me there's a difference between food and trash.

That wasn't all his blood had, though. In it, running through it like a different shade of stone through a block of marble or like... like copper through the wall of a home, electric and invisible and powerful, there was this *thing*. I knew it had to be whatever the Blue Devil had been shooting the kids with. It was like fire. It was like lava moving through the earth. I felt so *alive*. I felt power like I had never known before. Every vampire has something called their Last Breath, and it's the power they manifest when they drain the life out of someone, and I could feel mine winding up like a spring, but this was something else. This was color and light and ambition. It was everything it means to be alive and vibrant and to have hopes and dreams. It was everything it means to be a human being: want, desire, need, lust, energy, restlessness, exhaustion, warmth, hate. It was emotion but it was also *essence*, the sense of some internal engine humming, a feeling that I could really *go places*. A sense that I was more powerful than I could possibly know.

The Bull's Eye was watching me carefully, holding her breath again, but the boys had fainted. When Mark died then very likely a lot of mental blocks, things left over, things I hadn't encountered and hadn't needed to break down, came tumbling apart. They were unconscious on the floor, breathing very lightly.

So were the neighbors.

So were the people two blocks over.

Vampires can extend their senses, reach out and grope around in the darkness in a way humans cannot, but this wasn't something I had to do. It was something that was happening to me. That's what it was, this stuff from his blood, that he had gotten in turn from the twins: *the connection between all living things*. I sagged against the counter, overwhelmed, slipped on the greasy ash that had been Mark and slid down the cabinets to sit on the floor, dumbfounded.

"Are you okay?" The Bull's Eye was being very wary. She was a smart one.

"I'm... I could walk through a wall of diamond right now. I could slice air in two with my pinky finger." I drew a ragged breath and felt my chest. We can make our organs work when we want to, but I wasn't making my heart beat and in fact it was not beating. I *felt* like it *should* be. I was as high as a Georgia pine.

I sat there, silent, for thirty seconds. I could count them in the quiet heartbeat tick of every bird and bug and stray cat and horny dog for blocks. I could time myself in the rustle of the dying leaves and the discouraged grass.

"We have to kill the Blue Devil," I said, gasping for breath. "We can't let this exist. We can't let..." I waved vaguely at the kids. "There can't be people running around with this in their veins. We'd all go crazy. I would go crazy. Every vampire in the world would go mad."

"Tell me what's happening." She crouched, eight or ten feet away, and I spun mad eyes around to look at her. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know what he's giving them, but it's... it's *life*." I tried to explain it to her, but it came out like metaphor salad, like a word jumble for English majors. "I... invert a concept with me, if you will. Imagine everyone in the world were methadone addicts and someone invented heroin. Imagine everyone were alcoholics in a world that only knew beer and someone invented moonshine. A starving world that invents filet mignon. A fish that invents water." I clutched myself across the chest to keep myself from jumping up and running circles around the house, many every second. If I let myself do it, I would never be able to undo that this was possible. "I feel so good I think it's making me sick."

She nodded. She'd seen the world. She'd seen desperation and need and what starving people would do to one another for a handful of rice and beans. "I think we should capture him and turn him over to the police," she said, very evenly.

"We can fight about this later," I said. "Give me five minutes. I think I'm going to pass out

anyway.”

Then I did. I came to after ten minutes, not five. The twins were in their room, not talking but sitting beside one another. The Bull's Eye was watching out the windows, prowling the walls to peek through narrow gaps. I was still in the middle of the kitchen floor, covered in Mark's remains.

I stood up, head clear, and walked into the twins' room. They both snapped their heads up. They were scared. Good things had never happened to them when a vampire was in their house. That's true for most folks, though.

“I need to know where you go to get your injections,” I said. “You are not coming with us. You're done with all this. You'll never go back for another injection.” Scott opened his mouth but I held out a finger and pointed it at him like a disappointed and emphatic parent. “Do not make me break your mind open like a cherry cordial, kid. You're done with that shit. I don't know if what you've got will wear off, but if it doesn't, stay away from me. Stay away from anyone who seems too pretty or too handsome. Stay away from anyone who ever says anything about immortality. All dates are *lunch* dates from now on. I will not be watching you, but she will.” I hitched a thumb over my shoulder because the Bull's Eye had walked into the hallway, foyer-ish thing at the front of the house. “You will never, ever let a vampire feed from you. If one does, kill them. You don't have to drink their blood; cutting off their head will do nicely, as with most things. Is that clear?”

They sat in silence. The Bull's Eye answered from behind me. “Yes. They've got it, or at least they will soon enough.” She cleared her throat. “Now, boys, like he said: where did you go for the injections?”

They gave us a street address. I didn't know it, but the Bull's Eye wrinkled her brow. “I didn't even know there was anything down that street.”

“Nobody does,” Adam said. “That's probably the point.”

She nodded at him, eyebrows quirked, and said, “Let's go.”

Deal With the Devil – Chapter Ten

*As for an authentic villain, the real thing, the absolute, the artist,
one rarely meets him even once in a lifetime.*

The ordinary bad hat is always in part a decent fellow.

--Sidonie Colette

Wilkerson Avenue in Durham is a little residential street that abruptly turns into someone's gravel driveway. At least, that's what it seems to be. If you keep going, you drive – or in our case, walk – past the house at the end of it and it turns out there is more of it. If you follow it, a few dozen yards down, impossible to see in the dark of night or, at best, easily mistaken for the back of a completely different facility, is a low, long, yellow-beige building that Duke University stopped using as a machine shop of some sort, at some point in the distant past, and now there's a high chain link fence with rounds of razor wire and barbed wire encircling the top all the way around. In the side yard of the building there are gigantic shelves that hold lengths of rusted pipe many feet long, pipes one might lay underground, and in front there's a standard royal blue Duke University building sign that's had the title of whatever it once was scrubbed off at some point in the distant past. The sign is remarkably newer than the rest of the place, and compared to the brown grass shoving futilely forward out of cracks in the unused parking lot, it's almost pristine. There are remains of whatever the building was once named just visible, the ghosts of letters making words no one needs to know anymore, and, for reasons I suppose I could explain – liability, convenience, forgetfulness – without ever really *understanding*, the lights are still on. The lights on the outside of the building burn just bright enough, at night, to discourage teenagers stupid enough to think razor wire looks like fun. The gate across the entrance to the parking lot is massive and on rollers that would allow it to slide out of the way if vines hadn't grown all up the chain link on one side or the other. I pitied the guy they would have to send out here to patch up the place once I was done with it.

The Bull's Eye and I had parked a couple of blocks away, remarkably close to the technopagan house, it turned out, and I had wanted to stop in there to ask them about the building but the Bull's Eye was eager to get things over with and all the lights were out anyway. “Maybe they had an omen,” I said with a dark little smile, but she didn't think that was terribly funny.

I looked over at her, standing at the gate. “Rip it open?”

“Be my guest.” She was cracking her knuckles under her gloves – knife kevlar, she told me – and I started popping twisted fence wire between my fingers like bubble wrap. It wasn't terribly

quiet, but I didn't much care.

We walked through the hole I made and stuck to the shadows. We both prowled – no other word for it – around the edges of the lot and at the back we saw a door hanging open. There were dim lights coming from inside and I nodded. “We can sneak up that way.”

“It's too bright,” she said, shaking her head, but we didn't have options. I shrugged, she shrugged, and we set off across tall grass that had been ignored for at least one growing season. It crunched. I still didn't care. We snuck up to the door and inside I could hear the clink and clatter of metal against metal. He was in there, and I guessed he was working on something. An abandoned building in the most remote possible corner of Duke University's campus. He had set up a secret lair and his greatest enemy – the university that made him – was footing the bill.

The Bull's Eye made some complicated hand signal and I nodded as though I understood, then turned the corner of the doorway and walked inside. “Evening,” I said. The Blue Devil was in there, in his outfit – surprisingly little the worse for wear – and he was busy bolting something to something else, what kind of looked like a big metal box, in a way that seemed a little clumsy but done with tremendous strength. When he would tighten a bolt I would hear metal squeak and I realized that the wrench in his hand was being slowly bent out of shape. I recognized what he was building: it's a kind of improvised bomb that has an armored back and sides to direct the blast. The Olympic bomber, that motherfucker in Atlanta, used one in '96. It's worse than a simple explosive; it's a device you'd only use on someone you really hated. I didn't know where or when he planned to use it, but it wouldn't be good no matter what, and I marveled at the idea that he would have superhuman strength and still rely on bombs. The wrench took another twist as he spun it around. He was *really* strong.

Great. I figured already that he had been sampling the product but I hadn't expected *that*. He must have started after he stole the outfit. Crazy.

He didn't even turn around. “Ah. The Bull's Eye comes to my lair at long last.”

“Yeah.” She was behind me, looking annoyed. “She does.”

He turned, very slowly, and his eyes were of course completely insane: bugged, not totally focused. He was still beautiful. I couldn't help thinking that. He smelled delicious, too. “So, if you don't mind my asking, who the hell is he? Your sidekick?” He smirked. I cracked my knuckles.

“He's the guy who wants to kill you to put you out of business.” She shrugged a little, as if to say, you know, like y'do.

“And what do you want?”

“I want to turn you over to the authorities so you can repay society for your crimes.”

He pursed his lips in an expression of mild surprise, perhaps even scandal. “Really? That's

terribly quaint, isn't it?"

Ugh. Privileged son of a bitch. The dripping sarcasm coming off a hottie like that said *I get what I want* in big, neon letters. Some of them blinked.

"No, it's how things work in the real world," she said. "I suspect you're going to cause enough trouble for them that the cops end up shooting you during an escape attempt, to be honest, but I don't get to decide that. You do. Now put down the wrench, step away from the metal box thing you're working on, and get down on the ground with your hands on your head."

He smiled, and in a flash the wrench was flying through the air. I dropped into slow-mo and saw that she had started dodging before he had started throwing. She knew how this was going to go, the whole time, but she had to do her thing. Some things we do because we have to, even when we know they won't work. I had mad respect.

The Blue Devil had started moving as he threw the wrench – it was just a distraction – and he was moving almost as fast as me and he knew where he was going and what he was doing, so he had the drop on me. There was an open, oversized trap door in the floor, like a metal door over a mechanic's bay or something, and he tumbled – tumbled, a straight-up somersault and then over the edge, like an acrobat – down into it and out of sight. I heard pounding footsteps as he ran. He was wearing jogging shoes under that get-up and I figured he had run his share of 5K's in his time.

I swung around to the Bull's Eye, who had started moving but ever so slowly, and pointed before I sprang that direction myself. When I dropped into it I found that it was the mouth of a tunnel, probably an old steam tunnel. Risky to be running down one at this time of the year, but maybe he knew more about what systems were in use and what ones weren't at this point in the autumn. I could hear him slowing down but still running. He couldn't keep the super-speed up forever, and that was good, because the Bull's Eye couldn't keep it up at all.

I waited for her to catch up, and then the two of us took off down the tunnel. I let her go first. This was her guy, after all, and her town, and even if it were my problem it was still her turf.

The tunnel ran in darkness. I could see where we were going and I would occasionally say "left" to get her around some obstacle or a rock or something like that. There were rats running like crazy, way up ahead, away from us, and I wondered if we would catch up and the Blue Devil would stumble into them. An unpleasant thought, but an easy nab. No such luck. He took a sharp turn at one point and in my mental map that put him somewhere in the direction of the center of downtown, the loop, where the Carolina Theatre and a bunch of bars and restaurants and law offices could be found. All of a sudden he leapt and shot through a manhole, blowing the cover out of his way, and I could hear him running across pavement. "Up," I said, and I took three extra steps to catch up to her and hoist the Bull's Eye myself but she was already gone, up

the ladder, faster than I could have imagined a normal human being could go. She was good, and I kept forgetting that.

We popped out on West Chapel Hill Street, running down it and around a corner, past the police department despite being in the middle of the street. None of them seemed to notice. I wasn't hugely surprised. They had plenty other things to do. He dogged left, down Duke Street, towards Brightleaf Square, and he faulted a wrought iron fence to land on top of a car – alarm immediately blaring – and then he took off running across all of them in that row, not touching the ground but just leaping from hood to hood. Every single car started blaring and lights started flashing. Unsubtle, but subtlety wasn't his game. Attracting attention would create confusion and provide him, ideally, a way to escape. Even if he couldn't, attention would probably keep me from killing him. He was a smart one.

He pounded pavement right down the middle of Duke Street, towards Main, where an old woman had just stepped into the street to cross Main from south to north. He shot through, shoving her, and a ridiculous SUV with a big DUKE UNIVERSITY sticker on the back window shot past between us and them. When it was gone, the old woman was laying, dazed, in the pavement and the Blue Devil was racing up the sidewalk towards those same ancient, empty tobacco factory buildings past which I'd walked the night it all started, when I had to walk to Duke to follow the smell of the interloper who turned out to be Mark. The SUV would have killed that lady, I realized. He had saved someone's life and he doubtless hadn't meant to. I shook my head. Life is nothing if not unpredictable.

The Blue Devil turned and shot across the street again, from north to south, with us in hot pursuit. The Bull's Eye was gaining on him, being in just as good physical shape and having spent years training in pursuit and capture. She was able to cut corners, draw direct lines of approach and otherwise do the complex calculus of chasing down someone who didn't seem to know where he was going other than *away*. I was able to keep up but it was taxing me. If I weren't careful I'd get hungry and a hungry vampire is not the one you want making moral or ethical decisions.

The Blue Devil shot through a door that had been, up to that moment, chained and padlocked shut, and up some a random stairwell into darkness. The stairs were covered in broken tiles and old wood that had started to crumble. At one point this had been the entrance to some part of the factory devoted to offices, and accordingly better appointed, but that was decades ago and time didn't stand still for interior design. The place was covered in dust and and his footfalls and ours were kicking up clouds of it on every step. He was taking the stairs two at a time, as was she; I was pounding to keep up, but not doing a very good job.

By the time I got four floors up, where they had exited the stairs onto a mostly open, refuse-strewn cement floor where cigarettes were once manufactured, they were fighting. He was trying to punch her but he didn't know his own strength or, much, his own dexterity. He was

doubtless physically superior to her in strength, but he didn't know how to fight or what to do with his body's abilities. She did, and she was bobbing and weaving and staying just out of range or just an inch to the right, whatever was necessary. She had fought men three times her weight in caves in Afghanistan and jungles in Central America. She had killed two bodyguards of a fleeing Mexican drug lord who had agreed to testify in America in return for keeping half his wealth in a Swiss bank account, under the last administration. She had dropped out of trees to garotte her targets, punched their tracheas closed and kicked people so hard in the kneecap that their legs had nearly fallen off. She was a swift, targeted combatant and while he swung wildly she slowly – very slowly, *insanely* slowly – was wearing him down, punching him in the upper arm to weaken his swings, kicking him in the shin to bobble his sense of balance. They were flying at each other like two cats having a fight. I stopped just to watch. Like the bellydance from a month or more before, this was in its own way beautiful and I had to take a moment to appreciate it.

I realized, as I did so, that we weren't alone. There was another way in, or the chains had been rigged, but there were a handful of squatters blinking at this ridiculous melee from the shadows of the room. Light from the grime-covered windows and the half-open bay door – gaping four floors above gods knew what alley – were reflected in their wide, shocked eyes.

I wanted to help her, but I knew that I couldn't. She would hate me if I did. She didn't ask me to, as I had asked her, and among my kind that is a wall we don't dare try to climb over.

I heard a smack and a crack, and one of her gloved hands skittered off the Blue Devil's jaw as a tooth flew in a slow, beautiful arc across the room. Then another. She had started to get the best of him, finally, with a hundred thousand tiny punches. He had managed to connect with her a time or two, too, and I could tell from the way she moved her left arm that it might be mildly fractured or at least sprained at the shoulder. I didn't know how he had managed that, but she was wounded. One more punch sent him spinning away.

He smacked against the wall, she leapt towards him to deliver the knockout, and his hand came up with a hunk of rebar. She impaled herself on it before she even knew it was there. Blood flew everywhere and she took two steps back, the metal slipping slickly from his grip.

She staggered. I took a step to move in but she wasn't down yet. Even as I stepped forward, she spun and planted a roundhouse kick right in the side of his neck. I heard bones snap, big ones, and the light went out of his eyes. He collapsed against the cement floor with a sound like meat. He was as dead as he could be, whether she meant him to be or not.

She sagged to her knees next to him, and I finally got there. "Let me call 911." I already had my phone out – damn that public services would have a number I used, I could get a new phone tomorrow, I could get a hundred new phones, I didn't give a shit – but she drew a panting breath and shook her head. "Let... me... assess..." She was very lightly touching her own abdomen, feeling around, wincing, eyes fluttering as she did so, then she shook her head. Blood

was flowing out all over, smelling like you wouldn't believe. I knew she was dying, that the broken off rebar was too uneven, too ragged. It wasn't like a knife wound, where the knife can stanch the flow of blood in the wound it creates, if you get lucky and you leave it there. This was a gaping wound he had torn open all the way through the core of her body, and she was fading fast.

"Could you save me now?" She fluttered her eyes again. "If you turned me, would I live?"

I looked at her. I could. I could turn her right there and pull out the rebar and the wound would close right up. She'd probably have to drain all the bums in here, but it would work.

"Would it work?"

"Yes," I said. I hesitated to say more. I didn't know what to say. We see death all the time, all around us, but we rarely give a damn.

"Imagine what I could do." She blinked. Her eyes were losing their focus. Only seconds now. "Imagine what I would be capable of." She turned her face towards me, but not her eyes. Her eyes were elsewhere, looking out the gaping door with its rain-pissed particle board half over it. She was looking at the night and the moon and the stars and the skyline of her city, what little skyline it had.

I cleared my throat. "I already have," I said. "That's why I can't turn you. I already have."

She smiled again. "I didn't want you to," she whispered. "I just wanted to know if you would."

Then she shuddered, a convulsion that traveled all up and down her body, and her eyes didn't close but they did go dim. She started to fall over but I reached out and caught her so that I could ease her down. The Blue Devil might have deserved to die in a hard thud against concrete, but she didn't.

I could have turned her, an a part of me wanted to, yes, but like she said: imagine what she would be capable of. She was a noble and brave soul, who fought for what she believed in and took her job seriously. She had a city to protect and she had done so, one bungled burglary or one weird house full of victimized twin brothers or one self-made super villain at a time. She was a hero, a real and true one, and I didn't have any room for that kind of thing in my operation.

I laid her body down on the concrete as the last of it poured out. I could have even bitten her at the last second and taken in that final spark out of greed, sure, but her death had been her own. I didn't have the right to take that from her.

I closed her eyes, and turned around. The bums were still watching. "She was the Bull's Eye," I said aloud. "*You will forget that I was here.*" I paused, and added, "*But you will remember her.*"

Then I stood up as they glazed over, their minds working to process the orders they'd been

given, the modification I had made, and walked down the steps, slowly, and out to the street, and eventually back to my car to drive home. I could cry another time. I stopped and called the cops from a pay phone, one of those rarities one is always glad to see at times like that. They went and cleaned it up and the papers got everything wrong which was just fine by me.

In later nights, at the end of that week, Seth and I paid a visit to the technopagans and marched them over to the Blue Devil's lair to tell us what everything was. It was a long night, and then another, and then another, but eventually they made sense of his notes and his formulas. Seth took care of the bombs he'd been building and the technopagans told the Blue Devil had come up with a cocktail of steroids, stem cells and chemicals of his own making that amped someone's metabolism. It had crystal meth in it; that's part of what made them so strong. Meth turns off the part of the brain that tells you to stop straining a muscle or you'll damage it. That's where meth strength comes from. They were all destroying their bodies a little every time they performed some feat of strength. The technopagans were able to turn up one more thing that was important: the stuff destroyed brains. It didn't just make people crazy, it did something to the actual gray matter or the nervous system in general or both. The twins' minds were mushy because of ongoing brain damage. It would never correct itself. The technopagans were pretty sure it would keep getting worse. On the plus side, the physical enhancements would fade in time. I made a point of stopping in to check and, sure enough, within a month the twins were borderline mentally handicapped and back to their normal capabilities. They didn't really recognize me. Their memories were shot. I wondered what their mother would think now. I didn't call anyone, though. I didn't want to leave the cops too clear a trail to follow.

Seth and I burned the Blue Devil's little lair to the ground – the technopagans turned up that it was on the Duke Medicine power grid, for whatever reason, so the lights would always be on, forever, and an alarm would probably fire and summon the authorities once they figured out where the hell it was.

I then tracked down the Bull's Eye's mundane identity and went to her house and spent hours boxing up everything I could that was hand-written. I found her medals – I left them alone – and I took her journals, years' worth, and studied them in detail. She was a meticulous diarist. It made piecing together how she got in this situation possible, and I was intensely grateful. I thought about burning them, but I ended up putting them in the attic of my house in Raleigh. Vampires do that a lot: mementos.

Real estate records turned up three other houses owned by Mark, all of them with high turnover rates. It had been sheer bad luck that the twins wound up in one of his houses. Rent checks started going uncashed and tenants never seemed to complain. I didn't blame them. It would be a while before the county noticed anything. One more property turned up, one with

boarded up windows, an old log cabin sort of thing way down Fayetteville Road in southern Durham, near the new mall. It was set way back off the road, with a pedestrian hiking trail running through the woods behind it. There were no effects in the house, proper, but it had a basement decked out like a grenade had gone off in the '70s. It was clearly his personal haven and he had decked it out in the gaudiest reminders he could find of a time he was happy and alive. I torched it personally.

My city was mine again, the intruder was gone, and so was the hero I didn't want to ever have to put down myself. On occasion we, vampires, get to be the hero, too, and it's an intoxicating experience. Some of us play it like a game, doing good here and there and sometimes fighting a real bad apple just to see if we still have it in us, but at the bottom line we can only hope to survive and sometimes that means having to be the villain, too. I was glad I had never been forced to be the villain to the Bull's Eye. I was glad that my turf had one less hero in it, and I was glad it hadn't happened by my own hand. There are plenty of nights where the most we can ask is not to be at fault, cold comfort thought that might be, and I was glad to be able to go back to that: a nice, quiet life in charge of a bunch of psychopaths, feeding with as much discretion and luxury as I could, attracting no attention, encouraging no heroics. Vampires aren't heroes. We are survivors. The two are not mutually exclusive, but neither are they the same.