

# HER STRENGTH UNBOUNDED



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My thanks to Olivia, Ben, and my father  
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# Sarai

“So, you know a bit about the stuff we do here?” asked Pat as he walked across the factory floor.

Walking half a pace behind him was a man of average height, but he had a large frame and a three-inch scar on his left cheek. “You bet. Worked off and on in shops most o’ my life,” he said.

“Sounds good. We help a lot of companies looking to outsource light manufacturing and fabrication work—pretty much anything they need, we’ll do. So the more you know about a variety of tasks and tools, the better.” Pat turned a corner, walking between several machines being operated by oily, dirty men with heavy overalls and the briefest of disapproving glances at the new hire. “Down here is where I’d like you to start. Billy!” Pat put his hand on the shoulder of a short, stubby man with greying brown hair who was mostly differentiated from his coworkers by the tattoos that crisscrossed his arms and neck. “This is Billy, one of the clowns I have to supervise.”

Billy grunted, looking with the same disapproval at the man Pat was introducing.

Pat put on what was either a fake smile or one that hid some masochistic impulse behind false charm. With his thick, dark moustache and dark hair, he bore a vague resemblance to Groucho Marx. “Billy,” he said, “we’ve the wonderful opportunity to use and abuse Rick here. If you don’t mind, show him the ropes. I’d like him to have two thousand of these parts etched with serial numbers by the end of the day.” Turning slightly and putting his hand on Rick’s shoulder, Pat said, “If he can manage that, maybe we’ll see what we can give him to do tomorrow.” After giving Rick a slap on the back, the mocking smile never leaving his face, he turned and walked back down the aisle and disappeared somewhere into the factory.

Rick watched him walk away until Billy growled.

"Come on, I've got work to do. I make these parts here, and I need you to put numbers on 'em." Leading Rick to a stained table with a small box plugged into a socket on a steel post, Billy said, "This is the electro-etcher, and here're the printouts of the carbon etch. Turn the power on, put the paper on the electrode, dip it into the fluid, and press it against the metal tags. That'll etch the number." Billy's entire explanation consisted of several gestures, but nothing of particular assistance in demonstrating the process he was crudely describing. "Make sure you don't press too long, or you'll blur everything. And don't jiggle it. Just press down. Bring me a few after you've tried a couple test runs." He threw a few pieces of scrap metal on the table. "Then you can get working on the pieces. Pat said something like two thousand. You better get more than that done in eight hours."

As Billy turned to lumber back to his table, another worker who was walking down the aisle and wearing a heavy welding mask bumped into him. The force of the collision almost sent the heavy-set Billy onto his back.

The masked figure wore heavy canvas pants with a white sleeveless shirt and had smooth arms that were thin but wiry, with muscles like cords strung tight on the bones. In one hand was a torch welder and a length of hose, the end disconnected from any source of fuel.

"Hey, watch it you dumb piece a—oh." Billy reached out and flipped up the mask with a snicker; "Time to wake up, darlin'."

"Billy. Look before you step in front of me, or next time I'll land you on your fat ass," the other said, reaching up and pulling the mask off entirely.

Rick saw that the figure underneath was a woman—if not a girl. She had a small frame and appeared to him no more than seventeen or perhaps eighteen years old. The only features that betrayed any additional age were her toned muscles, which seemed too well developed for a girl, and her eyes.

Rick crossed his arms, his eyes moving up and down the woman before him. "Daddy get you a job here, sweetie?"

She turned to Billy, "Did you hear something?"

Billy shook his head.



Walking up to Rick and looking up at him from only inches away, she said, "Neither did I."

As she turned to continue through the aisle, Rick reached out and grabbed her arm.

She tore her arm away but paid him no more attention.

Billy snorted and went to his table.

Rick stood and rubbed the sweat between his fingers, lifting them up to his nose to breathe in its scent. He smiled and walked to the table to begin his work.

"Three thousand four hundred and thirty-one. Not bad. You'll probably be allowed back in tomorrow," Billy said to Rick as he shut down the machines on his own work table. "I'm going home." He turned back to Rick and said, "Oh, and clean up your table before you go. Pat sees a mess, he ain't gonna be happy. Believe it or not, jokers like you are a dime a dozen." Billy took four paces down the aisle before stopping, as though something tugged at his mind.

Finally, Billy said over his shoulder, "Listen to me, and listen good. I only gonna say this once. Don't mess with Sarai. There, you've been warned."

Rick suppressed a laugh. Fear was least on his mind. What was on his mind was the woman, Sarai. The entire day, she was locked in his imagination. She wasn't the most attractive thing he'd ever seen, but her body was nearly flawless, if a little on the slim side. He had felt the strength in her arm when she had pulled away from him—strong, but not strong enough to resist him. He needed only to wait for the right moment in the right place. She'd struggle against him, but she'd lose and would have no choice but to give in to him.

Of course, he would have to leave the stupid job he had just started, having donated a day's work for which he would never be paid. But he was convinced that having his way with Sarai would be worth it—and it would put her in her place.

Billy had left. The area of the factory where Rick had worked was empty, except for him. It was hidden from the main floor by dividing walls and shelves full of parts and other inventory. Machines ran elsewhere, creating a noisy background. The perfect place.

Almost as if she stepped out of Rick's thoughts and into the aisle, Sarai returned, mask and torch in hand, her face and

arms glistening with beads of sweat, her black hair pulled back and tied in a knot behind her head.

Rick turned to his table and began shuffling items, collecting waste tags marked with blurred or nearly invisible etchings, unplugging the etching machine, and brushing off the table with his shaking hand. He almost felt her presence behind him, and he tensed his muscles. In a moment of quick release as soon as Sarai had passed him, he lunged, wrapping one arm about her waist and putting his other hand over her mouth.

The anticipation of what he was about to do to her was obliterated when he was thrown onto the cement floor. His arm that had gone about her waist was wrenched behind him with a crack, sending a bolt of searing pain through his shoulder.

"Did you never learn to keep your hands to yourself?" Sarai hissed in his ear.

Rick merely groaned. His eyes were shut tight against the pain in his arm and the dull throbbing in his head from being slammed against the unforgiving floor. Then his eyes flew open when he heard the ring of metal.

Sarai had pulled a knife from her belt, jabbing the point against the base of Rick's skull. "No? Didn't think so," she whispered. "But you'll never try to touch me again. You think I couldn't *kill* you right now if I wanted?"

Rick could almost feel her baring her teeth at him, but before he could even protest or beg for his life, the point of the knife left the back of his head. He felt warm spit strike him in the side of his face, followed by Sarai's unyielding fist. Blackness took him.

\* \* \*

Sarai opened the door to her apartment, hanging her canvas jacket and her motorcycle helmet on a hook just inside the door. She flipped a switch to illuminate the one-room flat and set a brown paper bag on the counter in her dingy kitchen. After reaching down and untying her boots, she kicked them off, one of them leaving a scuff mark on the wall near the doorway.

She walked into the bathroom and pulled the chain of the mirror light. Pausing, Sarai looked at the face that stared

back at her through the scratched glass. After some time, she reached back and loosened her hair, which fell past her shoulder blades. With a snort, she tied it into a pony tail and leaned over to wash the grime from her face.

On returning to the kitchen area, Sarai reached into the paper bag and pulled out various vegetables and some fresh pita bread. She hastily cut the vegetables on the bare counter, leaving several gouges to go with the many that already crisscrossed the abused surface, and stuffed them into the pita. After wolfing down the meal, standing on her feet the entire time, she drank a glass of water from the tap. Reaching into the paper bag one last time, she pulled out a chocolate bar.

Sarai's bed was in the far corner of the apartment, a small night stand next to it supporting a lamp whose base was half covered in books. The chocolate bar landed on top of one of the books.

After turning on the lamp next to the bed, Sarai shut off the main light at the doorway, pausing to throw the deadbolt. Walking back to her bed, she took off her shirt and then pulled her knife from her belt, setting it on the small remaining bare surface of the nightstand. After removing her pants, she crawled under the cool sheets and grabbed the chocolate bar and a book from the pile. Tossing the foil wrapper aside, she chewed slowly and thoughtfully as she flipped the book open.

Thus she lay for several hours; the only indication that any time passed was the disappearing chocolate and her methodical progress through the book. Finally, Sarai sighed and tossed the book aside. It landed on the night stand but slid off onto the floor. She reached over and turned off the light.

For she knew not how long, she lay silently in the darkness, her eyes open. Finally, she yawned and rolled onto her side. Sleep found her moments later.

The grey light of morning flowed through the lone window in the small apartment. Sarai lay in her bed, unmoving, her eyes locked on the ceiling. Finally she arose, but she stood at the edge of her bed for some time before walking to the kitchen for a drink of water.

In the bathroom, she stood in front of the mirror and pulled the chain to turn the light on. Looking at herself steadily

and running her hand through her hair, she shook her head. "Fool," she whispered.

Minutes later, she walked from her apartment, looking much the same as she had arrived the previous evening. The sun was barely lighting the sky when she emerged from the building, and the streets were just beginning to hum with the sound of cars driving past. Just around the corner was a parking lot. Sarai mounted her motorcycle and placed her helmet on her head. The engine roared to life.

Sweat poured down Sarai's face as she worked on despite the heat of the torch adding to the warmth of the factory's atmosphere. Even though it was only late May, the weather was unseasonably warm, and the air conditioners had yet to be returned to service. As she welded two pieces of metal together, one hand slipped, and the weld she had begun came apart.

"Damn it!" she shouted.

Almost immediately, Billy rounded a corner with an agility that belied his dumpy stature. "You okay, babe? Hey—Sarai."

"I'm fine, Billy. I'm fine."

"You sure?" He reached toward her mask, but Sarai's hand quickly blocked him.

She paused a moment and then removed the mask herself, looking at Billy with a steady gaze. Her face was expressionless.

Billy returned her gaze for several long moments. Finally, after looking away briefly, he said, "Come on, babe. Over here and sit down." He led Sarai to his table and pulled a chair out, pushing her gently to make her sit. He looked at her silently, not knowing what lay behind her unrevealing face. "Found the blood on the floor this morning," he said. "Did he hurt you, Sarai?"

Sarai snorted, "You know me, Billy. I can look after myself."

Billy shook his head, "Sometimes I wonder. I guess I know how it turned out, though, seeing as Rick hasn't shown today."

Her face was impassive.

"Sarai—"

"Don't start. And I don't want to hear about how you fought in Vietnam. I know."

"Can you blame me for wondering?"

"No. But it's not like that. I just know how to defend myself."

"You're too young to have the kind of look I've seen in you. Too young, babe. Old tunnel rats like me who've seen far too much have that look. Not young girls like you."

"Sometimes it's forced on you."

"Tell me."

Sarai shook her head.

"Come on." he sighed. "I just want to help."

"I know." The corner of her mouth turned up at him.

Billy chuckled softly. He reached out and patted her shoulder, "You're a keeper, babe. And a good friend." He chuckled some more in response to the brief smile that crossed her face. Looking down at his watch and tapping its face a couple times, he said, "Lunch time. Or close enough for you to take it plus an extra half hour or so. I'll punch you out when I go in a little while."

"Don't bother, you snake. I'll be okay. I'm meeting someone here for lunch."

"Ah. Chloe? Nice lady."

"Don't get your hopes up. She's married."

Billy nodded, laughing. "See you this afternoon."

Sarai rose from the chair and walked down the aisle, patting Billy once on the back as she passed.

"Well, Miss Chloe," Pat said in his characteristic tone to a tall blonde woman, "I know she's in here somewhere. I—wait, here we go."

Sarai rolled her eyes as Pat flashed his winning grin at her. "Come on, Chloe," she said. "Ignore him."

Chloe giggled, "Thanks, Pat."

Pat gave her a half bow and then walked off.

"Let me punch out, then we can go," Sarai said. She walked to a time clock hanging on the wall next to a slotted box containing neatly filed cards. Sarai quickly grabbed her card from the box, slid it into the time clock, then returned it.

Chloe smiled, "I brought something new for lunch this time."

"Hm, I'm not sure what to think of that."

Sitting on a bench in a little patch of grass between the street and the concrete sidewalk, the two women watched the passing cars as they ate.

"You okay, Sarai?"

"Hm? What?"

Chloe raised her eyebrows. "You haven't heard half of what I've said. Are you okay?"

"Fine."

"Lunch not taste good?"

"It was fine."

"Something happen at work?"

"No," Sarai said without hesitation.

"What's on your mind?"

Sarai smiled, "You're so persistent. I'm okay—let it go."

"Well, okay. But you know you can tell me if something's wrong." She smiled, "So anyways, I left you a little present at your apartment for Friday night. I think you're going to have a good time. It'll be good for you to get out and do something fun for a change. You never give yourself a break."

Sarai opened her mouth to respond, but the other woman cut her off.

"And don't tell me you don't deserve it or some nonsense like that. We're going to have a good time whether you like it or not."

Sarai laughed, "You're funny. How're things with you and Kevin?"

Chloe forced a smile, "Why do you ask?"

"Was that a smile or a grimace?"

Chloe put on a wounded face.

"I ask because you don't talk about him much anymore."

"We're fine."

"Hm."

"Don't believe me?"

"Should I?"

"You!" Chloe growled playfully. She sat silently for a moment. "You're not going to let it go, are you?"

Sarai shrugged.

"I'm glad to be married, Sarai. It's what I've always wanted. You know that."

"Hm."

"Really."

"Okay." Sarai looked intently at Chloe.

Chloe looked back at Sarai for several seconds, then looked away.

"You can tell me things, too, Chloe."

"I know. And I'm glad I have you."

Sarai smiled and then turned her face to look straight ahead.

"Well," Chloe reached into her handbag and pulled out her cell phone. "Time to get back to it. I left your present in a box outside your door. And I know—it's discreet. It cost me quite a bit, and I don't want it to get stolen."

Sarai narrowed her eyes and looked sidelong at the other woman.

Chloe laughed, "Don't worry about the price. Really. If we're going to all go out, you're going to look good for a change. Just do me one favor."

"What's that?"

"Don't open it until you get home from work Friday night. I want it to be a surprise."

Sarai smirked and shook her head. "Okay. I'll wait."

"Good! And who knows? Now that your hair is getting nice and long, you might look so good when we go out that you might even meet someone!"

Sarai's look remained unchanged, unless maybe it became blacker. "I hate taking care of this," she said, reaching back and grabbing the raven pony tail behind her head.

"Oh, I think it makes you look so cute, though!"

"You would."

Chloe laughed. "Well, I need to go." But she became motionless.

"What is it?"

She smiled and shook her head, "Nothing. Nothing!"

"Chloe, don't try to hide from me."

Chloe nodded, looking down. She was silent.

Sarai waited patiently.

"Could I—may I—come by for a while after work? I've felt so lonely at home lately."

Sarai nodded, "Of course, Chloe. You can come by anytime you want. You don't even have to ask—I've told you that before."

Chloe nodded and then smiled, her face changing almost instantly from gloom to brilliance. "We'll have fun this weekend! I promise!"

"Okay. But please don't make this some kind of blind date thing—I don't need that."

"There's an idea!"

"I'm serious, Chloe."

"I know, Sarai. I wouldn't do that to you." She rose to her feet. She paused for a moment, turning her head this way and that. Finally, she looked down at Sarai, "Okay. You're right. Kevin's been acting strange lately. I can't quite figure it out. He seems distant. Hardly looks at me." She blinked furiously.

Sarai rose to her feet. "Is there anything I can do?"

Chloe laughed nervously, "No. He's probably just having a hard time at work. He's not very good at letting these things out. But he's been staying later and later."

"Is there something else?"

"No."

Sarai looked at her steadily.

"What?"

Sarai said nothing.

Chloe looked down, "He's asked a lot about you. I don't know why."

"You didn't tell him about the way I am, did you?"

"Heavens no! I wouldn't ever! I know you don't want me to tell anyone."

"Hm. Well, strange. What do you think it is?"

Chloe shrugged, "I don't know."

Sarai furrowed her brow. A moment later, she said, "Well, try not to stew over it, okay? And take care of you."

"Thank you, Sarai."

Sarai nodded. "Off you go. I need to get back."

Chloe smiled, "Okay. I'll come over after I get off work." For a moment, she gazed at Sarai with a hint of desperation.

"Hey," Sarai said, "be strong. I'll see you later, okay?"

Nodding, Chloe said, "Okay."

The two parted, and Sarai walked slowly back to the factory.

The box just outside Sarai's apartment looked worn and was caved in on two sides. Chloe had wisely chosen one that looked too worthless for any thief to bother with. It was small—only about a foot on each side and a few inches high. Sarai tucked it under her arm and carried it in with her. After locking the door and kicking her boots off, she carried it to her bed. She thought about opening it, even though she had said



she wouldn't. But Chloe enjoyed trying to surprise Sarai, even if Sarai was usually unimpressed.

So, Sarai put the box on the old carpet and slid it under her bed. And then she sat in brooding thought.

Some time later—perhaps only seconds, perhaps many minutes—a knock sounded at the door.

Sarai rose and looked through the peep hole before opening the door.

Chloe smiled, "Hi."

"Hey. Come in."

Chloe walked in and took off her heels, setting them against the wall near the door. She then looked around. "One day you'll let me help you decorate this place a little. Or, better, find you somewhere else to live."

"Maybe one day," Sarai said, smiling.

"You at least need some more furniture."

"Nah."

"Silly! All you have is a table. Nowhere comfortable to sit, except your bed. People'll start getting funny ideas about us."

Sarai shrugged, "That's their problem."

"Well," Chloe lifted a paper bag she was carrying, "I brought something to eat."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. You'll like this, I promise. Nothing too odd."

Sarai chuckled. Then she looked intently in Chloe's eyes. "Chloe, are you okay?"

Chloe's lip quivered. "I feel so alone. I feel like everyone is abandoning me."

"I'm always here for you."

Chloe smiled sadly and nodded, "I know, Sarai. Seems like you're the only one who cares anymore. Kevin," she sighed, "he doesn't talk to me much. I don't even think he likes the way I look anymore."

"Why wouldn't he? You're beautiful."

Chloe blushed, "No, not really."

Sarai smiled, "Compared with the company you keep? Yes, you're beautiful."

"You're too hard on yourself. You're pretty too, in your own way."

Sarai smirked, "Damning by faint praise?"

Chloe growled.

"It's okay, Chloe," Sarai chuckled, "You won't hurt my feelings."

"You do that just to embarrass me, I swear."

"No. But your reaction usually is pretty funny. Come on. Bring whatever you've got in the bag over here." She brushed some dust off the table, pulled out a chair for Chloe, then sat down across from her. They shared the food that Chloe brought—Chinese take-out—and ate mostly in silence.

When they were finished, Chloe sat up straight and looked at Sarai for several long moments.

Sarai looked back at her. "Penny for your thoughts."

"I'll take that penny first."

Sarai smirked, "Funny."

Chloe smiled and looked down for a moment, then at Sarai once more. "Well, just thinking about what we discussed that one time."

"Oh."

"Do you—do you still want to? I mean, I—I know it's a personal thing, and you don't have to—well, I don't have to be the one."

"I'm sure. I just want you to be sure, too."

"I am sure, Sarai."

Sarai looked intently into her eyes. "Chloe, you can't change once we go through with it. It's once and only once, and it's forever."

Chloe nodded. "I understand. If it's what you want, it's what I want too."

Sarai inhaled deeply, then let her breath out slowly.

"Does it scare you?" Chloe asked.

"No. I just—I don't know exactly how it will work."

"Because of what happened to you?"

Sarai nodded.

Chloe smiled, "It'll be okay, however it works. As long as you're with me."

Sarai closed her eyes and smiled. "I'm glad you're my friend, Chloe. I couldn't ask for better."

Chloe smiled back. "I don't know why you'd even take interest in someone like me. You're so far beyond me, Sarai."

"Don't say that. Inside, I'm no different than you."

"Yes you are. You're special."

"Do you always have to argue?"

Chloe chuckled.

Sarai looked silently at Chloe for a moment. "We won't be so different anymore." She swallowed, and her breathing quickened.

Chloe nodded.

Sarai rose and picked up her chair, setting it down facing the other woman. She sat down and motioned Chloe to turn toward her.

Chloe turned her own chair to face Sarai. When Sarai leaned forward slightly, resting her elbows on her knees and extending her hands, Chloe reached out and put her own hands in Sarai's. "What do I need to do?"

"Just follow me where I go," Sarai said.

Chloe nodded.

"Close your eyes."

She did as Sarai told her. And then a ringing made her open her eyes once more. "Oh, damn," she said. The sound came from her purse. "I'm so sorry, let me go turn that stupid thing off. I should have known better."

Sarai smiled and nodded, "It's okay, Chloe." She stayed seated, her face darkening with thought.

Chloe rifled through her purse and finally pulled out the phone. The ringing changed to a single short tone. "Kevin. He called. Probably wondering where I am."

Sarai rose and looked at Chloe, smiling sadly. "Go."

"No, I—"

Sarai nodded, "Yes, Chloe, go home. We'll do this another time."

"But it's too serious to just put it off like this!" She glared at her phone. "He doesn't care. Just probably wondering where I am so he has something to warm his bed tonight."

Sarai rose and walked over to stand inches from her. She looked up at the taller woman. "Is it really that bad?"

Chloe sighed, "I just wish I knew he loved me like I love him."

Sarai nodded. "Well, maybe you should fix things with him before we go through with this."

Chloe looked at her. "I wish I'd never met him."

Sarai put her arms around Chloe, "You'll be okay. I'll always be here for you."

Chloe hugged Sarai back.

"Now, go and be strong. Okay?"

Chloe nodded, wiping her eyes and smiling.

"And don't think you have to ask to see me. Just come by. Whenever you want."

Chloe chuckled and nodded again.

Sarai smiled, "Go on home. I'll see you tomorrow."

Chloe slowly walked over toward the door, placing her heels back on her feet and turning once more to look at Sarai.

Sarai looked back at her with an expressionless face.

"Sarai."

"Yes?"

"Tell me to stay. Tell me not to go back home."

Sarai smiled, but she shook her head. "There's nowhere for you to sleep, other than the floor. Please go home."

Chloe looked down.

"I'm here if you need me."

Chloe nodded and smiled briefly at Sarai before walking out and closing the door softly behind her.

Sarai chewed on the side of her finger as she walked to her bed and sat down.

Sarai was mostly quiet at lunch the next day.

"Was it something I did?" Chloe said.

Sarai's head turned quickly to face her, "No! Of course not."

"Are you sure? Because you've been so distant the past couple days. Work isn't bothering you, is it?"

Sarai was silent.

"Please tell me."

She turned to look at Chloe but still said nothing. Her face was expressionless. Finally, she said, "A couple days ago. New guy at the factory. Tried to attack me."

Chloe gasped.

"He didn't last long."

"That's awful! Why didn't you tell me?!"

"Because you have enough on your mind, Chloe. You don't need to worry about me."

"Yes I do. I care about you, Sarai."

The corner of Sarai's mouth turned up. "I know. I'm glad you do."

"Did he hurt you at all?"

"No."

Chloe sighed, "Good. What—um, what did you—"

"Threw him in a dumpster. I'm sure he made it home on his own."

Chloe nodded slowly and looked away.

Sarai took a bite of the sandwich Chloe had brought her. She chewed thoughtfully for a moment and then turned to look at the other woman once more. "Thanks, Chloe."

Chloe chuckled, "For what?"

"For being so good to me."

"Not hardly! If we went tallying who owes whom, I'd end up deeply in your debt."

Sarai laughed.

"I like it when you laugh," Chloe said. "Makes you look so beautiful."

"Oh stop that."

"It does. Whenever you smile. And no faint praise at all."

Sarai shook her head and kept laughing. "You're funny."

"So!" Chloe said a moment later. "Tomorrow's the big day!"

"Things going to be okay?"

Chloe nodded, "Yes. Kevin said he was looking forward to it. I guess work has just been wearing him out."

Sarai nodded but said nothing more.

"Hey," Chloe said after silence had fallen for several minutes. "Are you okay?"

Sarai nodded slowly.

"What is it really?"

"I don't want to see you get hurt."

Chloe laughed, "Me?"

Sarai looked at her and nodded. "What you said last night—what you wanted me to tell you."

Chloe's face darkened. "Oh."

"I don't want to come between you and your husband, Chloe. But I also won't let him, or anyone else, ever hurt you. Not if there's anything I can do about it."

Chloe looked down.

"I'm your friend and always will be, but I know how important your marriage is to you. When you asked me to tell you not to leave last night—well, that would have made you put me ahead of him. And I know you don't really want me to do that to you."

Turning her head to look at Sarai, Chloe said, "Don't you ever get lonely? Well," she smiled and looked away for a moment, "you know what I mean. *That* kind of lonely."

"No."

"Really?"

Sarai nodded.

Chloe sighed, "That makes me so sad. I mean, of course I wouldn't ever want you to be lonely. But I wish—I don't know. I wish you could feel what it's like to be in love."

Sarai smiled at her. "You're very sweet."

"I know a couple nice single guys at work, and—"

"No, Chloe."

Chloe looked away.

"Hey, it's okay. I'm content being single."

Chloe nodded. She then inhaled deeply, "Well, I know I pestered you last night and all, but would you like to go out with me for a while tonight? Kevin's working late. I thought we could go somewhere to eat and, I don't know, shop or go to a movie or something."

Sarai laughed, "Let me guess, my wardrobe is lacking."

"Well," Chloe laughed, "yes, but I really have no ulterior motives this time. I just thought it'd be nice to get out a little, so I figured you might want to join me."

"Of course I would."

"I mean, I know we're going out tomorrow night too, so if you're getting tired of me—"

Sarai snorted, "I never get tired of you."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

Sarai looked out the lone window in her apartment. It was getting late, and Chloe hadn't shown up. Walking to the nightstand next to her bed, she grabbed her knife. But as she slid it into her belt, a knock sounded at her door. She trotted over to it and opened it without looking through the peep hole.

Chloe stood there, her face streaked with tears. She looked at Sarai and tried to smile.

"Come in," Sarai said, taking her hand and leading her in. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't tell you at lunch," Chloe said, wiping her face. "Kevin didn't come home last night. That's why he called."

"Well, do you think—"

"I don't know why. I don't know."

"Come here," Sarai said. She made Chloe sit in a chair next to the table. Sarai then pulled another chair close and sat down facing her.

Chloe covered her face and cried. She then looked desperately at Sarai. "I wish you would have told me to stay last night. I wish you would have. Then I wouldn't know."

Sarai softly brushed Chloe's blonde hair from her face. "I'm sorry, Chloe."

"Don't make me go back again. Let me stay here with you."

Sarai sighed softly, "You need to try. At least find out for sure what's going on. It may not be anything that bad."

"It's not like it used to be. I know something's really wrong."

"If that's how it turns out, and you've tried to fix things, then I'll be here. You can come and stay. I'll buy a couch or something for one of us to sleep on. You can live with me if you want; we can even move somewhere else. Whatever you want. But don't give up on him. Not yet. It's too important to you." She looked into Chloe's eyes intently. "Okay?"

"It's so hard."

"I know."

"I just want him to love me. Why won't he just love me?"

Sarai looked sympathetically at her.

Chloe chuckled through her tears, "What would I do without you?"

Sarai laughed softly.

"I love you, Sarai."

"I love you too, Chloe."

A moment later Chloe wiped her cheeks and laughed. "Still want to go out with me?"

Sarai smiled, "Sure."

As Sarai rose, Chloe put her hand on Sarai's arm. "Sarai, maybe now we should—you know."

Sarai shook her head, "No. Not right now."

"But—"

"You need to get things in order first."

"But—"

"Chloe, believe me. It will change many things, and you need to be sure you can handle it. You're too emotional right now. Too unsure of things."

"Yes, but—"

"What happens if you decide later that you made a rash decision because your marriage hit a rough spot? You'll blame me."

"No, Sarai, I'd never do that!"

"Yes, you would, and rightly so. Because I know what it means—what we were about to do last night—but you don't yet. Not yet."

Chloe nodded. "I guess I just want someone to be close to."

Sarai smiled, "We can still be close. Even if I wasn't this way, I would still want to be close to you. And I would hope you'd still feel the same."

"I would, of course!"

Nodding, Sarai said, "I know." She reached behind her head and started gathering her hair to tie it in her usual knot.

"Would you do something for me?"

"What's that?" She was still gathering her hair.

"Leave it down. Just the way it is."

"Why?"

"Because I think it looks nice."

Sarai smiled, "You're funny. Okay." She let go of the bundle of hair.

Chloe shook her head, "You hide it so well."

"Hide what?"

But she said nothing. She only smiled. "Let's go!"

For the rest of the evening, Chloe drove them around the city, including to two clothing stores. She was only able to convince Sarai to buy a new pair of work pants.

"Aw, come on, Sarai. You'd look so good in this dress."

"No."

"I'll buy it for you."

"Money's not the problem."

"Oh, you!"

Sarai chuckled in spite of herself.

When Chloe thought Sarai was beginning to tire of clothes shopping, she drove them to a greasy spoon drive-in. "Well," she said, "what do you think? Good old American junk food for a change?" She grinned.

Sarai laughed, "Sure, why not."

"I snitch a burger here some nights when I'm on my own. It's good."



A carhop walked out with a pad and waited outside Chloe's window.

Chloe rolled it down, "Hi!"

"What can I get you?" a young man in a red uniform said gruffly.

"Two regular burgers with everything, two sodas, and one order of onion rings. Oh, and extra napkins."

"Got it. Five minutes."

"Thanks." Chloe rolled the window back up, leaving it cracked slightly.

Sarai cracked hers too.

Chloe laughed, "I love it. Not many places have carhops anymore." She looked at Sarai, "You don't seem all that surprised to see one."

"Should I be?"

"Well, yes! You're too young to have been to many places like this. Before your time—and mine. Don't you find it novel?"

Sarai smiled, "It's nice. But not novel."

"You're so cryptic sometimes. Such a mystery." She giggled.

"Some things a girl should keep to herself," Sarai said, smirking.

"Yeah? Like?"

"Her age."

"Aw, come on. Girl to girl?"

"Maybe one day."

Chloe was silent for a while. "Sarai?"

"Yes?"

"Do you still have nightmares?"

"Not so much anymore." She smiled at Chloe, "I have a friend who lets me call her in the middle of the night when I'm really upset by them."

Chloe smiled back. "I don't know how you were able to get any sleep at all, having to relive that every night."

"I got used to it many years ago."

"It can't have been too many years!" Then her face fell, but it remained playful. "However many that was. I'll never understand why you are so secretive about how long ago it was."

"Like I've told you, it was when I was young. Thirteen."

"Yeah," Chloe said slowly, a smile on her face. "And that was how long ago?"

"Not long enough," Sarai responded.

"I'm sorry." Chloe frowned.

"Nothing to be sorry about."

"Yes there is. I should be more sensitive about what happened."

"You didn't go through it, so you don't think about it. And I'm glad, on both counts."

"Sometimes I think about it." She looked sympathetically at Sarai. "I know it must have hurt. I can't even imagine. But didn't they do anything to—to make it easier?"

"No."

Chloe's eyes filled with tears. "I hate to think of everything they stole from you because of that."

"Hey, it's okay. I don't dwell on it, and neither should you."

Chloe nodded. She jumped when a knock on the window sounded next to her ear. She turned quickly and sighed, chuckling. Rolling down the window, she said, "Sorry!"

"Fifteen forty," said the carhop. He handed two greasy bags and a tray with two full cups through the window.

Chloe handed him a twenty. "Keep it."

The carhop accepted the bill and raised his hand in acknowledgment before walking off.

Chloe looked over at Sarai, who was already peeking into one of the bags. "Looks good, doesn't it?!"

Sarai smirked.

"I know, it probably takes years off your life. But it sure tastes good."

Sarai looked at Chloe for a moment, smiling.

Chloe smiled back, "Yes?"

"You make me happy."

"Oh?" she chuckled. "Because I make you eat junk food?"

Sarai laughed, "No. Because I get to see the world through your eyes."

Chloe reached into the other bag and pulled out a large, greasy onion ring. "Want one?" She grinned.

When they had finished eating, Chloe sighed contentedly. "That was really good. I'll probably pay for it, though."

Sarai sipped her drink.

"Sometimes I think you know something I don't," Chloe said.

"Probably something."

Chloe gently swatted Sarai's leg with the back of her hand, "Smart aleck." Then she laughed. "What I mean is, you're your own girl."

"It's a tradeoff, like everything in life."

Chloe nodded. "But you never get hurt."

"Yes, but that's not why I am single. Chloe, you shouldn't regret getting married. Even if it ends up not working out, it will have been worth it. You'll learn from it, whatever happens."

"Maybe. But if it doesn't, I want to be like you. Just have you as my friend. No complications. No pain."

"I wish it were that simple. But you'll get lonely. *That* kind of lonely. And I'll be no comfort then."

"I'd get over it."

Sarai shrugged. "Maybe."

They sat in silence for several minutes. Chloe then inhaled deeply, "Well! Ready to go?"

Sarai nodded.

Chloe drove slowly through the dark of night. The streets were busy, but the traffic was becoming much lighter as the city slowed for the evening. At a particularly long stoplight, Chloe looked over to see Sarai leaning her head back against the window. She was asleep.

Chloe smiled. She had never seen the other woman sleeping; she sometimes even wondered if Sarai ever really did sleep.

When they arrived outside Sarai's apartment, Chloe brought the car gently to a stop. She then turned the engine off, leaving the radio to play its low music. She leaned back in her seat and smiled as she watched Sarai sleep.

# Chloe

"Owen!" shouted a half-bald man of middle age. His bland black tie was askew over his short-sleeve white shirt. "Owen, damnit!"

"Yeah, Pete?" Will Owen's head popped up above the edge of his cubicle. He was a younger man with curly brown hair, and he stood several cubicles away from Pete, who was leaning out of his private office.

"Do you have a name for me yet? The slimebag that's delivering Constantine his bribe money?"

"Almost."

"Almost?"

"A couple more phone calls, and I think I'll—"

"Well that's great!" Pete said. "I told you to have it hours ago. I happen to have that bastard Constantine on the phone right now. Guess I'll have to bluff him some more." Pete shook his head, glaring at Will, before he turned and slammed his office door behind him.

"Wow," said a young brunette woman standing next to Will. She adjusted her thick-rim glasses.

Will chuckled, "Don't pay him any attention, Alana. He's all bark."

"So why didn't you just blame me?" She handed him a printout.

He accepted the paper. "Ah. Good. Looks like you found the guy. This should appease Pete."

"So?"

"So what?"

"Why didn't you blame me? You gave me the job of finding this name."

Will smiled and leaned back in his chair. "Two reasons. One, it wouldn't have done me any good. Pete would've blamed me all the more. And two, it wouldn't have done you any

good. Listen," he leaned forward and pointed the printout at her. "You're good. Most people never would have found this. Keep working, and you'll soon have one of these high-class cubicles of your own."

Alana chuckled, "Don't want one. I want to be out in the world interviewing people and finding out what's going on."

"Yeah, I know. But you have to write your story sometime too, and it's easiest to do that at some kind of home base. And what's more homey than a hellhole office like this one?" He grinned at her.

She laughed and then turned to walk away.

"Hey, wait," he said, his face darkening. "I do have one more thing we need to discuss—it's serious."

She turned and stood just outside Will's cubicle.

Will held up a finger and picked up his phone with the other hand. "Yeah. Pete. Got it. The name's Brian Cass." He read a phone number.

Alana looked at Will in horror as Pete's voice roared, even through the phone.

Will stifled his laughter and held the phone away from his ear. When Pete's voice had died down, Will returned the phone to his ear and said, "Uh huh. I love you too." He hung up. "Now, you," he turned once more to Alana.

The young woman's face started to turn white.

"Hey, don't wig out on me. This was good work. I just wanted to tell you to take the rest of the day off. It's Friday."

Alana sighed and chuckled, putting her hand over her heart. Then she pointed at Will, "Don't do that to me again!"

"Get outta here," Will said, laughing. After she had left, he leaned forward, putting his elbow on his desk and resting his chin in his hand. He sighed deeply. Scanning his desk, he looked at the pile of papers he had collected for stories he was preparing. Most of the material related to a corrupt police captain, Zachary Constantine. For nearly a year, Will had pursued a long and complex trail of money flowing to Constantine; its purpose and source remained unclear, but at least he had uncovered the identity of the man who had been handing the payments directly to Constantine. Well, Alana had found it—with some guidance from Will.

He chuckled. Alana would be a good journalist. She had a strong sense of things; she knew when something wasn't

right. She reminded him a bit of himself—particularly when he was younger. Not that he was that much older than she was: a dozen years, or fifteen at the most.

A number of awards hung from the wall of his cubicle. Not that he cared for such things. But Pete seemed to think that displaying awards was a good motivator.

Will chuckled cynically. It seemed increasingly pointless—reporting on stories that few people would find interesting, let alone worthy of any change in their behavior. Constantine? Just another of many corrupt officials. Who would care, as long as gas prices stayed low? Well, as long as they didn't go any higher.

Will looked at the clock on his computer. Three fifteen in the afternoon. Rubbing his face, he stood up to stretch. He then pulled the pen from behind his ear and tossed it on his desk before grabbing his jacket and walking out of the office.

When he started his car, the radio immediately began blaring stories from a local all-news station. He turned the volume knob with prejudice, silencing the shrill voice. Sighing, he put the car in drive and joined the growing flood of traffic.

Will arrived at his spartan house about forty-five minutes later. It was a small, low structure surrounded by numerous others just like it, except that some had more landscaping than his. The yard (if that was the right name for the small area in front of and behind the house) was all grass.

A couple abstract prints were the sum total of his decorations inside. The house had a living room, furnished with a couch and a bookshelf but no television, and a bedroom. In the kitchen was a table with one chair.

Will opened the refrigerator and looked around. The pickings were slim. He grabbed a beer and opened it. Sitting at the table, he sipped it once and then set it down, pushing it away.

An itch burned inside him. He wouldn't have been able to describe it, other than to maybe say that he felt like he was supposed to be somewhere or do something, and his chance was slipping away. Something, somewhere other than where he was right then.

Pursing his lips, he rose and left the house, not bothering to lock the door behind him. He drove off moments later.

Zachary Constantine slammed the phone onto its cradle and cursed under his breath. He then calmly placed his hands on his desk, and his eyes snapped up to look at the woman who laughed at him from the far side of his office. She leaned against the door; written backwards on its frosted glass window was *Capt. Z. Constantine, City Police*.

Next to the woman, leaning against the wall with his arms folded, was another man. He wore wire-rim glasses with shaded lenses, and his dark hair was slicked back on his head. A knife was at his belt.

"Aw, whassa matta, baby?" said the woman to Constantine, her voice dripping with scornful pity. She was stunningly beautiful; her dark, wavy hair fell halfway down her back. Her brown eyes were bright with awareness, and her gaze was penetrating.

"You are the matter, Veronica. What do you want?"

"Oh, the usual."

Constantine's eyes narrowed.

"Don't look at me like that," Veronica said with a mock frown. She walked seductively to his desk and leaned over it. "This was a fair trade, wasn't it?"

He said nothing.

Veronica straightened and walked slowly around the desk, finally standing behind Constantine's leather chair.

Constantine was motionless, but his face bore a mix of anger and hatred.

"Wasn't it, baby? Hmm?" She leaned over and put her arms around him. "Didn't we have fun together? But you knew that had to be paid for."

"You're sick," Constantine said.

Veronica laughed.

"Take your hands off me."

"Or what? You'll do it for me?" She growled, a mix of playfulness and mockery. "Just don't forget about your lovely little wife, who is counting on you to continue pleasing me—even if she doesn't know it. And it's not that hard. I'm easy to please. At least you thought so in bed."

"That's it, I've had—" He froze in mid-speech. Veronica had a knife at his throat.

She giggled, "You've had it? With me? What are you planning to do about it, baby? Do you really want to give up

all the money and protection I make sure you get? You have nothing to worry about if you just do what I tell you."

"And what about this damn paper that keeps hounding me?"

"That's your problem. If you don't want the money anymore, it'll stop coming." She pulled the knife away and returned to the front of the desk, grinning at him. "And I get your wife in payment of your debt to me. And then who knows? You too?" She laughed, "It has to be someone soon. I'm getting hungry. Even I need nourishment."

Constantine continued to glare through the slits of his eyes.

She set a piece of paper on his desk. It had an address written on it. "Have some of your boys in blue be there tonight. I get one woman or the other—I'm not sure. Maybe both!" She laughed. "I love a good mystery."

"How long do you think I can keep this quiet?" he spat at her.

She laughed, "As long as you want your sweet wife to live."

"Fine. What's the story this time?"

"Some moron like you wants to trade." She sighed, "I don't know what men like you see in their wives. If I'm good enough to take her place in bed, what do you really want to keep her around for?" Then she smiled again. "But this one really touches my heart; he wants to give me his wife's friend instead of his wife. Anyway, he's supposed to have her ready for me in his car, but I think I'll just wait in his apartment. Who knows how it'll turn out? Three in one night?" She giggled.

Constantine picked up the paper and looked at it. "What do you want me to do with the body?"

"Bodies, maybe? I don't care. That's your problem. Whatever you have to do so that my name doesn't come up. You know—the usual."

"Fine. Whatever. Get out."

Veronica blew him a kiss, "Be good, or I'll make a date with your wife." She giggled and waved her knife. The door opened, and she was gone.

The other man in the room smirked at Constantine, but he was silent. He tossed a thick envelope onto the desk and then left, closing the door behind him.

Constantine looked at the envelope with disgust. When it had hit the desk, some of the money inside was exposed. He



picked up his phone and dialed a number. "Garrett? Zach here. Yes—no—I—" He groaned. "No, look, I've had enough of this. I'm done with it. No, you listen! I'll have one of my snipers pop your daughter if she does this to me again. What?! You leave my son out of this. I don't care what Veronica needs. She's a damn pig. All right, all right, all right! Just—just leave my son alone. You gonna leave him alone? Yes, fine, I'll do it. Right. No, you won't hear from me again about this." He slammed the phone down. "Bastard."

\* \* \*

Sarai parked her motorcycle in its usual place outside her apartment building. She turned off the engine and sighed as she removed her helmet. It had been a long day. Chloe hadn't been able to meet her for lunch, thanks to a long midday meeting at her own job. Pat had been in a bad mood and had blown up at Sarai over a minor matter. Billy had tried to make light of it, but it had bothered her more than she was willing to admit. She had ended up staying late to fix several broken machines.

Once inside her apartment, she sat on her bed and reached underneath it, taking hold of the box Chloe had left for her and dragging it out. She pulled her knife from her belt and set it on the bed next to her. She then set the box on her lap, used the knife to cut the tape, and then opened the mangled flaps.

Inside the box was red tissue paper, neatly wrapped around something flat. Carefully opening the two flaps of paper like the pages of a book, Sarai snorted when she realized what was inside. With one hand, she pulled a sleeveless blue dress out of the box. Simple, no frills, but feminine.

Sighing, she whispered, "Chloe. You're such a—girl." Although she had no watch, she knew that Kevin and Chloe would be there soon. "I suppose I shouldn't get this dirty." Putting it back in the box, she rose to go to the shower.

Afterwards, she dressed in the near dark of her apartment's dingy bathroom. Pulling the chain and turning on the light, she looked at herself in the mirror. After a minute of silence, she realized that the color had completely left her face.

"Oh, Chloe, why? Why do you do this to me?" she whispered. For a moment, she then looked at herself in the

mirror as though she were looking at a different person, and her face showed the grief and anger that struggled against one another to control her.

A knock at her door brought her back to herself. She quickly tied her hair behind her head and pulled the chain, returning to darkness the face in the mirror.

"Hi Sarai!" Chloe said, her face bright with a smile and with a look of expectation. "Wow!" she said, looking up and down at the other.

Sarai looked down at herself, "It's not me, but I didn't figure I had a choice."

"No. To that second part, anyways. Wow, Sarai—you really look great. I always knew there was a woman in there."

Sarai turned away. "I need to get something and I'll be ready."

"Okay. Kevin's down waiting in the car."

Sarai grabbed her knife, but she looked in vain for a place to hide it in the dress.

"Here," Chloe said, walking over to Sarai with her arm outstretched. "The other part of your present."

Sarai accepted from the other a black band of soft but strong material. In it was a sheath for a knife.

"I knew you couldn't leave your knife behind and wouldn't wear the dress otherwise. It goes on your leg." She smiled.

"You're something else." Sarai lifted the skirt of the dress and strapped the band to her thigh, then she grabbed her knife from beside the bed and slid the blade neatly into the sheath. She paused for a moment, her face darkening, but then began rearranging the dress.

When Sarai had let the dress down once more, Chloe grinned. "Great! Dangerous in more ways than one."

Sarai stepped close to Chloe. "Are you okay tonight?"

Chloe nodded. "I'm sorry I couldn't do lunch. It made for a long day." She sighed.

"Me too."

"Hey, Sarai. Are you okay?" Chloe almost thought that she saw Sarai shiver.

"I'm fine," Sarai said as she stepped back.

"We're going to have fun, okay?" Chloe said.

Sarai nodded and smiled at her.

Chloe smiled back, "Let's go!"

On the street below, Kevin reached over from behind the wheel and pulled the handles of the front and rear passenger-side doors of the sedan, opening them slightly.

Chloe sat in front and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. "Thanks, hon," she said with a smile.

Kevin grunted and stepped on the gas pedal.

Sarai sat behind Chloe. The excited woman in front of her spoke almost without end about how they would have a fun evening, that this would be a good experience for Sarai, and other things that passed by Sarai's ear but did not enter in. Sarai looked out the window beside her the entire ride, taking on the appearance of a statue. The trip could have been a few minutes or nearly an eternity.

When Kevin finally put the car in park, Chloe realized that Sarai had said nothing the entire time. "Are you awake back there? We're here. Come on!"

Sarai looked at the nearby building girded with neon lights and flashing signs, realizing it was a night club. She forced her hand to reach for the door handle, and she stepped into the cool twilight air.

"Kevin, go and see if we'll be able to get in right away, okay? I need to fix my makeup real quick."

"Right," the man said. He walked off.

"Are you sure you're okay, Sarai?"

Sarai nodded.

"I know this isn't what you're used to. I thought maybe it would help a little. I hope I'm not pushing you too hard." She smiled nervously at Sarai, reaching out to make some unneeded adjustments to the dress before letting her hands fall to her sides and looking down.

"Chloe. I appreciate what you're doing. You're good to me." She smiled. "You're allowed to have fun too, you know. I don't need a babysitter. I can handle myself as well here as anywhere."

Chloe laughed, "I know. Otherwise I wouldn't have brought you. Come on. Kevin is pacing over there."

Sarai sighed inaudibly but followed the nearly giddy woman.

The music was loud, and the flashing lights made the world seem like a film shot with too few frames. Sarai felt the bass inside her as if it was coming from her own heart. She

followed Chloe, with Kevin leading through crowds. More than once, Sarai sensed the unwelcome gaze of someone in the sea of people through which she was passing.

"Hey, sweetie," a voice sounded in her left ear, cutting through the din. A man stepped in front of her with a half sneer on his face and a keen glint in his eye. His dark hair was slicked back on his head, and he wore wire-rim glasses with shaded lenses.

"Excuse me," Sarai said, but the sound was carried away by the music. She felt as though she had simply mouthed the words, her voice failing to obey her.

The man stepped closer and put an arm around her waist, pulling her against him. "Dance?" he said, his voice somehow reaching her through the noise.

Sarai's forearm snapped to her side to dash his arm from her with the intent of leaving a bruise he wouldn't soon forget. But the arm was gone in that instant, and the two both backed away slightly, as if each had recognized something in the other.

"So, how 'bout that dance?" he said with a laugh, reaching up to adjust his glasses.

Sarai started to reach for her side but stopped almost before she began. Her knife was on her leg, under her dress, and she would have to lift it to get to the blade.

"Sarai! This way!" Chloe shouted next to her. She took Sarai's hand and pulled her through the crowd.

Sarai looked over her shoulder at the man, who quickly blended back into the crowd.

Moments later, the two women emerged into a more open area with a number of tables. The music was less oppressive, and they sat in a booth wrapped around a table. Kevin was already seated. They found that they could speak in almost normal tones and still be heard.

"It gets crazy out there sometimes. Drink?" A waiter had appeared, and Chloe said, "rum and cola, please." Kevin ordered straight scotch.

"Water," Sarai said, looking briefly at the waiter. He was obviously a foreigner—Asian of some sort.

Chloe gave Sarai a disappointed look.

"Maybe later," Sarai responded to the other's silent reprimand. Her eyes scanned the people that wandered

around the tables, some coming to sit down, others going to the dance floor.

"Hey, something happen back there?" Chloe asked.

"No."

"Ahem," Kevin said. "So, never been to one of these places, Sarai?"

"No."

Kevin nodded, then chuckled. "Well, Chlo, let's go dance a while. Let the girl settle down a bit."

Chloe's eyes stayed on Sarai as Kevin pulled her back to her feet.

"Don't look so sad," Sarai said with a quick smile, leaning back slightly into the cushioned booth.

Chloe's expression remained unchanged, but she turned her head to face forward after almost tripping as Kevin led her back into the fray.

Sarai resumed her scans of the crowd, but she began to feel less tense. The music had changed to something less rhythmic and more melodic; it was almost soothing after the relentless pounding of the previous song. She began easing back into the leather cushions of the booth until she spied the man who had accosted her earlier. He was staring at her from some distance away, a finger over the contour of his mouth. Sarai stiffened, but the man made no move, showing no sign that he was troubled by her awareness of his gaze. The corner of his mouth turned up, and he adjusted his glasses.

As Sarai tensed to rise, the man's head snapped to the side. He then turned and shoved two people aside as he dove back into the crowd. The waiter—the Asian one—followed, emerging from the crowd and then vanishing once more into it, appearing and disappearing like a breath on a cold day. He looked less like a waiter, though, and more like a patron.

"Hey."

Sarai turned instantly in response to the voice beside her. Her legs were set beneath her, the muscles in her arms taut and her hands clenched into fists. As her body tensed, she thought she felt her dress tear slightly—that infernal thing Chloe made her wear—but she ignored it.

"What?!" Sarai snapped, seeing a calm man with a full mug of beer in his hand.

"Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to startle you." He looked down at Sarai and then rocked back and forth on his toes briefly. He raised his free hand and lightly scratched his curly hair, then he grimaced. "You've probably had enough attention." He raised the palm of his hand, "Sorry."

"No," Sarai said, sighing, "I'm sorry."

"May I?" he said, pointing to the other side of the booth.

"Sure."

He sat down and put his beer on the table. "My first time in a place like this. Hung out for a while alone, but realized I don't fit in if I don't have a woman on my arm or a drink in my hand."

Sarai smirked, "Mine too. My first time, I mean."

The man looked out at the dance floor. "Crazy." Turning back to Sarai, he said, "You here alone?" He clicked his tongue, "Don't answer. I didn't mean that to sound the way it did. I'm Will." He offered his hand over the table.

She accepted it after hesitating briefly. "Sarai."

"Interesting name."

"Thank you, I suppose."

Will chuckled. "Yeah. It's a compliment. What brings you here? You look a little out of place." He smiled and shook his head, "I better leave some room in my mouth for my drink." He sipped his beer, "No, you look good. I mean, you could fit in here just fine." He laughed, "Ignore me. Say something so I can shut up. What do you do?"

"I work at a factory."

"Oh? Doing what?"

"I'm a welder."

"Yeah? Fixing things kind of welding, or building things?"

"Is this an interview?"

Will laughed again, "Of sorts, I suppose." He turned the beer mug back and forth between his fingers. "Sorry. I guess I'm still at work. I'm a writer. Journalist, I suppose you'd say."

"Looking for a story?"

"No. Looking for a break." He raised the beer to his lips.

"A news story kind of break, or just a rest?"

Will snorted, spilling some of the beer and splashing some in his face.

"Sorry," Sarai said, smirking. She handed him a cloth napkin from the center of the table.

Will wiped his face, "Thanks." He coughed once and wiped his nose. "Lovely, huh? To answer your question—a rest, really. Just a rest. Or something along those lines."

"Hm."

"Um, you don't mind if," he looked around, "are you all right? I mean, when I walked up, you looked a little worried."

"I'm fine."

Will nodded.

"Really."

Will shrugged and held his hands up, "I didn't say anything."

"Hm," Sarai's eyes narrowed.

"I figured I'd try something new tonight. It's Friday night, work has been a bear, and I've got nothing better in the world to do. So here I am." He sipped his beer. "I'd ask you to dance, but I'd probably just embarrass myself more."

"I don't dance."

"I didn't figure."

Sarai cocked her head slightly, "What made you not figure?"

"Most women who go out to a night club in a dress like that also wear makeup."

"This?" She pulled at a shoulder strap, "This is to humor a friend. That one, actually."

"Hello!" Chloe said with a smile.

"Oh," Will rose, "I'm sorry to have taken your seat."

"Nonono! Stay!" Chloe said, almost forcing Will back into the booth. "Just slide down a little! I'm Chloe, and this is Kevin, my husband." She offered her hand.

"Will," he said and shook her hand, then did the same with Kevin, nodding curtly.

Kevin looked back and forth from Will to Sarai.

Chloe then strategically chose to sit right next to Will and pushed him along the seat toward Sarai. She flashed a brilliant smile at the other woman as she did so, nodding as though the two shared some secret knowledge.

Sarai rolled her eyes.

"Where are the drinks?" Kevin said. "Damn lazy waiters in this joint." He flagged down another waiter. "Where's our drinks, man?"

The other waiter flipped through a small pad.

"Hey, forget it. Just bring us a scotch and a rum and cola."

"I'm fine," Sarai said when Kevin pointed at her.

He turned back to the waiter, "And make it quick. Waited long enough."

The waiter nodded and rushed off—a different waiter than before, Sarai noticed.

Kevin looked at his watch.

"Hey, what's up?" Chloe said, her beaming expression darkening briefly. "Stop that. We just got here."

Kevin nodded. The drinks arrived a moment later, and he quickly downed half of his. "I'm gonna go use the bathroom and I'll be back."

"Okay," Chloe said. She then turned to Sarai. "Sorry. He's being a bit of a grump."

Sarai looked at her sympathetically.

Chloe smiled sadly, then turned to Will. "Do you know Sarai?"

"No. Well, no. We just met."

"Great!"

Sarai directed a benevolently disgusted look at Chloe.

"Oh, come on," the other said. "It's good to meet—people."

"Hm."

"Whew," Chloe sipped her drink. "Air's so dry in here." The music changed to another trite dance song with a relentless rhythm. "So, what've you two talked about?"

No answer.

"Come on! I'd like to join in the conversation too."

"Small talk, Chloe."

"Why don't you two go dance?"

Will chuckled, "That's okay. I'm not much of a dancer."

"Nonsense! Who said you have to be good at something to do it? Sarai wants to."

Will gave Sarai a lost look and noticed that her face was turning red. Her eyes were directed at Chloe with a glare that was becoming steadily colder.

"Off you two go. Go on!"

"Chloe!" Sarai hissed sharply.

Chloe froze as if she had been struck across the face. "I—I'm sorry, Sarai."

Sarai's face softened, "Forget it. It's okay." She looked away from Chloe to avoid seeing the other's embarrassment. As her gaze passed across the room, she caught sight of Kevin



looking at the table from a distance. She let her gaze continue to move away smoothly then looked at Will as though she had seen nothing unusual.

Will stared at his beer. Then, without moving, he looked up at Sarai, "Well, this is awkward."

"I'm going to the ladies' room," Chloe said, her face flushed. "I'll be back in a few minutes." She promptly left the booth.

Sarai sighed.

"Yeah. You definitely don't fit in here."

She looked at him silently.

He smiled, "Hey, just an honest observation. Not intended as an insult."

She shrugged and pointed a hand in Chloe's direction.

Will chuckled, "I know. Friends put us in some real pickles."

He looked at Sarai, "Yeah. So." His glance quickly shifted from the woman to his beer and back. "Yes?"

"Sorry."

"I thought for a second I had something in my teeth. Where'd you go?"

"Right here."

"What'd I say to bring it on?"

"A journalist to the end."

He smiled, "I suppose. My boss says I'm like a dog—I can smell a buried bone and I'll dig until I find it."

"I can tell."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

"I see. Well, I have to admit, I can't tell much about you. But I wonder," he paused. "How old are you?" He placed his elbows on the table and leaned forward, his chest almost resting on the metal edge.

"What does my age have to do with anything?"

"I don't know. Maybe I smell a bone. I look at you and think upper teens. Low twenties on a really tired day. Then I look at your friend—early thirties. What's she doing with a teen? So, I figure you've either got an interesting story or a youth potion. Either one works for me."

"And you're a journalist?"

Will shrugged, "I guess. I'd be happy to hear differently though."

"You're good," she said.

"Maybe." He rubbed his chin.

Sarai said nothing.

"Damn," Will said. "I may be good, but you're better. At least tell me where my logic went wrong."

"Why so quick to assume I'm not just her friend?"

"I don't. That's the problem."

"And you've never met someone who looks younger than they are?"

"Are you admitting you're older than you look?"

"I thought you wanted me to poke holes in your logic."

Will laughed.

"What do you really want?"

"Honestly?"

Sarai looked at him silently.

"I want to know what's bothering me about you."

"I don't fit in here, of course."

He chuckled, "Touché. Don't you ever just want to out and say something about yourself? I mean, I hardly ever meet someone who can't be prodded into telling me their life story."

"You want my life story?"

"A teaser would be enough."

"I thought you wanted a rest from your work."

"See what I mean?"

"You want a teaser? You're transparent to me. How's that?"

Will raised his eyebrows and looked down. "It says a lot, actually."

"I'll leave it to you and your logic to take what you will from it." Sarai looked sidelong at where Kevin had been standing. Now, Chloe was next to him, obviously berating him for some reason. Her arms were straight at her sides, her face red.

Will took another sip of his beer and nodded toward Kevin and Chloe. "Looks like the evening might be over sooner than later. I hope you either have a ride of your own or a set of ear plugs." He began sliding to the other side of the booth. "You be able to get home?"

"Yes. She and I will get home just fine."

Will nodded, "Well, hey, no hard feelings, okay? I let my curiosity get the best of me. Old habit."

"Quite all right."

He turned but didn't leave, and then he chuckled. He turned back and looked at Sarai with a foolish smile on his face.

"The answer is no. As I said, I don't dance."

Will laughed and raised his beer to her, "Transparent as a window. It was a pleasure meeting you, Sarai." He set his half-finished beer on an empty table nearby and walked toward a dark hallway with an exit sign glowing red above it.

Sarai sat quietly, her brow furrowed.

A minute later, Chloe returned and sat down. "Where's your friend?"

"Will left."

A grimace crossed Chloe's face briefly. She quickly took a drink and fanned her face with a napkin.

"Are you okay?"

"No, Sarai. No! I wanted you to have fun! You push yourself no end, and I try to help, but I mess everything up. I should have left Kevin home. I should have left you alone. I'm sorry."

Sarai closed her eyes and smiled. "Chloe, you are like a little sister to me. Your infernal persistence, as much as it drives me crazy sometimes, shows me you really care. Means a lot to me."

Chloe laughed as she carefully tried to wipe a tear from her face. "Gonna mess up my makeup."

Sarai smiled. "So what's Kevin's problem?"

"He's in such a hurry to go home."

"Ignore him."

Chloe nodded. "Sarai, I really didn't mean to push you earlier. I just got excited—thought maybe you might have met someone."

"I did."

Chloe sighed, "You know what I mean."

"I'm fine by myself."

"Is it because of—" She was silenced by Sarai's gaze.

"No. It's because I like my life the way it is."

Chloe nodded. "Yeah, I know. I guess I had hoped maybe you'd change your mind. I just want you to be happy."

Sarai smiled at her, "I'm quite happy with just you, Chloe. I wouldn't change a thing."

Chloe laughed, "I guess it's just as well. Then I don't have to share you."

Laughing, Sarai said, "I don't share myself with just anybody."

Then they both looked at each other intently.

"Sarai."

She shook her head, "Don't talk about it here. But I know what you're thinking." Sarai sighed. "If you still want to—the next time we can be alone, we will. You know."

Chloe smiled, and her eyes filled with tears. "I'll come over tonight."

"But—"

"I'll tell Kevin we're going out a while longer. Girls' night. Besides, he seems to be in no mood to spend time with me."

Sarai looked steadily at her for a moment then nodded.

"Are *you* sure?" Chloe said.

"Yes."

"What about what you said the other night?"

"Maybe it's worth the risk. I want to as much as you do. It's lonely being this way."

Chloe nodded, "Then we'll be lonely together."

The two women sat together at the table for a couple hours. Chloe ordered another drink and some appetizers, and they nibbled on the greasy food as they talked and watched the scene about them. Kevin returned to the table periodically, never staying more than a few minutes before walking off again.

"Probably playing pool and losing horribly," Chloe said. "He let me play once against him. His ego couldn't handle a rematch."

The music was exhausting, the relentless high energy tiresome to mind and body. Finally, Kevin returned and declared the evening over.

"Let's go," he said. "If you two are done."

Chloe slapped him on the leg, "Grouch." She turned to Sarai, "Ready?"

"Sure."

The three made their way out through the same dark hallway that Will had used. Sarai glanced over her shoulder into the crowd once more before leaving the flashing lights

behind. She saw nothing that caught her attention—not the waiter (was he even a waiter?), and not the man who had accosted her earlier in the evening.

The ride was mostly silent. Sarai and Chloe both stared out their windows, and Kevin made no excess movement in driving the car, except that his index finger tapped the steering wheel unceasingly.

Chloe was the first to break the silence. “Kev, Sarai and I are going out for a little while longer. Take us home, and then we’ll take my car.”

Kevin said nothing and made no movement, as though his destination remained unchanged.

“Okay?” Chloe said.

He simply nodded and kept driving.

Chloe furrowed her brow, but she fell silent. Finally she turned and looked out the window once more, lost in thought.

When they arrived and Kevin brought the car to a halt, Chloe turned back to face Sarai, “Let’s go.”

“Stop,” Kevin said.

Chloe immediately turned to face him. Sarai remained motionless, but her eyes shifted to look at him as well.

“Chloe, go up to our place and stay there. Alone.”

Chloe’s mouth opened. After a moment of breathless surprise, she said, “I beg your pardon?!”

“I said get inside and stay there!”

“No!” Chloe said defiantly.

Kevin raised his hand and swung it at her face, but when it was just a hair’s breadth from her skin, Sarai grabbed his arm and ripped it away.

“Don’t touch her!” she hissed.

Even in the cramped quarters of the car, Kevin turned and swung his fist at Sarai.

She easily deflected it and responded by hitting him squarely in the face with the heel of her palm.

He covered his face and groaned.

Chloe gasped.

Sarai put her hand on Chloe’s shoulder, “Go pack some things. You can stay with me. Hurry!”

Chloe looked back and forth at Kevin and Sarai, but she nodded and stepped out of the car. “Sarai, please don’t—”

“Don’t worry,” she said, “I’ll control myself. Go on.”

Chloe shivered.

"Go on, Chloe," Sarai said.

The other nodded and walked quickly toward the building, looking back once or twice before disappearing in the doorway.

"Damn it," Kevin said in a muffled voice, pulling his hands away from his face and looking at them. Sarai's strike had been delivered strategically, and it had left no mark, nor any blood.

"So," Sarai said, "What's her name?"

"What?" he said, grimacing.

"The other woman. The one you're cheating on Chloe with."

"What are you talking about?"

"Any more blood goes to your face and it's going to explode."

"Damn you. Mind your own business!"

"You first. Where do you get off trying to hit Chloe?"

Kevin reached under his seat and pulled out a gun, pointing it back at Sarai.

She almost laughed. "Can't hit me, so shoot me?"

"Shut up!"

"I'll think about it once you tell me what the hell's going on."

Kevin was silent, but his eyes flitted from side to side periodically before returning to Sarai and the sights on his pistol.

Sarai sighed, "I'm getting tired you sticking that thing in my face. Put it down or I'll put it down for you."

"Heh!" he said, "You're unbelievable! Who the hell do you think you are?!"

Sarai's eyes narrowed to slits. "Enough," she said. In an instant, she had the gun in her hands.

Kevin wailed, drawing his hand back and cradling a mangled trigger finger.

"Now, tell me what's going on."

Kevin then flexed his legs and tried to drive his elbow into her.

Sarai raised her hand, catching his elbow and pushing him back, slamming him into the steering wheel.

Kevin groaned as he slumped down, still cradling his hand.

Sarai calmly pulled the clip from the handle of the pistol. She flicked the bullets out of the clip one by one with her

thumb then tossed it over the seat in front of her. She pulled the slide to eject the bullet in the chamber. "Let's do this again." She waited a few seconds. "Tell me or I'll start *trying* to hurt you."

"All right, all right!" he said. "I had no damn choice. It was you for her."

Sarai was silent.

"I had no choice!"

"Who gave you no choice?"

"Veronica." Kevin raised his eyes, looked at Sarai, and flinched, even though she had made no move. "I—I got involved with her. It was stupid. I don't have a choice anymore, though." He looked down at his injured hand and then back at Sarai, "Chloe or you."

"Chloe or me for what?"

"She's a freak! She—I don't even know. She kills for some reason. Gets off on it I guess. She said I owed her—either Chloe or someone else."

"So, out of your great love for Chloe, you offered me?"

"Yes, yes. Of course! But even if I'd've said otherwise, she said she found out something about you tonight, that she wanted you one way or the other."

"She was at the club?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

He was silent.

Her eyes widened in fury.

"Yes. No! No. Someone else there with her. A man."

"And what were you going to do with me?"

Kevin shook his head.

"Tell me!" Sarai shouted.

The roar of her voice caused him to shiver, and he looked at her with fear in his eyes, "Keep you here in the car until she came for you."

Sarai moved to the edge of the seat, "Where is this woman now?!"

"I don't know."

"Chloe!" She reached over and grabbed the base of Kevin's neck and squeezed.

Kevin stiffened and groaned, then slumped over a few seconds later.

She then opened the door to the night and ran across the street to Chloe's apartment building.

Muffled voices sounded through the door, and then a hideous laugh. It was a woman's voice, the chilling sound reaching Sarai's ears just as she approached the door.

Sweat glistened on Sarai's bare arms. Strands of her hair hung across her face, and her breath came in fast but controlled exhalations. She braced herself and then kicked the door, which shattered and flew into the apartment in pieces. Inside, several men in trench coats stood idly, one startled from sipping a cup of coffee. He immediately dropped it and reached to his belt.

The other two did likewise, and a moment later, all three were aiming their pistols.

But Sarai was gone. She had left the men pointing their weapons at an empty doorway. She moved into a living room and then down a hallway to a closed door. Closing her eyes tightly for an instant, she then ran through the door, breaking it apart.

Once inside the room, she skidded to a halt on the carpet, looking in horror at what was before her.

A woman with long, brown hair was on top of Chloe, who lay prone on the bed. One of her hands was wrapped around Chloe's throat, and the other held the handle of a knife.

Sarai couldn't see the blade: it was in Chloe. A look of surprise was frozen on the young woman's face.

"Chloe!" Sarai yelled.

The woman turned her head toward Sarai, a look of utter delight on her face. "Good! You're here!" She licked her lips then giggled.

Sarai bared her teeth and clenched her fists, her muscles becoming taut like cords on her arms and legs.

But just as Sarai braced to charge, she was tackled from behind.

"Hello again, sweetie," a masculine voice whispered in her ear. "Veronica! Come get her!"

Sarai immediately recognized the voice from the club: the man in shaded glasses who had accosted her and was later chased off by the waiter.

"Hold her, Brian," said Veronica, who was now climbing off Chloe.



Sarai screamed and planted her hands on the floor on either side of her shoulders. She pushed in a short burst, lifting herself and Brian off the floor and flipping them both backwards. She landed on top of him and immediately drove her elbow back, catching him in the jaw.

Brian groaned and released her.

She was quickly back on her feet, turning toward Veronica. Veronica simply smiled.

By that time, the men Sarai encountered when she entered the apartment had arrived, pistols aiming at her. They began shooting, but missed. Each time one of them pulled his trigger, the target seemed to have moved elsewhere.

Sarai reached to her leg and pulled her knife free of its sheath. One by one, she took down the men who were shooting at her. Attacking the first, she grabbed the pistol hand and slid the knife between the bones of his forearm. He dropped the gun with a scream, and she slammed the palm of her hand into his face, knocking him unconscious into a wall. The others fell in like manner.

"Veronica, go!" said Brian, who was now back on his feet. "I guess she's mine."

Veronica sighed, "Too bad!" She then giggled and ran to a window at the other side of the room.

Brian now had a knife in his hand as well. He reached up and removed his shaded glasses. The frame was broken. "Pretty good for a girl," he said. "Didn't know it worked that way."

Sarai said nothing, her face still twisted in a terrifying grimace.

He laughed, rubbing his jaw, "Quite strong. Veronica would have loved you." He lowered his hand, his gaze intent on Sarai. "Oh, we know what you are. I was a little surprised, but Veronica was ecstatic. She really wanted you. But," he let out a fake sigh, "She had to settle for just that." He glanced briefly over his shoulder at Chloe.

Sarai held her knife tightly in one hand, her other hand clenching and unclenching.

"Seems such a waste for me to kill you instead of letting Veronica do what she does. But this will be fun. I've never killed one like you." In the next instant he was on her, his knife slashing.

Sarai blocked or dodged his attacks, her speed matching his, but she carefully governed her strength.

The next few seconds filled the room with the sound of grunts, dull thuds of limbs blocking one another, and the occasional clink of knife blades. Had any of the three men lying on the bedroom floor been conscious, they would only have heard a whirring noise.

Sarai stepped back momentarily, exhaling slowly. The fight was a stalemate. She could hold back no longer.

Brian breathed heavily, sweat rolling down his face. He smiled, "Not bad. But enough of this." He charged.

But Sarai was ready. Her muscles relaxed momentarily, and just as he attacked, she tensed for her final defense. Light shined from around her, half-illuminating a blackness that surrounded Brian. Then she saw him slow in his movements, as if he were struggling in a thick oil instead of air. Sarai struck with her left hand, the force of the blow breaking his knife arm. She was then behind him, wrapping her arm around his head and over his eyes. She pulled his head back and rammed her knife under his chin and up into his head, and he went limp. She pulled the knife out and let him fall at her feet.

"How do you like it?!" she shouted down at him, her voice cracking with the final word. Her breath hissed through her clenched teeth, and she growled softly with every exhalation. Dropping the knife, she waited for the pain.

As she raised her arms to cover her face with her hands, the wrenching agony began. She fell to her knees and screamed, a long, high-pitched wail. The pain grew steadily, and her scream waxed with the feeling that her bones were being torn apart from the inside. As it finally began to subside, she fell forward over Brian's body. A few moments later, breathing heavily, she rose unsteadily to her feet.

Running a hand through her hair and pulling it off her face, Sarai then turned to the bed. She walked over and kneeled on it beside Chloe.

"Oh, Chloe. Oh, Chloe!" She put her hand on the young woman's face. "You didn't deserve this!"

Blood was still running from the wound on Chloe's chest. Veronica's knife had pierced her heart.

Sarai put her arms around Chloe and lifted her, holding her tightly. "You didn't deserve this," she whispered. "You didn't

deserve *this!*” Sarai wept as she rocked back and forth with Chloe in her arms. “I should have saved you. I could have. I could have once. I could have!”

One of the gunmen groaned as he opened his eyes. He still saw stars. He looked up to see Sarai standing over him. He then fell back into blackness when she kicked him in the ribs.

Sarai reached into his coat and pulled out a wallet. It fell open, showing a golden badge. She shook her head. A cop. She dropped the badge on his head and walked to the doorway of the bedroom.

Sirens were beginning to sound in the distance through the open window that Veronica had used to leave the apartment.

Sarai turned back, looking at Chloe. “Sleep, poor girl. I’m sorry I have to leave you here.” She then left the apartment.

More police were arriving already. Sarai walked so slowly down the sidewalk and away from the building that they paid her no attention. Hours later—she knew not how many—she arrived home. She had walked alone in the dark, fearing no one and nothing, except were it the idea of one day facing Chloe again and struggling to explain how she could have let her down so horribly.

Morning was just beginning to illuminate the city streets when Sarai opened the door to her apartment. She wandered into the bathroom, pulling the chain of the mirror light and slowly raising her eyes to look at her reflection.

Her hair was a mess. Her face was tear stained, and her eyes were ringed by dark circles. The blue dress that Chloe had given her—sweet Chloe—was torn and sullied with blood. Chloe had been so happy to see her in it. So full of life—life that now was nothing more than an evil black stain.

Sarai struggled to keep her face still and stared at herself until the struggle ended. Reaching down to the sink, she picked up a comb that rested on the edge of the bowl and turned it in her hand, looking at it. Then she combed her hair back in slow, even strokes, going over it several times. It was greasy and obeyed her easily, extending down past her shoulders.

She reached back with her left hand, grasping her hair near the ends and wrapping it around her fingers until her fist was

against her head. Looking into her own eyes in the mirror, she reached to her leg and pulled her knife free of its sheath—the one Chloe had given her. In a single smooth motion, she slid the blade through her hair, cutting it free from her head. She knotted the locks into a bundle and left the bathroom.

After taking off the dress and putting on her work pants and a sleeveless shirt, she slid the knife into her belt and put on a canvas jacket. She tied her boots, grabbed her helmet, and left the apartment without looking back.

# Will

Will Owen bolted upright when his cell phone chirped. He grabbed it and accepted the call.

"Yeah? Aw, come on, Mikey. It's Saturday. Yes—no—all right. Fine. Where is it? Right. Got it. I'll go check it out." He pressed "End" and tossed the phone onto his night stand, then lay back in bed and rubbed his eyes. A moment later, he was up.

"So, you said how many cops were hurt?" Will asked an officer who was standing near a police cruiser. He scribbled in a notepad, not looking up at the officer.

"None."

"And how many total?"

"Two dead."

"And the others they brought out on stretchers?"

"Unrelated. Accident in another apartment."

"What happened to the vics?"

"Stabbed. Maybe some crackhead gone loopy."

Will nodded, "Got it. Thanks." He turned and walked away. Under his breath, he said, "Friggin' liar." He walked around to the ambulance where one of the bodies was waiting to be loaded. It was enclosed in a black plastic bag. Another bagged body was on a gurney near the entrance to the building.

"Hey," Will said to the coroner's assistant, "What's up with these two?"

"Knife wounds," the other said, his lips barely moving, and the rest of him giving no indication that he was speaking to a journalist.

"Who are they?"

"Two males."

"How 'bout a look?"

"Forget it!"

"Aw, come on." Will dropped a twenty-dollar bill on the ground. "Oops, I'm such a butterfingers."

The coroner's assistant paused.

"Boy, you drive a hard bargain." Will dropped another twenty. "My fingers are getting stickier. Make up your mind."

The other looked around quickly, and apparently deciding the coast was clear enough, he unzipped the bag, opening it slightly.

Will's breath caught in his chest. *Him! What was his name? Kevin?*

The bag was then zipped up once more. "That's all you get." The coroner's assistant picked up the bills from the ground and pocketed them quickly before calling to an idle officer for assistance in loading the body.

"Man alive," Will said as he scribbled quickly in his notebook. He then moseyed toward another officer who was writing on a clipboard.

"The two knifed vics—related?"

The officer shook his head, "No. Looks random. Dead guy up in the apartment. Found the guy who owned the place dead in a car—got it right in the heart." He waved his hand curtly.

"And who killed the owner?"

"Who knows. Wife. Wife's boyfriend. Someone else. Check the newspapers in a couple days," he said with a brief chuckle.

Will snorted and shook his head. As he turned to walk back to his car, he caught out of the corner of his eye a shape moving behind the corner of a building across the street. He continued walking as if he had seen nothing.

Trotting across the street, he held up his hand to stop a car in a long line that was slowed by gawking and by the emergency vehicles that clogged half the road. Once on the far sidewalk, he walked past the corner as though he was minding his own business, intending to glance back ever so quickly just before he reached the next building.

But he didn't make it three steps past the corner. A hand wrapped around his mouth and an arm around his chest, and he was jerked back into the narrow alleyway, the motion jarring his body. He was then forced none too gently against the hard brick of the building he had just passed.

"Wha—" he began.

"Sh!" hissed a voice behind him. "What did they say? Where's Chloe?"

Will struggled to turn his head to see who was holding him.

"Eyes on the wall!" the voice hissed again.

Will furrowed his brow. "Sarai? Is that you? What the *hell* are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

"I'm doing my job, of course!"

"Keep your voice down!" she said. "Now tell me, what did they do with Chloe?"

He then tried to turn his whole body as fast as he could, hoping to force Sarai to lose her grip on him—but it was to no avail. He felt like he was struggling against steel.

"Stop that or I'll end up hurting you," she said.

"I'd rather not talk to a brick wall."

Sarai snorted, "Fine. You try running to the cops, and I'll—"

"Don't worry," he said, groaning in frustration. "Since that obviously means you're involved, I'll keep quiet. Scout's honor."

A moment later, he felt her release her iron grip on him, and he turned slowly to face her. He almost expected to see her towering above him with a form much larger than his. Instead, he had to look down at her slight frame.

Sarai looked up at him steadily. Her youthful appearance was tainted by the dark circles around her eyes.

Will nodded slowly, "Thanks."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Chloe!"

Will blinked, "Oh. Chloe—your friend. I didn't see her come out. Maybe she left before I got here, or—"

"She was *murdered*, damnit!"

Will fell silent for a moment, then he said softly, "I didn't know. I only saw Kevin's body and one other. Well, I didn't see in the bag, but I've seen enough of them to know it was no woman in there. And I trust what the coroner's assistant told me."

Sarai's mouth opened slightly and her eyes glazed, but she quickly recovered. "Are you sure they didn't bring anyone else out?"

Will nodded, "As sure as I can be. Like I said, something might have happened before I got here, but I don't see why. Police only mentioned two dead, and the coroner's not been here that long." He looked at her intently. "Sarai, I have to ask. How are you involved in this?"

Stepping back from him, she said, "That's none of your business." She turned to leave.

"Hey, *it is* my business. I know you're involved somehow. Tell me, and maybe I can help—find Chloe's body, or whatever."

She looked over her shoulder at him and snorted, "You can't help me. The best thing you can do is forget you saw me."

"I can't do that. Come on. Tell me something. Off the record?"

"Nothing's off the record."

"What happened up there? I find out that three cops got their tails kicked and two—three—people are dead. And one of the bodies just vanished?"

Sarai turned smartly and faced him, her eyes boring into his and making him look away. "If I knew what happened to her, I wouldn't have *asked* you."

"Why *did* you ask me? I know you showed yourself earlier to get me to come over here."

"Figure it out, journalist."

Finally, he said, "Ah, I get it. You're involved, and the cops know it. Can't just stroll up and ask them what's going on, I suppose."

With a snort that smacked of boredom, Sarai turned and walked away.

"What are you going to do now?" Will asked quickly.

Sarai said nothing.

"Hey! I'll help you find Chloe's body if you want. Come on!"

"I'm not interested in giving you a story," Sarai said without turning and without stopping.

Will followed her. "But don't you want to find out what—"

Sarai snapped around once more. "My friend is dead. I had just hoped she would be treated with a little respect now, since she wasn't while she was alive. Are you happy? Write about that if you want to."

"Let me help you."



"You can't."

"You'd be surprised what I can do."

Sarai fell silent, but her pace increased.

"Hey, wait." He paused, "I'm sorry about your friend. I've lost one or two in my time."

Sarai stopped.

"Look, I can find out things. I'm not involved in this. Just a journalist. But I have contacts." He reached toward her to turn her around, but he quickly pulled his hand back as though he had been burned.

She turned to face him once more, "I don't want your help."

Will looked intently at her. "Was it Kevin who killed Chloe? No—that other man. Who was he?"

Sarai shook her head. "I'm not giving you a story."

Will looked away for a moment as if searching for something, then looked at her again. "Then will you at least let me ask you something else? I'll only ask this one thing if you'll answer honestly. It has nothing to do with all this, I promise." When she was silent, he asked, "How old are you?"

The briefest smirk crossed Sarai's face.

"What's funny?"

"Don't you know? You promised to ask something that has nothing to do with this."

Will stammered for a moment, then said, "Let me help, Sarai."

"Why? So you can have a story?"

Will shrugged. "Maybe I just want to help."

"Then tell me why really."

"The same reason I've been bothered by you since last night when I saw you sitting by your lonesome in that club. I can't explain it, really, even to myself. Maybe it's just childish curiosity. Maybe it's because I think you know something that," he paused, "that I want to know too."

"Such things have killed more than cats."

"Yeah, I know. And I figure one day I'll really step in it."

Sarai stepped closer to him. "Maybe you can help." She looked over his shoulder, and her face twisted in surprise and fear.

Will's eyes went wide and he spun around, only to feel Sarai grasping his neck near his shoulder. Stars flew in front of his eyes, and blackness covered him.

"Sorry," Sarai whispered as she eased him to the asphalt. She then trotted down the alleyway to her motorcycle. Donning her helmet, she hopped on, started the engine, and rode off, leaving Will collapsed in the shadows.

\* \* \*

"Bring me hamburger. With fries. And bottle of wine—California red," said Matvei Savenkov, his eyes never leaving the silver barrel that he was carefully polishing with a felt cloth. He sat at the center of a long, dark wooden table with ornate designs carved along its edge. The surface was smooth and polished to a high gloss. Covering a portion of the table was a thick cloth, and on the cloth was a silver pistol that was only missing its barrel. A full magazine lay next to it.

At Matvei's request, a stubby man with lank, dark hair nodded and walked carefully among the antiques toward the back of the store.

The sound of a door opening and closing reached Matvei's ears. "I never understand why they say *french* when they talk about fries." He shook his head then looked carefully at the barrel in his hand. Nodding in satisfaction, he set the felt cloth down and picked up the pistol, replacing the barrel and then retracting and releasing the slide. The pistol closed with a satisfying mechanical click.

Matvei chuckled, "I love America. Maybe not land of free, but sure land of plenty. Don't you think, Stepan?"

Stepan Isayev nodded with a cold smile. He was a tall man dressed in an impeccable black suit, his muscular frame large but lacking any flab. He stood silently near the entrance to the store.

Another click sounded when Matvei slid the magazine into the handle of the pistol. He pulled the slide back and released it once more, chambering a round. Holding the gun firmly in his hands and extending his arms, he looked down the sites at a tall vase elsewhere in the store. With a smile, he set the pistol down.

Bells jingled as the door at the entrance to the shop opened.

Stepan's head turned smartly.

Matvei looked up and then groaned, muttering to himself in Russian.

A woman walked into the store. "Hi, Matty," she said.

Stepan reached into his black coat.

"*Nyet!*" Matvei said sharply. Then speaking more calmly, a wry smile on his face, he said "Do not be moron, Stepan. Maybe you remember what happen to Alexei?"

Stepan froze, his hand still in his jacket, but his eyes turned back to the woman.

She flashed a brief and insincere smile as she walked past him.

"Stepan, go to wine cellar and pick something good. Something red. Let breathe before you bring here."

Stepan slowly pulled his hand from his jacket and sheepishly walked to the back of the store. He opened a door to a stairwell leading downward, closing it behind him.

"Miss Rahmani," Matvei said nodding, a plastic smile on his face.

Sarai stared at him silently.

Matvei closed his eyes and raised his eyebrows, "Always good to see friend."

She said nothing.

The smile left Matvei's face. "What do you want?"

"Information."

His face turned to a frown. "I thought we have agreement. I give my protection to your little friend— what is sweet thing's name, Chloe?—and you leave me alone."

Sarai's eyes narrowed.

The color bled out of Matvei's cheeks. "Wait, now! If something happen to her, it was not me!"

She was silent.

"So, something did happen." He pursed his lips then winced. "But our agreement—"

"Our agreement, Matty, was that you and your two-bit thugs make sure that no one hurts Chloe."

"We did nothing to her! We can't protect her every minute!"

"You should have thought of that before you went after her for an accident you caused."

Matvei's shocked face changed to a resigned smirk. "What can I say. Alexei was angry that he get scratches on new Ferrari." He shrugged, "Wanted to blame everyone but himself. So, your Chloe was just in wrong place at wrong time. As I recall, you not even know her—"

Sarai sighed, "I don't care, Matty. You're wasting my time."

Rubbing his forehead, he said, "What do you want to know?"

"A name."

He muttered under his breath once more in Russian.

Sarai slammed her fist on the table.

Matvei jumped.

"Her given name is Veronica. Alias maybe, I don't know. I want her full name. The real one."

Matvei smiled nervously, "Such a lovely American name. Friend?"

Sarai's face was immobile.

Matvei looked down and shrugged. "How many Veronicas could be in city? Too many, I think. But why come to me? Surely woman of your—abilities—can do this on her own."

In a motion that defied Matvei's vision, Sarai pulled her knife from her belt and stuck it into the fine wood of the table.

Matvei stifled a gasp, and his eyes strayed briefly to his loaded pistol.

Sarai shook her head slowly. In an instant, she had the gun in her hand.

Matvei opened his mouth. "Miss Rahmani, no. Please. You already ruin table. But that—that is very, *very* expensive gun."

Sarai nodded as she removed the magazine and tossed it behind her. She then pulled the slide, ejecting the chambered round. It clicked on the floor several times. Holding the barrel of the empty pistol in one hand and the grip in the other, she looked at Matvei once more.

"Alright. Alright!" He groaned. "Can you at least give some hint?"

Her eyes bored into him. "Ask the cops."

Matvei chuckled and shook his head. "Miss Rahmani, you must understand. My relationship with cops is very precarious. You see, if I—"

Sarai braced herself and tightened her grip on the pistol.

"No! Wait! Please!"

Her eyes narrowed at him.

"I will ask cops. Perhaps I have marker or two to call in." He smiled.

Sarai nodded.

He shrugged, "What is in this for me?"

"I'll call us even."

Matvei's shoulders fell as if in relief.

Sarai set the pistol down on the table and pulled her knife from the wood, sliding it into her belt. "Make it fast, Matty."

Matvei closed his eyes and smiled, "I will do my best." As Sarai turned and walked toward the front exit, he sat up straight and said, "This will make us even, yes?"

"That's what I said, Matty," she responded without turning. A moment later, the bells on the door jingled, and she was gone.

Matvei gently lifted his pistol from the table, caressing it as though it needed consoling after a terrifying ordeal.

Stepan arrived minutes later, setting a bottle of red wine and a tall glass next to Matvei. He nearly gasped when he saw the knife mark in the shiny surface of the table.

Matvei looked up at him as he set the pistol down on the cloth. In answer to an unasked question that was almost visible on Stepan's lips, he said, "Sarai Rahmani. You don't mess with her." He poured wine into the glass and emptied it in a single gulp.

\* \* \*

"Oh, this is good," Will said, the phone at his ear, his feet on his desk, his pad in his lap. He rubbed lightly at the bruise where his neck met his right shoulder. "This morning it was two dead, now it's one? Just the apartment owner? So, if I call back this evening, you'll tell me nothing happened there, right? Uh huh. Well, what if I told you I found out that those three pedestrian injuries in that building were all cops, all with knife wounds? Where'd I find that out? None of your friggin' business." The other end of the line clicked. Will slammed the phone down. "Damn cops."

"Hey, Will, what're you doing here on Saturday?"

Will put his feet down and turned to see Alana standing behind him.

She adjusted her thick-rimmed glasses, but her questioning glance remained.

"Well, I—um, homicide. Triple homicide this morning. Or late last night. Was looking into it."

"Oh. What's bugging you about it?" She held a stack of papers against her chest as she quizzed him.

Will shook his head, "What do you need, Alana?"

"Me? Oh! Well, nothing. I was just getting some things together. Are you okay?"

"Fine."

Alana set the stack of papers down on Will's desk. "Since you're here, you can help me go through all this."

Will groaned, "And what is *all this*?"

"Credit histories on every cop under Constantine. And a few more for good measure."

Will rubbed his forehead.

"Come on, it'll be fun."

"I think this is a waste of time, Alana. The cops aren't stupid—they're getting paid in cash, and they're not going to do anything conspicuous with that money. They probably just supplement their grocery shopping and gas purchases little by little. It'd never show up in a credit history. We should follow this Brian Cass fellow. The one that delivers the bribes."

Alana shook her head, "I disagree."

Will snorted.

"Yeah, I know, I'm not experienced enough to disagree. But I just don't think we'll get anywhere with Cass," Alana said.

"No?"

"No."

"And why not?" Will said as he leaned back in his chair.

"You said yourself the cops aren't stupid. They're not taking money from someone that can be found, traced, or bought. Constantine is pretty high up on the food chain. If the money is coming from someone higher up, well, that someone will probably go to great pains to protect himself."

"Or herself," Will said.

"Or herself. Anyways, we can't throw Cass in prison and make him give us his handler. And unless he has a weakness we can exploit, then they've effectively cut us off from going any higher. And from what I can tell, Cass doesn't even exist on paper. No driver's license, no birth certificate, no nothing. We'll never find who's at the top of this that way. So we have to go down the chain."

Will chuckled, "That's what I love about you, Alana. *They*. You sound like a conspiracy nut."

Alana shrugged, "What's wrong with a pronoun when we don't really know who's involved?"

Will smirked, "Nothing at all." He rubbed his chin, "Do you think Constantine knows who the money's really coming from?"

"Yes. But that doesn't matter."

"Why not?"

She shrugged. "I just have a sense he won't say anything. Everything I've seen and heard from him, he's shut up tighter than a clam. For some reason."

Will nodded.

"So, are we going to make this pop quiz drag on, or are you going to help me with these credit histories?"

"Not yet. Why will going down the chain work? Why wouldn't they just choose some cops that are as ironclad as Cass?"

Alana smiled, "At some point, someone is getting money because they need it or want it. And that's the weak link: someone who can be bought."

"Okay. And how do you intend to buy this person? You gonna use your vast intern salary?"

Alana glared. "Well, we don't need to buy anyone outright. Just threaten the flow of money. Isn't that what we do best?"

"Yes," Will said, "but betraying your boss is a good way to put a squeeze on your income, if not your life span. I'm not sure any of them would go for it."

"True. But we might eventually gain some other leverage. And if we have more than one name, then we might have a better chance of flipping one of them. Everyone can blame everyone else, and no one's left hanging in the breeze. But none of that works if we don't know who's involved."

Will pursed his lips and mixed a nod with a shake of his head, "Maybe."

"Well, anyway, maybe we'll find another trail we can follow." She held out her hands, "So, what do you think? Will this get Pete to give me a real job here?"

Will laughed, "No. Not until you get something good out of all of it—preferably something that sells some papers or gets us some ad revenue."

Alana shrugged, "Fine."

"Well, why don't you get started on these exciting credit histories."

"What're you going to do?"

"I have some calls to make. But I'll get back with you when I'm done."

Alana nodded, took the stack of papers, and sat down in an empty cubicle.

Will grabbed his notebook and a pen, then placed his feet on his desk and leaned back. He sat motionless for a time, except that he tapped his notebook with the pen in a monotonous rhythm. Finally, he took his feet off his desk and rolled his chair up to it, placing his forearms on the edge and typing on the keyboard. He ran a white pages search on Sarai.

"How many people can have that name?" he mumbled.

The search returned several dozen hits.

He leaned back and rubbed his chin. "Hm."

Will then clicked "Print" on the results and reached for a phone book. He flipped to the yellow pages.

"Factory?" He chuckled, "Not factory outlets. Manufacturing? Industrial?" He flipped back and forth through the book for several minutes, finally throwing it across his desk. "Damn useless thing."

Again he sat in thought. "Welding." He grabbed the phone book once more. "I'll bet she's good. If she's good, she's known."

He picked up the phone, then set it back down. It was Saturday. The phone calls would have to wait until Monday.

Will returned his hands to his keyboard and ran more Internet searches. He searched every relevant combination of words he could think of, vainly hoping he might find some reference to Sarai in the context of welding, manufacturing, or factories. Nothing.

"Not surprising, I suppose," he mumbled to himself. He then stood up and stretched. Walking quietly over to the cubicle where Alana was working, he listened to her talking to herself under her breath.

"Hey, stop that!" he said loudly, smiling as he did.

Alana jumped. "Damn it don't do that to me!" she said when she had turned to see Will laughing behind her.

"Sorry. I guess I'll help you."

Alana's eyes narrowed and she looked at him intently as he rolled a chair over from another cubicle.

"What?" he said, noticing her gaze.

"What's up with this thing you're looking into?"

"The homicide?"



She nodded.

He shook his head curtly, "I'm not sure."

"No, something's up. You're never like this."

Will began to dismiss the matter, then he looked at the pile of credit histories. "Can't be."

"What?"

He leaned back and furrowed his brow.

"What?!" Alana nearly shouted at him.

"We've assumed all along it's drugs. Cops shake down dealers, deliver the stuff to someone else to sell, then the money gets laundered and delivered to Constantine, who spreads it through the ranks."

"Yeah, what else would it be?"

"Why haven't we ever seen any of the stuff, though? Why no dealers complaining of being ripped off by bad cops lately?" He rubbed his chin.

Alana laughed, "So, you think it has something to do with this murder you're looking into?"

"This *is* an odd one."

"Oh? How so?"

"I'm pretty convinced this one's getting covered up."

"Okay, so, who got bumped off?"

"That's the thing," Will said, "it's no one all that important, at least in the grand scheme. But—"

"But what?"

"I called in a marker from an emergency medical tech—I punted a story about one of his kids getting into trouble some time back. He said three cops were injured. Injured bad. Cut up. When I got there this morning, the story was two dead, three unrelated injuries."

"And?"

"I know for a fact that three are dead. But when I called the cops to get the official story a bit ago, I was told one dead, three civilians injured—not three cops."

"How sure are you about your numbers?"

"Sure."

"What aren't you telling me?"

"For an intern, you sure have a bad attitude."

Alana smiled.

"Well, last night I—" he stopped. Shaking his head, he continued, "Just believe me. I know what I saw."

"Alright, I'm waiting for the punch line. What's this have to do with—hang on, you're not serious. Are you?"

Will shrugged. "We're not getting anywhere with the drug idea, are we?"

"So," Alana raised her hands in resignation, "what? Cops are killing people? Why? The fun of it?"

"I don't know."

"That makes no sense!"

"I know, Alana! I didn't say it did!"

"Sorry," she said.

He waved his hand, "Forget it. Look, I don't have a clear picture yet. All I know is we're spinning our wheels with the drug idea. Maybe the cops *are* killing people for some reason, but maybe they're just covering up something. Maybe killing had nothing to do with it until last night. Maybe something went wrong." He paused for a moment and stared into space. Returning to himself, he looked at Alana, "I couldn't find any evidence of an emergency call or dispatch. Just three cops at the site of a murder. No reason, no ties to that place, nothing."

"Why not just assume it was a phony drug deal turned rip?"

"Because of who's involved. It's about more than just money, or drugs."

"And who is it that's involved?" Alana glared at him.

Will smiled, but he said nothing.

"Alright," she sighed. "Assume there's a connection. What now?"

"Now, you get to find out their names." He smiled and pointed to the stack of credit histories. Alana had barely made a dent in them. "Monday, send Danny out to talk to them. See if any of them looks like he might've been roughed up."

"Nuh uh! I'll do that part!"

Will shook his head, "No you won't. Too dangerous."

"But—"

"No buts, Alana. I catch you out there on this one and I'll have your internship pulled."

"You wouldn't!"

"I would. You're not experienced enough. Not yet. Believe me, it's for your good."

She glared at him.

"Look, if we get this story, you can have the byline. Just don't go out on the street. Deal?"

She pursed her lips, "Fine. Deal."

"Okay. I think instead of sharing your light reading there, I'm gonna hit up a couple sources. See if I can find out what's happening." He looked intently at her. "Stay off the street, got it?"

"I said I would!"

"Yeah, and I know you."

"I promise."

Will chuckled, "You promise what?"

Alana smiled, "Trapped. I promise you I won't talk to anyone about this."

Will nodded, and as he walked past his desk, he paused to look at the awards that lined his cubicle wall. He snorted and kept walking.

Will drove slowly as he passed Chloe's apartment building for the fifth time. Little had changed. Two police cruisers were parked outside. One officer was canvassing a resident of the building.

But Will wasn't interested in the police. His attention focused mostly on the alleys nearby. He hoped he would see her—Sarai. Finally, he pulled his car into the alley where he had talked to her earlier that day, but she wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"You're an idiot," he whispered to himself. "Let it go," he repeated continuously as he stared blankly down the alley. Minutes later, he left the alley and returned to the office.

"Back so soon?" Alana said when she saw Will plop down in his chair. "Hey, what's up?" She rolled her chair over to his desk.

He shook his head, "Don't know."

"You wanna tell me what's twisting you up about this?"

"Nope."

"Pft."

He smiled at her, "Don't worry, Alana. I'm just trying to figure out what's going on."

"Get anything useful while you were out?"

"No."

Alana nodded. "Well, then, I guess it's credit histories."

Will chuckled, "Fine, you irrepressible intern."

She smiled, "Someone has to keep people in this place on their toes."

He laughed, and together they rolled their chairs back to the other cubicle.

Alana had made a dent in the stack. She had sorted almost all the papers into a number of neat but scattered piles.

"Okay, so what are all these piles?"

"Here's the ones that look clean, over there are the real suspicious ones, and the ones in between are various shades of grey. Darker here, lighter there—it's sort of an 'S' shape." She motioned to the various stacks.

Will shook his head. "How about I just take a stack and start looking through it?"

"Be my guest!"

As the sun fell in the sky, finally reaching the horizon—not that Will and Alana could see it from their windowless office—they finished separating the credit histories into two stacks: those that appeared clean and those that didn't.

Alana rubbed her eyes under her glasses. "Ugh. I can't take this anymore."

Will nodded, "You're really a masochist, I have to admit."

"I need to drink a pot of coffee or something."

"No you don't, Alana. You need to go home."

"I need to finish."

"Nope. Office is closed. Go home."

"You're so bossy," she said, a mock look of disapproval on her face.

Will smiled, "Only because you need someone to boss you around."

She chuckled, "Well, if you insist. Will you be back tomorrow?"

"Yes," he said.

"Hey, Will?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you please tell me what's bugging you?"

"It's just a coincidence."

"Tell me."

Will put his hands behind his head and sighed, "Last night, I met a very strange woman at a dance club. I mean *strange*."

Alana smiled, "I don't know what's stranger, you going to a dance club or you meeting a woman."

He glared at her. "Funny, wise-ass."

Alana covered her mouth to stifle a chuckle. She then quickly changed her expression back to a more solemn one and said, "Sorry. Continue. What was strange about her? She look funny?"

"No. Well, not in any obvious way. Something else." He sat up straight, "Okay, you know how people are. Mostly a bunch of self-centered narcissists. This one? I couldn't get her to say *anything* about herself."

"Maybe she likes being a private person."

"Even private people have that itch to talk about themselves. Not a glimmer from this one. She looks too young to have that kind of discipline."

"Looks too young? How old is she?"

He shook his head, "I don't know."

"So what's she got to do with this?"

"Her friend—and her friend's husband—were two of the murder vics last night."

"Well, that alone wouldn't lead me to believe it was anything more than a coincidence."

"That's because you didn't meet her afterwards."

"You saw her again? And what's her name?"

"Sarai. And yes—found her hanging around the vics' apartment building."

"What'd she say?"

"Not much, after she nearly broke me in half dragging me into the alley. She then put some sort of pressure-point hold on me. Knocked me clean out. This woman is hard core, and I got the sense from what little she said that she's going after the perp."

"So you're sure she didn't do it?"

"I have no reason to have an opinion either way at this point, but my gut tells me she didn't do it. Besides, her friend at the club seemed halfway between a sister and a daughter. I can't imagine she'd have killed her."

Alana adjusted her glasses. "Odd. How many did you say were murdered?"

"Three."

"Did you see all the bodies?"

"No, just one—the friend's husband. Recognized him from the club. The other was a male. I didn't see in the bag, but I'm pretty certain about that. Coroner's assistant backed me up on that, too."

"How do you know it's three total, then?"

"Sarai told me."

"And you believe her?"

He shrugged and raised his hands, "Like I said, I have no reason one way or the other, really, but I tend to believe her."

"Okay, so, who was the other guy?"

Will furrowed his brow. "I don't know."

"And you said they changed the story to one dead?"

He nodded.

"Any ideas?"

"No."

"Anything else you want to tell me?"

"No."

Alana narrowed her eyes, "Okay. Well, I guess I'll go home."

"Go there and stay. I'll find out who he was. I don't want you getting in over your head. I want this to count as part of your promise. Okay?"

"Fine," Alana said, raising her arms in resignation. "I can barely see straight anyway."

"You be able to get home safely?"

"Yeah, fine. See you tomorrow."

"Night," Will said. After Alana left, he sat in thought for several minutes. Then he picked up his phone and dialed a number. When a voice answered on the other end of the line, Will said, "Yeah, Svetlana, I need a favor." His face turned red at her response, "For crying out loud, I don't mean *sexual favor*. You know I'm not that kind of guy. Yeah, whatever."

"Listen, I just need some information. We'll be even. Right. Okay, two people were whacked last night. I need their names. Preferably both of them. Yes, just names. And yes, I'll really consider us even. Sound okay? Good. When can you get them? Come on, timing is everything. Can you get them for me by tomorrow morning?" He sighed, "I know tomorrow's Sunday. Just do it, will you? Okay. Thank you, Svetlana. Good night." He set the phone down and chuckled.

Will then became so lost in his thoughts that he was surprised to find himself sitting in his driveway nearly an

hour later. The ride home was habit, and he had paid it so little attention that, as far as he knew, it might never have occurred at all.

After turning on the lights and walking into his kitchen, he opened the refrigerator and surveyed once more the sparse selection. He grabbed a half of a sub that was wrapped in clear plastic; it was probably close to a week old, but it would do. He also grabbed a beer.

Sitting at his table, Will unwrapped the sub and took a bite. As he chewed the stale bread, he opened his beer and sipped it. He then pushed both the beer and the sub away and sighed, rubbing his forehead.

Minutes later, wearing the same clothes he had put on that morning, Will crashed into his bed. But sleep was far from him.

"You look like hell," Alana said.

"Didn't sleep," Will replied.

Alana nodded, "Well, I've been here since sunup. Your phone was ringing off the hook, so I answered it."

Will's eyes went wide.

Alana smiled and held up a scrap of paper. "You were right. Wanna guess whose name is on here?"

"You talked to Svetlana?"

"Yep. She said one of the stiff's was a sure ID, but the other was less certain. Some cop apparently dropped the name at some point and it stuck. No ID, though. And she told me to tell you that she considers her debt paid."

Will grabbed the piece of paper from her and unfolded it. "My goodness."

Alana nodded.

On the paper were two handwritten names: Kevin Anderson and Brian Cass.

Will stared at the paper and rubbed his chin.

"This is crazy," Alana said. "This means our best lead now is the woman you met—Sarai."

Will shook his head, "Not *our*. *My*. You keep working on those credit histories. Might still find something in there."

"Hey! I don't want to be left out on this!"

"Alana, I told you I'd give you the byline. I'll keep my word. I'd never stab you in the back. You're good at what you do, and you'll get better with practice. But this lead's mine."

"Why?"

Will ran his hand through his hair, "Something about this woman. Something."

Alana pursed her lips, her eyes narrowing. "Look, Will, I usually keep my mouth shut because you always seem to know what you're doing, even if I don't. But this is different. I don't know what's going on with you or with this woman. But you're getting twisted by it all. I can see it."

Will looked at her.

"I know I'm just an int—" She fell silent when he raised his hand.

"I appreciate it, Alana. But like you said, I know what I'm doing."

She nodded, "Well, just keep your head on straight. I don't want to end up taking your cubicle because you got yourself killed."

Will smiled and gave Alana a mock punch to the shoulder. "Go finish with your credit histories. I'm going to see what I can find out about Cass."

"Okay. Let me know if I can help."

"I will."

Alana lingered for a moment then returned to her borrowed cubicle, where two stacks of papers in manila folders awaited her.

Will sat at his desk and turned on his monitor. He started searching the Internet for Brian Cass—and anything that could possibly link him to someone named Sarai.

Several hours later, he shoved his keyboard away with a vengeance. After rubbing his eyes and then waiting for the resulting blur to leave his vision, he looked over at Alana.

The young woman had her arms on the desk, and her head was resting on them. Her back rose and fell with a slow and steady rhythm.

Will rose and walked over to her. He gently put his hand on her shoulder.

"What? I'm almost done," she said as she looked up at Will. "Oh, sorry. I must have dozed off."

"It's okay, Alana. Why don't you take the rest of the weekend. Whatever's left of it."

"No, I'm almost there. I've got five prime candidates, and—"

"Alana."



She sighed, "I sense an order coming. All right, I suppose I'm too tired to be of much use anyway."

Will nodded, "I'm guessing you didn't sleep much last night either?"

She shook her head, "Too much on my mind. I actually got here at about two this morning. Figured if I wasn't going to sleep, I might as well work."

Smiling, he said, "Then you definitely need to take the rest of the day. Try not to think about this anymore. I'll do the same." He raised his eyebrows in a silent acknowledgment of how difficult he knew this would be.

Alana chuckled, "Okay. Tomorrow morning, then!"

"You bet."

Despite what he said, Will stayed at his desk for several more hours. He continued to search the Internet, albeit unsuccessfully, for some connection between a Brian Cass and Sarai. No connection was forthcoming. Neither seemed to have any presence whatsoever.

By the time he left the office, his mind was completely clouded by fatigue. He stopped briefly at a Mexican fast food restaurant and ordered some tacos. The food was tasteless, and he chewed mechanically as he sat at his table in his home, an open but untouched beer in front of him.

*Something's up. You're never like this,* Will heard Alana say. Sighing, he whispered to himself, "You're smack in the middle of this, Sarai—whoever you are." He sipped his beer and then rose from the table, leaving an untouched taco.

When his body hit the sheets of his bed, he fell asleep almost immediately. But he dreamed; they were bizarre dreams of Sarai, and of fire.

"Yeah, hi, Bill here in manufacturing. I have some stuff that needs to be fixed, and I need an expert welder." Will was back in the office once more. It was Monday morning at last, and he began making phone calls almost as soon as the eight o'clock hour arrived. He leaned back in his chair and said, "Well, that sounds good, but I heard about this chick that works for some factory. Supposedly she's the best." He held his pen at the ready. "Well, assume a woman *was* capable. If you could maybe give me her number, I could give you a one hundred percent commission on the first job." He spun the pen on his

hand a couple times. "Name's Sarai. No, really. All right, well, thanks anyway." He hit the flash button on the phone and dialed another number.

Several calls followed, each ending in the same way.

Will sighed, running his hands through his hair. He sat quietly for several minutes. Then, lounging back in his chair, he dialed another number. "Yes, hello." He paused. "I need some acetylene tanks. You bet. What? You need what to buy the stuff? Well, listen, I don't have that—I'm just trying to process this order for one of my coworkers. Right. Welder—female, if you can believe it." He bolted upright in his chair. "You know Sarai? I mean, of course you do. Right. All right. Well, we have some discrepancies in our paperwork, and I was wondering which phone number is associated with that account?" He scribbled. "Okay, well, I think what I'll do is get everything in order here and then call you back so you don't have to break the rules on her account again. You betcha. Thanks." He hung up.

"Gotcha now." He dialed the number he had written on his pad. "Hello, where are you located?"

\* \* \*

"Calm down, calm down, Billy," Pat said. "I'm sure she's fine. She's gonna hear it from me when she shows, but in the meantime, don't worry about it."

Billy shook his head.

Pat turned, "Excuse me, sir," he said to a curly-haired man that had walked onto the factory floor. "If I could ask you to wait in the office right over there," he pointed.

"I'm looking for a woman. Name's Sarai," Will Owen said.

Billy stepped closer, "You seen her?"

"Well," Will stepped back slightly, "No, but I'd like to find her, actually."

Pat's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Look, I mean her no harm. She might be in some trouble. Just thought I might be able to help."

"What kind of trouble?" Billy said.

"Her friend was murdered a couple nights ago."

"Chloe?" Pat said.

Will nodded.

He looked at the floor and shook his head. "I pity the punk who did that," he said softly.

"Why?" Will asked.

Pat snorted and turned to Billy, "I guess he must not know her too well." He then turned back to Will. "He certainly doesn't if he thinks there's anything he can do to *help* her."

"When did you see her last?" Billy said, ignoring Pat.

"Saturday morning. Near where they found Chloe's husband—I guess it was Chloe's place. He was dead. They didn't even find Chloe."

"And Sarai's involved?" Billy asked.

"I think so. Look, I just want to know how I can find her. I've been trying to find out some information that might help." He briefly looked sidelong at Pat before continuing. "Do you know where she might have gone?"

Pat paused before speaking. "I suppose you're not out to hurt her. And if you are, well." He faked a laugh. "I don't know much about her outside of work. She comes on time, gets twice as much done as clowns like Billy here, and then leaves at the end of the day. That's all I know. But if I had to hazard a guess, I'd say that what you need to do is find out who hurt Chloe. Then you'll find Sarai." Pat sighed, "Such a damn shame. Chloe was a nice lady."

Will slowly backed away as Pat and Billy talked more heatedly about Sarai. He then turned and left through the office.

\* \* \*

Walking to his car, Will spun his keys around his finger and pursed his lips in thought. He sat down behind the wheel and rubbed his chin. "Sarai, where would you go?" he said. "If the cops aren't giving it to me straight, then they must know something else. Come on!" He tapped his fist against his forehead. "Okay, so, your coworkers think you're going to be wherever Chloe's murderer is. But where is that?"

Will started the car and drove out of the parking lot. His next stop was a convenience store. He wandered into the store and walked up and down the aisles, finally finding what he was looking for: prepaid cellular phones. He grabbed the cheapest one he could find and walked to the register.

Once in his car, he reached into his glove box and pulled out a pen knife, then cut open the molded plastic container. After a minute of pressing buttons to set up the phone, he dialed a number, exhaling as if preparing for a leap into darkness.

"Yeah, Detective Jones here from across town. I got a suspect, and I wanted to check it out with you all. No. My laptop's gone on the fritz, so I only got a few details. Said here you were looking for this one. Female, black hair, black eyes. About twenty to twenty five, five feet four or five, one-thirty to one-forty or so. You do? Murder? Damn. What's her full name? Could you spell that? Rahmani? Okay. Who'd she do in? All right, any other suspects I should be aware of on this one? None? Okay, well, names of the investigating officers? Why? Because I want to follow up on this one. My badge number? Well, let's see, it's E-N-D." He pressed the "End" button and shut the phone off.

"Well, maybe that'll be enough," he said as he pulled out of the parking lot, making a left turn to head back to his office.

After arriving, he returned to his desk only to be accosted by his supervisor.

"Where you been?" Pete asked.

Will sat down. "Working on a story."

"So where is it?"

"Still brewing."

"It's a murder; get something written and let's run it. Shouldn't be hard."

"More to it than that."

Pete shook his head, "Whatever. Have something by the end of the day or there's going to be trouble."

Will looked at him unswervingly, but he said nothing.

Pete walked off.

Once he was out of sight, Will turned to his computer and ran a new white pages search. "I'd be surprised if there was more than one Sarai Rahmani in the entire world."

His search returned a single hit. An address. No phone number; nothing else.

"That's not much help. Why would she go back there? The cops must know she lives there too and would be—" He stopped short. "She *is* there!" He grabbed his keys and jacket and ran from his cubicle, sending his chair crashing into the desk.

"Hey, Will, what's up?" Alana asked when she nearly ran into him.

"Later, Alana."

"Hey, wait!"

"What?!"

Alana stepped back and adjusted her glasses, "You found her, didn't you?"

"No. Not yet, anyway."

"Let me go with you."

"I don't have time for this, Alana."

She sighed, "You're losing it, Will."

He paused.

She stepped closer to him, "I know, it's not my place. And I don't know what's going on between you and this woman, but you're walking the line. It's getting in your head. Let me come with you."

Will shook his head, "No. I have to do this myself."

"Why?"

He leaned toward her slightly and whispered, "Because there's something more to this than just corruption or cops or murder. Something. And I need to know what it is."

"Something about this story, or something about her?"

Will looked at her intently and said softly, "I don't know if there's a difference."

Alana was silent.

"Maybe I'm just going insane. But—"

Alana nodded, "Okay. Listen, you call me when you can. You need to give yourself a reality check. I don't want to get the byline because you ended up dead."

Will nodded.

Alana narrowed her eyes slightly, "Be careful."

"I will."

When he arrived at Sarai's apartment building, he noticed a black sedan parked nearby with two men in it, one of whom was sipping coffee. Will pulled into an empty parking space next to the sidewalk and immediately exited. "Act like you own the place," he said under his breath. Noticing that in the back of the car he had a paper bag half full of old clothes he intended to donate one day, he reached over the seat and grabbed it. He walked toward the apartment building, forcing his eyes to stay fixed on the doorway. He fumbled

with his keys as he walked—just another half-employed man returning with some junk food to his ugly apartment.

Once inside the door he quickly scanned for a stairwell. It was grimy and thoroughly unappealing. He set the bag of clothes down and then climbed the stairs, reaching the third floor just before his breath started quickening with the effort. He entered a dingy hallway and walked to number 308: Sarai's apartment, assuming the Internet had given him decent information.

"Why would you live in a place like this?" Will whispered. He reached down and felt the doorknob. Locked. Holding his breath, he tapped three times. No response. All was quiet, except for the mingled sound of a television and a radio from elsewhere in the building. He stood another few seconds before turning to investigate elsewhere.

But before he could pivot on his foot, his feet were swept from under him, and he was thrown face first to the sullied floor of the hallway. He then felt a knee in his back and a small hand covering his mouth.

"Shh!" a voice hissed.

Will was silent, but his eyes strained as he tried to see whom he already knew was behind him.

"When I let go, keep your voice down."

Will nodded. He felt the knee leave his back and the hand uncover his mouth. Turning his head, he saw Sarai.

"Idiot," Sarai said, looking down at him. "Are you trying to get just yourself killed, or me too? What are you doing here?"

Will laughed in spite of his position, "Didn't I ask you that last time?"

"It's not funny."

Will shrugged and rose to his feet.

"How did you enter the building?"

"Through the front. Look, I already know that some cops were across the—"

"Yes, and they know who the reporters are." She shook her head. "Go down to the basement. There's a tunnel to the building across the street. Exit's in the back. Go."

Will snorted, "No."

Sarai's face was expressionless. She stepped toward him.

He stepped back and raised his arms defensively.

"Stubborn fool."

Will clenched his teeth, then said, "I want to know what's going on first."

Sarai's face was immobile.

As she stepped toward him again, Will tried to shove her away with both hands but found himself pushing against air. Just before he could regain his balance, he was thrown back to the floor. He winced when he felt her hand at the base of his neck.

But Sarai did not squeeze. Instead, she released him and stepped back slightly.

"What're you waiting for?" He feigned resignation, letting his muscles relax briefly. Then, as quickly as he could, he reached for her leg in hopes of pulling it out from under her. Grasping nothing but air, he felt her knee in his back once more.

"Not smart," Sarai said. "I don't have time for you. And if you don't get your sorry ass out of here, I'm going to knock you out and leave you for the cops to deal with when they get up here. If you want to live, journalist, then get up and leave the way I told you."

"But—how did you do that?!"

She was silent, but she pushed her knee harder against his back.

Will groaned slightly then said, "I'm not giving up. Tell me what's going on."

Sarai shook her head, "Still don't get it, do you? They'll kill you." She eased up on him slightly.

Will pursed his lips, "So be it." He turned his head to look at her.

Sarai sighed, but she kept her eyes locked on Will's.

For several seconds, Will held her gaze. Then he wavered, finally looking away.

"I'm trying to find the woman that murdered Chloe," Sarai said a moment later, standing up straight and stepping back from him. "Are you happy now?"

Will rose to his feet and looked at her once more. "It was a woman? Then what about Brian Cass? What did he have to do with it?"

"Was that his name? I don't know what he was doing there, other than trying to kill me."

Will paused, his face becoming a mixture of understanding, shock, and fear. "You killed Cass." He looked away a moment

and then back at Sarai. "And those cops—you cut up those cops?"

Sarai's expression was blank.

"But that Kevin fellow, he—"

"I didn't kill him."

"But you did kill Cass?"

Sarai's eyes were afire. Her gaze caused Will to look away almost instantly. "I didn't want to kill *anyone!*"

Will shook his head, "Maybe I believe you. But there're too many questions. Like what happened to Chloe's body if she's dead but you didn't kill her?"

"Enough!" Sarai hissed.

Will stepped back as though he had been struck across the face. Then he looked at her intently, "If you know the cops're here looking for you, then why would you even be—" He looked at her door. "Sarai, I can help you, but not if you're doing what I think you're doing."

"I never said I wanted your help. This is your last chance. They'll be up here soon. You can either leave now or stay permanently. Make up your mind."

Something in Sarai's voice caused Will to slowly back away and then turn to leave. But his head was still turned, his curious gaze remaining on her. Finally, he entered the stairwell, pausing for a moment in thought.

Descending several flights, he reached the basement as Sarai had told him. He walked briskly through the tunnel, reaching another stairwell on the far side. Voices sounded behind him, along with chatter on walkie-talkies and the thudding of boots. When Will ascended the stairs and exited the building, he saw a motorcycle, a helmet hanging from one of the handles. He looked back at the building, then started pacing back and forth next to the motorcycle.

\* \* \*

Sarai stood at her door like a statue until Will finally disappeared into the stairwell. She then pulled a key from her pocket and unlocked the door to her apartment, closing it behind her but not locking it.

At the back of the apartment, in a wooden chair, sat a man bound with old rags. His arms were tied behind the chair,



and a gag was in his mouth. His eyes were covered. A walkie-talkie was on the floor near him.

Sarai walked up to the bound man. "Don't scream, please. I'll crush your throat before anyone hears. Got it?"

The man whimpered but nodded fervently.

Sarai picked up a leather wallet that was next to the walkie-talkie. Opening it and seeing the golden badge and an identification card, she read the name: Edward Smith. She untied the gag.

Edward gasped, struggling to get more air through his mouth.

"Now calm down and listen to me. I'm fair." She pulled her knife from her belt. "You answer my questions, and you live." She pushed the point of the knife against his throat, "Okay?"

Edward gasped and nodded.

"Good," Sarai said. "Why are you in my apartment?"

He opened his mouth but said nothing.

"I said I'm fair," she said. "I'll keep my word. Tell me why you're here."

"She—you—murdered a man."

"So I've heard. What was his name?"

"K—Kevin. Kevin something. Anderson."

Sarai sighed. "So what happened to the other dead guy?"

"What?"

"Or the woman? What'd you do with her?"

"I have no idea what you're—"

"Well you better figure it out before I start cutting!" she hissed.

Edward fell silent, his mouth open in shock.

She rubbed her forehead. Walking to the lone window and looking down to the street below, she saw two chubby and poorly disguised plainclothes officers trotting across the street. They wore black bulletproof vests with large white letters across the front and back: DCPD. Around them, scurrying like ants, were black-clad members of a special response team.

Sarai turned back to the bound officer. "Are you scared?"

The man nodded.

"It's almost over. Tell me about Veronica."

He froze and said nothing.

Sarai brought the point of the knife to his cheek just below his covered eye. "I don't have time. You're going to tell me one way or the other."

"They'll kill me."

"They won't find out. Tell me."

"She—she's his daughter."

"Whose?"

The man shook his head.

Then the door burst open. "She's in there!" a voice shouted beyond the door.

Sarai looked to the doorway but saw no one.

"SRT, SRT, go, go, go!" said another voice from the hallway.

"Back! Away from the door!" he shouted to his comrade.

Sarai turned back to Edward and whispered in his ear, "Tell them I asked you about her but you told me nothing. Understand?"

He nodded quickly.

"Good," Sarai said as she reached to the base of his neck and squeezed.

She walked to the doorway. She heard the two men breathing just outside, chatter sounding on their walkie-talkies. Boots thudded as men came up the stairs of the building.

Sarai closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. Then she exerted herself, the world around her slowing like a dying film reel. She ran down the hall, the two officers never even seeing her. She then flew down the stairway, shoving aside black-clad men in military garb, each of whom held an automatic weapon. As she moved, she felt herself approaching the barrier: a line that she never dared cross. And she knew that the price she would soon pay was quickly mounting as she neared it.

Moments later—an instant for the men she had passed—she was in the basement of the building. The tunnel to the next building was in front of her. The world resumed its pace around her, and she knew her time was short. Spotting a stack of folded rags on top of a crate, she grabbed one as she ran into the tunnel. As she passed through the barely lit hallway, she twisted the rag and, holding the ends tightly, put it between her teeth.

Sarai had almost reached the end of the tunnel when the pain began. She bit down onto the rag and tried to stifle the

screams that seemed to rise in her throat of their own accord. Falling to the ground and curling up, she shivered as her muffled cries passed between her clenched teeth.

When the pain had passed, leaving a fiery ache in her bones, she tossed the rag aside and rose weakly. Stumbling the last few feet, she reached a stairwell to the building across the street from her apartment and climbed as quickly as her aching legs would carry her.

Sarai exited the back and found Will pacing near her motorcycle. She ran to it, feeling her limbs once again returning to normal, but she paused for a moment, looking at him.

Will shrugged.

Pursing her lips, she placed her helmet on her head and started the engine, then motioned curtly for Will to sit behind her. Once he was in position, they accelerated down a side street and into the city.

Will shifted uneasily. He was unsure where to put his hands and arms as he rode behind Sarai. He felt strange with his arms around her, but she gave him no indication she felt the same discomfort. She operated the machine with a deliberate, smooth, and practiced expertise.

The two followed a zigzagging path, going in no particular direction but obviously making progress toward some end.

Finally, feeling as though he had been woken from a long dream, Will reached up and tapped Sarai's helmet. She rode a little longer then pulled into an alley.

Will dismounted, shaking his head, "Alright, Sarai, I need to know what's going on. This is getting absolutely insane."

Sarai removed her helmet. "You chose to get involved."

Will threw his hands in the air, "What did you expect me to do?"

"Mind your own business."

He turned away, looking down the alley at the cars that passed at the far end.

Sarai said nothing.

Will turned back. He laughed nervously. "Who *are* you?"

"Sarai."

"Don't gimme that. I know your name."

Her face was immobile.

He held his finger to his mouth and paced back and forth. Sarai simply watched him silently.

"I know what I saw," he said repeatedly. Finally he turned to her, "How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"I'm not particularly athletic, okay, and I'm not real strong or fast. But I know what a person's limits are. You—you—" He stammered, looking at her.

Sarai set her helmet on the seat of the motorcycle.

"Oh, hell. What do you want me to do now?"

"That's your problem."

"Why'd you bring me along?"

"Because I didn't want you to be caught by them. Wouldn't have done me or you any good."

"Them being?"

"Cops were involved in Chloe's murder. I have my suspicions of how they relate to Veronica."

"Veronica. Who's Veronica?"

"She murdered Chloe."

Will slapped his forehead and smiled, "Oh, just a coincidence, right? Some psychopath kills the friend of—of—" he pointed at Sarai. "Of whatever it is you are!"

Sarai picked up her helmet, "I'm a woman, last time I checked."

"Oh, right. Just your average woman!"

"Your words, not mine."

He glared at her. "How old are you?!"

"Back to that, are we?"

"Damn it, stop!"

Sarai looked down for a moment as if honestly weighing whether to respond. "You're not ready for the answer to that question. But," she said, cutting him off before he could protest, "you already have some idea. You can see things well enough." She looked at him and pursed her lips before putting her helmet back on. "You can find your way home. Stay away from the cops." She hopped on her motorcycle.

Will ran up to her.

Sarai turned and looked at him, her face hidden behind the tinted glass of her helmet.

Will opened his mouth, but when no words came, he closed it and looked down.

Sarai started the motorcycle and rode off.

Will stared after her. Finally, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a paper and a broken piece of pencil. He scribbled quickly on the paper and shoved it back in his pocket before walking away.

“Damn, Will, you look like crap.”

“Not now, Alana.”

Alana adjusted her glasses, “Now I’m really starting to get worried. What’s going on? Did you find her?”

Will was silent. He ran more Internet searches, this time trying to find some connection between the police and someone named Veronica.

“Will,” Alana said, putting her hand on his desk and squatting next to him.

His eyes glanced over at her.

“Tell me, please.”

He opened his mouth, but when no words came forth, he closed it and shook his head.

Alana sighed. “Pete’s getting fired up about this. I tried to explain that we think there’s a connection between this murder and our police investigation, but he doesn’t want to hear it. He told me to warn you his patience is running—”

“I don’t care.”

“Then tell me why!”

He shook his head, “It’s not even about murder anymore. It’s about *her*.”

“What about her?” Alana was unsure if his changing expression meant he was about to blow up at her in anger or to break down crying. “Please, tell me.”

He looked at her squarely, “I don’t even know if I should trust what I saw. And I don’t want to tell you until I know for sure.”

“At least give me an idea?”

He shook his head. “I need to work on this for a while. Keep doing what you’ve been doing.”

Alana stood and looked down at the floor. “Nothing on Brian Cass. Can hardly even tell that the guy ever even existed.”

Will nodded slowly, “Keep trying.” He smiled briefly at her and then turned back to his computer.

Alana pursed her lips and then turned to leave.

When she had left, Will rubbed his eyes. He cursed under his breath and stood up. It was almost six o'clock. He left the office.

When he arrived home, he went to his refrigerator and grabbed his last beer. Sitting at his table, he opened it but shoved it away a moment later. He ran his hands through his hair and wandered to his bed. It was still light out when he fell asleep.

# Veronica

Matvei emerged from Savenkov's Antiques to find Sarai leaning against the bare brick, just beside the window looking into the store. Her hands were in her pockets. "Sarai," he said, nodding with a suspicious smile.

"Matty."

"We will be even, yes?"

"Yes."

"Veronica Jansen."

Sarai turned and started walking down the sidewalk.

Matvei kept pace beside her. "She is daughter of Garrett Jansen—socialite. He has sway with cops and just about everybody else I talk to in public circles. Could not get same address or number twice for this woman. Everybody say something different." He found it increasingly difficult to keep up with Sarai, but he kept talking, giving her every detail of what he had discovered. "Only sure thing is no one like to speak about her. Fear, I gather." Finally, he found himself standing next to a motorcycle, which Sarai was mounting. "If you want her," he said, finally drawing her gaze, "try club Xanadu."

Sarai put on her helmet and looked at Matvei. "We're even. Stay out of trouble."

Matvei nodded and smiled, "Don't get yourself killed. Would be," he paused and smiled, "horrible shame."

Sarai flipped the visor down and started the motorcycle. With tires squealing, she rode off.

Matvei sighed deeply when she was out of sight, and then he chuckled softly as he walked slowly back to the store.

Night had fallen. The air was unseasonably cold. An occasional dark figure passed up or down the alley, but not one paid any attention to the woman sitting silently.

Sarai's back was against the bare brick of a building. Her motorcycle was hidden behind a nearby dumpster. She sat with her arms wrapped around her knees, and in her hand she held the knotted locks that she had cut from her own head only a few days before.

"Oh, Chloe," she whispered. "I wish you were here. I'm so alone." She rested her head on her knees and tightened her grip on her hair.

Finally she raised her head. Tears streamed down her face. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so sorry!" She gazed in front of her as if Chloe stood there looking back at her.

"I wanted to save you. I tried! I *tried!*" She shook her head. "If only he hadn't changed me—damn him! I would still have you, Chloe. I'd still have you. I would have had gentle hands."

She sighed. "You knew more about me than anyone. You knew everything. Except my age," she laughed through her tears. "You even knew how badly I was hurt. But you understood. You helped me like no one has. Not even him."

She wiped her cheeks with the sleeve of her jacket then rested her head on her knees once more. This time she closed her eyes. "I miss you."

When she had drifted into a dream, she was being held in a man's arms. She still felt the pain of her wounds—that sharp, bitter pain—even though they had become only the faintest of scars that she would never see. The man slowly rocked her back and forth, humming softly. She felt his fingers brush a strand of her hair from her face. She groaned.

"Shh," he said. "Shh, little girl."

Sarai started as daylight began to glow. She lifted her head despite her stiff neck and stood to her feet. Her stomach churned from the position she had slept the night in. She raised her hands to the sky and stood on her tiptoes, drawing in as much breath as her lungs would hold as she stretched. Sighing as her arms fell, she walked to the dumpster and rolled her motorcycle out.

She took the helmet off the handle and looked at her reflection in the visor. "You shouldn't do this," she said. "You're not like him, no matter what he did to you." Her raven hair was ragged and messy. She cocked her head slightly, "You're not very attractive. Chloe didn't have much to work with."



She sighed and then put the helmet on her head in a single swift motion. She started the engine, turning the handle and making a high-pitched roar. Finally, lifting her feet off the ground, she rode down the alley and turned onto the street.

\* \* \*

"Listen to me, pal," Pete said, "I've given you enough slack on this one—days of it. It's a murder, it's over, and you need to give me the damn story. It's tonight or you're gone."

Will looked over his monitor at his boss. "More to it than murder."

Pete responded with a mocking laugh. "Oh? That because that gofer girl told you? I'm gonna can Alana unless she cuts the crap and starts doing her own job instead of yours."

Will glared at him.

"Story on my desk." Pete tapped his watch, "End of the day, or else." He stormed off.

Will snorted, his eyes returning to his computer. "I can't believe what you're doing to me," he said as he ran another search for Sarai Rahmani. "Come on. Where will you go?"

An hour later, Will was sitting in his chair, his chin on his hand, his elbow on his desk, and his face expressionless. His searches had been fruitless. He slowly sat up straight, then promptly grabbed his keyboard with both hands, raising it and slamming it back onto his desk. The 'x' and 'p' keys flew off and clicked on the floor. Near silence fell in the office.

Ignoring the shocked looks from his coworkers, he rose and walked to the bathroom. He leaned over the sink and splashed cold water on his face. Looking in the mirror, he sighed.

"What have you gotten yourself into? Damn fool." He raised a fist and set it back down on the porcelain. "Think! She's going after Veronica. Veronica's somehow in with the cops. And all of it's tied to Constantine. Idiot, think!" He shook his head. "What *is* this woman?"

Will grabbed several paper towels and wiped his hands and face. He tossed the towels at the trash can and missed but ignored them as he left the bathroom.

Standing at his cubicle, he looked at his desk, reading the several small plaques that recognized this or that achievement for stories that he couldn't even remember.

Sarai had done something to him. He could no longer feel like just an observer who has no effect on the things he sees: he was part of the story now. How could he not be after what she had shown him? But it was worse than that. It was as if she had stolen his will in the matter, like a riptide that carries a hapless swimmer out to sea. Her draw was not rational; it was something about her that he couldn't see or hear or touch. It was just something he could sense—something that overshadowed everything else: his career, his accomplishments, his friends, his life. All over a woman he barely knew.

Shaking his head, he said, "You're not getting away from me." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys, then walked past several cubicles to Pete's office. It was empty. He opened the door and approached a portrait that was hanging on the wall. Taking it down and setting it on the floor, he then looked through his keys. Finally selecting one, he inserted it into the lock of the safe that had been hidden behind the portrait. Inside were several files. He deliberately selected one and closed the safe, pulling his key out.

Will didn't see Pete as he left the office. His face flushed nonetheless. Just as he reached for the door to the outer hallway, a voice hissed behind him.

"Will! What the *hell* are you doing?!"

Will snapped around to see Alana. But he said nothing.

"Well?"

He shook his head, "I won't be back, Alana."

"Will, I know what you did. Put it back. Please."

"I don't care about the story."

"Neither do I!" she said. "I don't want you to get in any more trouble!"

"Too late," he said.

Alana looked around and adjusted her glasses, "What're you gonna do with that?"

"I don't know."

She sighed, "Is it her? Sarai?"

He nodded. "I have to see this through, Alana. I have to find her."

"You need someone to come with you on this."

He shook his head, "No. I'm probably going to get myself killed. You stay here. Don't you dare follow me." He stepped

close to her and gave her a kiss on her cheek. "The byline is still yours."

"Will!"

"Stay on the story, but don't follow me. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"Okay. Goodbye, Alana."

"Will, call me when you can. Please. At least let me know you're okay."

He paused and then nodded curtly before walking out of the office. On reaching his car, he set the file on the passenger seat and then held his head in his hands. "Damn you, Sarai."

He started the car and drove off, tires squealing. Minutes later, he was parked near a police precinct. He exited his car, grabbing the file as he went, and walked into the building.

He addressed a woman working behind a desk in the lobby. "I need to see Constantine."

"What for?" the woman asked.

"Tell him it's Will Owen."

She snorted, "He's busy."

"He's not too busy for this. Tell him."

"I think you're getting a little upset there. Calm yourself, or we'll do it for you."

"Please, call him."

"Joe, we got a troublemaker here."

A large officer walked up behind the woman. "You makin' trouble, pal?"

Will turned without making another sound and pulled the prepaid cell phone from his pocket. He turned it on and dialed a number.

"Constantine. It's Will Owen. I have a proposition for you. Yes. No." He turned back to the woman and the officer behind her. "No, I can't get past the scum you have at your front desk. Yes, I'll wait."

Just as the officer reached for his night stick, obviously preparing to walk around the desk, the phone rang. The woman answered and, with a glare, told Will to enter. "Two-fifteen."

Will walked past the desk deeper into the building. On reaching the door of office 215, which had Constantine's name on its frosted window, he entered to see a heavyset man

with a black tie sitting behind a large desk overflowing with papers.

"You got in, but you're not getting out in one piece unless this is damn good, Owen."

"Constantine." Will threw the file in his hand onto the other's desk. "Look familiar?"

Constantine grabbed the file and flipped through it. He then set it down, but his eyes did not return to Will for almost a minute. "What the hell is this?"

"That's your sorry ass I just gave back to you."

"Yeah, so? What about all eight million copies you made of all this stuff?"

"You know only originals will cut it for this one. Too easy to forge stuff on a copy. That's all the affidavits, everything."

Constantine chuckled, "Okay, well, thanks. I suppose I'll count that as the piece you're leaving behind. Off you go."

"I want something in return."

Constantine laughed loudly, "Surely you must realize you're in no position to ask for anything. I've had you and your cronies in my business for almost two years, and you think you're getting something?"

"You're clear now. You're keeping your pension instead of getting room and board in steel city."

Constantine leaned back, "Then why not an exchange in the night somewhere?"

"No time. Consider it a gesture of good faith. I just want some information."

The other weighted the file in his hand.

"That's everything," Will said.

Constantine sighed, "Fine, what do you want to know?"

"Who is Veronica?"

"Had you asked me anything else, I would have told you. Not this."

"Come on."

Constantine snorted, "Hey, I told you, I've no reason to help you. I'm still deciding whether I should have one of my boys follow you home and cap you."

Will shook his head, "I've got nothing left to offer. All I can say is I won't ever investigate you or your office again. Please."

Constantine shouted, "I ain't sayin' squat about Ver—" he stopped and looked around. His face twisted and he bared

his teeth. He then paused, looking intently at Will. "You like to dance, Owen?"

"Sure. As much as the next guy."

With a nod, Constantine said, "You'll like the club Xanadu. I hear there's a special on drinks tonight. At least if tonight is the night I think it is."

Will stared at him for a moment then nodded. He turned and walked slowly to the door, half expecting to be shot in the back as he did so, but he left the office and the building unharmed.

Sitting in his car, he turned Constantine's words over in his head. "Xanadu. I'll find Veronica there, I suppose. And Sarai will find her too." He looked over at the empty passenger seat, then slammed his palm onto the steering wheel. He started the engine and drove.

Will flew through the streets recklessly. Within minutes, he had already run one red light and come close on several others. He occasionally looked over at the empty seat next to him.

Night had fallen and the world was dark, apart from the pervasive light pollution that illuminated the city.

"Come on," he said as he waited behind a string of cars at an intersection. "Come on!" He beat his hand on the steering wheel.

When the light finally turned green and he turned left, nearing the particularly garish lights of the club Xanadu, he inhaled deeply. As he turned into the parking lot, he saw a scuffle among several people in one of the aisles.

He cursed under his breath, knowing it couldn't be a coincidence. He stopped his car in the middle of an aisle and threw the door open. After running as fast as he could through the maze of vehicles, he skidded and stood motionless when he saw Sarai being held between a man and a woman. The woman had a knife at Sarai's chest. "Stop!" Will shouted, knowing he was too far away to do anything to help.

\* \* \*

"Back for another go 'round, eh?" said the bartender.

"Hm?" Sarai responded.

"Saw you here last night too." He chuckled, "Not many girls dress like that. It's kind of attractive in a way. I guess you get

so used to seeing slutty clothing that everyday fashion looks really, well, fashionable.”

Sarai stared at the man but said nothing.

“Hey, don’t mean anything by it. How ‘bout I get you something on the house to make up for it?”

Sarai shook her head as though she hadn’t heard a word he said. “What?”

“You all right? Maybe had one too many already?”

“No, I’m sorry. I just have something on my mind. Thank you, no.”

“Okay, well, you let me know if you want something other than water on the rocks.”

Sarai nodded.

When the bartender had left, Sarai chewed on the side of her finger. “Oh, Chloe,” she whispered. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

Then something caught her attention—something she saw out of the corner of her eye, something that nagged at the edge of her mind. She looked from side to side, seeing nothing but other patrons, some sitting and drinking, chatting with one another, and some wandering to or from the dance floor. On the wall above the bar, a neon sign in script said *XANADU*.

The next thing she saw was several well-dressed men entering the club, their dark suits and poorly concealed earpieces doing nothing to hide their identities.

They fanned out into the crowd and took positions throughout the room, their eyes scanning. They were followed by a less conspicuous man with a beautiful woman holding onto his arm. His facial structure and hair color were like those of the woman; he resembled her closely. The casual observer might have thought they were brother and sister. They both appeared very young, but for no obvious reasons, he seemed much older than her.

The woman had long, dark hair and wore a winning smile. Numerous eyes followed her, and she seemed to revel in the attention that she clearly knew she was receiving. It was Veronica.

Sarai sipped her water and reached to her belt, feeling the reassuring presence of her knife. Her mouth opened, and her breath passed between her lips. Still, something tugged at her mind. She looked to either side at the bar but recognized

nothing. Turning her head back to Veronica, she saw the other woman dancing with a club patron.

Veronica was whispering in his ear, a wicked smile on her face. The man she had arrived with was nowhere to be seen.

Sarai tried not to stare. She looked at other people mingling in the crowd, and at the men and women dancing. Some people were sitting at tables, a few waiters wandering among them. Waiters.

Sarai's head snapped to her right. Whoever had been sitting just next to her was gone, and still she saw nothing that explained the feeling that she was missing something.

The evening passed slowly. Sarai occasionally rose to stretch her legs, wandering around a bit before returning to the bar, and usually taking a different seat each time. The nagging feeling returned to her occasionally, sometimes more acutely than others, but she was able to almost completely ignore it.

Veronica danced with a variety of men. She seemed to enjoy every minute of it. Finally, she left the dance floor with one man in particular, both of them walking arm in arm toward an exit. She had apparently chosen her date for the evening. The entourage that escorted her into the club now converged on that same exit.

Sarai clenched her teeth and followed. She counted the men in the escort: one, two, three, four. No challenge. She was behind the last of them a moment later as he entered the almost impenetrable blackness of the passageway from the dance room to the outside. Grabbing the side of his neck and squeezing, she eased him down and leaned him against the wall. No one saw, and in all likelihood, anyone who had seen wouldn't have much cared.

Veronica laughed, hanging onto her date's arm as they walked through the parking lot. Car tires squealed somewhere nearby.

The three remaining men in Veronica's escort walked only a short distance behind her. Two walked side by side—a mistake they paid for in the next instant.

Running up behind them silently, Sarai grabbed their heads and rammed them together, and both men groaned and fell to the ground, drunkenly reaching for their battered temples.

The fourth member of the entourage howled and quickly drew his sidearm, pointing it here and there but finding no mark. He then felt a knife at his throat.

"Drop it," hissed Sarai from behind him.

He obliged but then tried to flip her over his back.

Instead of resisting, Sarai let herself be rolled over him, landing blithely on her feet. She swung her fist and connected with his face.

The man crumpled to the ground and was still.

Sarai then turned to Veronica, whose date was now running blindly through the parking lot. "How could you?! What did she do to you?!" Sarai shouted.

Veronica smiled and shook her head, "What a stupid question. Since when does that matter?"

"It matters to *me!*"

Veronica shrugged, "I needed her." She looked up as if searching for something, then looked at Sarai again. "I was so hungry. Don't you know what it's like to be hungry? And haven't you ever felt it? The way the life just slips out of someone when you slide a knife into them? The look in their eyes—it's so delicious."

Sarai pulled her knife from her belt, her face twisted in disgust. "Never again."

Veronica laughed, "Look at you! You know *exactly* what I mean! That's what you want from me, just like I want it from you." She tilted her head forward and looked at Sarai through her eyebrows. "We're not so different, you and I." Licking her lips, she said, "These people—like your little girlfriend—it's always the same. Nothing new. But you? You're like me, but overflowing with life. All the life I'd ever need. And you're going to give it to me, just like your girlfriend did."

Sarai curled her lip, but just as she started toward Veronica, she stopped and clenched her teeth. Then she shook her head, "No. We're different." As she started to back away, she was stopped by arms of steel.

"I can't let you leave," said a masculine voice behind her.

Sarai struggled, but the strength that had enclosed her was irresistible. She looked down and saw one of his hands: it had a scar in the middle of it that might have been left from a deep cut or a stab wound. After trying ever so briefly to calm herself, she exerted all her strength, and white light blazed



around her. But her assailant's arms seemed to match her every effort, the blackness that surrounded him surrounding her as well. She let out a cry.

Veronica pulled her own knife from her dress and started forward. "Hold her tight, daddy," she said.

"I'm sorry," whispered Veronica's father, Garrett Jansen. "This is how it has to be. My daughter needs you." He tightened his hold on Sarai. "Make it quick, Veronica."

Sarai continued to struggle, but Veronica was only inches away. She couldn't seem to look away from the other's gaze. Although Sarai's knife was still in her hand, Garrett's grip on her was so overwhelming she could do nothing to bring it to bear.

Veronica was surrounded by blackness, just like her father: it was like an oily smoke from a hidden flame. Sarai felt encased in darkness.

"Yes, look in my eyes." Veronica smiled, her breath quickening.

Sarai felt the point of the knife at her breast.

Then a voice shouted from across the parking lot. "Stop!"

Both Garrett and Veronica turned their heads toward the voice, and in that same instant, a shadowy figure collided with Garrett, causing him to release his grip on Sarai.

Garrett stumbled away, hopping on one leg as he tried to stay upright.

Sarai turned and looked behind her. Her benefactor was the waiter she had seen the night Chloe was murdered. Now she knew: he was the same one who had been sitting beside her at the bar. She had just, for some reason, been unable to recognize him.

His features were distinctly Asian. He looked at Sarai, but his eyes widened when he looked past her.

She turned her head just in time to see Veronica stab her knife forward, but Sarai had already moved aside, grabbing the other woman's arm and swinging the knife around.

Veronica looked down at her chest. She slowly pulled her hand away from the handle of the knife, opening her palm to see the blood that covered it. The handle stuck out of her, the blade in her heart. She looked at Sarai.

Sarai shivered as she slowly backed away, her eyes fixed on Veronica.

"Veronica!" shouted Garrett, who now stood firmly on his feet. His face paled visibly, even under the harsh city lights. He ran forward and caught her as she fell, easing her to the ground.

A look of surprise was frozen on her face. "Daddy," she wheezed with her last breath

Garrett groaned, "Oh, Veronica!" He snapped his head around to face Sarai, who was still fixating on the dead woman. He then reached to his belt and twice clicked a button on his walkie-talkie.

The Asian man stepped in front of Sarai. "Go," he said over his shoulder. "You must go now." He then turned back. "Now!" he shouted.

Sarai started, then looked at him as if she had been snapped out of a trance. The shocked expression left her face, then she turned and saw Will Owen some distance across the parking lot.

Will was frozen where he stood, unable to speak or move. All around him, men dressed in black and carrying machine guns filtered through the cars in the parking lot, converging on where Veronica lay dead. He came back to himself and ran to Sarai, who was looking back at him. "We're friggin' dead!"

Sarai looked back at Veronica briefly, then grabbed Will's shoulder. "Not dead yet. Stay with me!" Although the troopers flowing into the parking lot were all around them, Sarai decisively chose a direction and ran, dragging Will behind her.

Nearby, the Asian man took down the first of the attackers, pulling the gun from his hands and smoothly but mercilessly throwing him to the asphalt.

Then the gunfire began.

Sarai pulled Will down, and the two continued running, staying low to the ground and keeping cars between them and the attackers as best she could.

To Will's dismay, they almost ran directly into one of the armed troopers, but Sarai quickly disarmed him, chopping him in the throat with the side of her hand and picking up his weapon.

"Damn things," she said calmly despite the deafening noise of automatic gunfire and the bullets that flew over her head.

"Stay low," she shouted to Will. "Motorcycle's down two buildings, right, in the alley. Got it?"

Will didn't respond.

Sarai rose briefly, firing the weapon and causing several of the troopers to stop and lower themselves next to a vehicle. As they returned fire, Sarai elbowed Will, "Got it?!"

Will looked at her, pausing briefly, then nodded.

"Go! Run!" She disappeared as though she were nothing but a vapor.

Will felt frozen. Then he saw Sarai almost thirty feet away, firing the weapon and then disappearing once more. "Aw, hell!" he said. Running fast and low, Will ignored as best he could the gunfire and the bullets that were passing far too close to his body.

Sarai moved from position to position, firing her weapon to draw attention, occasionally taking down a trooper that got in her way. She was slowly maneuvering them away from Will, who was running openly and, a moment later, was out of sight.

She scanned the scene quickly but was unable to see the Asian man. He had disappeared once more, as was apparently his wont.

Garrett was purposefully striding toward her, showing no signs that her movements were at all confusing. He seemed to be anticipating her actions, even though the black-clad troopers were largely responding too late to her provocations, allowing themselves to be moved wherever she wanted.

Sarai was on her third machine gun, and it finally ran out of ammunition. She threw it down and began her escape. Just as she broke clear, she saw Garrett in front of her. She slid on her heels and fell backward.

Garrett bared his teeth and raised a bloody knife above his head—the knife that Veronica had almost slid into Sarai. He brought it down in a vicious, snake-like strike that was held fast inches from Sarai's face.

The Asian man had grabbed Garrett's arm, groaning with the exertion as he then deflected the knife hand and struck with his fist. The two fought in a furious whirr of limbs.

Sarai rolled to her knees and ran once more. Looking back briefly, she saw the troopers racing toward Garrett. But the

Asian man was gone again, leaving Garrett standing as though he were lost. She faced forward once more and ran as fast as she could, passing like a wind through the night.

Will found the motorcycle behind a dumpster. A moment later, Sarai appeared behind him.

"Let's go," she said.

Will jumped, "Damn it, don't scare me like that!"

Sarai looked at him with an expressionless face.

He then shook his head, "Didn't I say I'd step in it one day?"

"I suppose so. Hop on behind me," she said as she mounted the motorcycle and donned her helmet.

Will shrugged, "I guess I have no choice."

"Listen," Sarai turned her head to speak to him over her shoulder, "You came after me. I didn't ask you to follow. You stepped in it because you didn't know when to quit."

"How could I, Sarai? Did you see what happened back there?"

"Of course."

"So did I. That wasn't real. I mean," he snorted, "that shouldn't be real. That was beyond anything I—or anyone else—has ever seen." He paused, then said, "How could I not follow? So, I stepped in it. Sometimes it's worth it."

"Hm," Sarai responded. "Get on."

He mounted the motorcycle behind her.

"Put your arms around me and hold on. I'm going to have to be creative."

Will hesitated, then put his arms around her, clasping his hands but trying not to touch her. But when she accelerated the motorcycle forward, he instinctively tightened his grip.

They rode a meandering path, sometimes down main roads, sometimes through dark alleys, and sometimes into parking garages only to emerge moments later. At one point, Sarai stopped and removed the license plate, replacing it with a different one that she kept in a small sleeve attached to the motorcycle. Finally, they stopped in an alley near a bar. A number of motorcycles were parked outside it.

"Lovely," Will said as the two dismounted.

"Afraid?"

He snorted, "Not with you here."

Sarai carried her helmet and beckoned him, "Let's go. We stay in the alley for what's left of the night."

"Here?"

Sarai nodded.

The air was cold. Even for late spring, the evenings remained chilly. Sarai sat with her arms around her knees, her head resting on them. She was silent and still.

Will shivered. He was no more protected from the cold than Sarai was, but he found himself unable to ignore it.

"Sarai?" he said softly.

She turned her head, resting her chin on her knees to look at him.

"May I ask you something?" To his surprise, she simply nodded. He then felt all the words drain from his mind, her lack of resistance throwing him off his usual balance.

Sarai just waited silently.

Finally, Will said, "What happened to your hair?" He half expected a sardonic response but received nothing of the sort.

She reached into the pocket of her jacket to pull out the locks that she had knotted. "I grew it out for Chloe. Don't need it now."

"I see," he said.

"Aren't you going to ask me your usual question?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because—because it doesn't matter now."

"Am I still a story to you?"

Will sighed, "I don't know, Sarai. I don't know. I don't know about anything anymore. Not after what I just saw."

"I'm fifty-eight."

Will looked at her, but the number didn't affect him as much as he thought it would have. He laughed.

"Is that funny?"

He continued laughing. "I don't know why I'm laughing." He chuckled a while longer, then said, "I think it's funny that this doesn't shock me."

"That's why I told you now. I knew you would believe me."

"Oh, I believe you. I can tell you're honest. I guess the hardest part now is looking at you and not—" he cut himself short.

"Not seeing an old lady?"

Will looked at her for a moment and then nodded.

"Now you'll have to find something else to ask me," she said, turning her head and hiding her face from him.

He looked at Sarai for several minutes in silence, watching her shoulders rise and fall slowly as she breathed. Then he whispered, "I can't believe it."

"Believe what?" she said without moving.

He snorted and then looked around, finally gazing at the nearly starless sky. "I've lost everything now. I don't even know why."

"Hm."

"What does that mean?"

She was silent.

Will sighed. He looked at Sarai and struggled to decide whether he should hate her. "So what do we do now?" he said.

"Leave. I'll take you a ways out of the city, and then you can go your own way."

Will shook his head, "I might as well stay with you. You can't deny me that now."

"Yes I can."

Will chuckled, "But you won't."

"No?"

"No."

"What makes you think that?" she said.

"Because of what I just saw. That woman—she was Veronica, wasn't she?"

Sarai was motionless.

"She killed your friend. Almost killed you. But you didn't want to kill her, did you?" When she said nothing, he nodded. "Then if you really believe the cops'll kill me—well, even though you don't really know me, you don't want my blood on your hands."

Sarai raised her head and looked at him. A moment later, she looked at her hands and then back at Will.

Will smiled sadly, "I think just maybe I'm starting to figure you out."

Sarai smirked.

"What's funny?"

"It took Chloe a long time before she said that to me."

"I'm tenacious. That's why I'm—"

"A journalist. I know." She sighed, "Rest a while. Long ride in the morning. We'll stop somewhere and get you a helmet."

Will nodded and tried as best he could to find a comfortable position, but the asphalt was unforgiving, the cold air was stirring with a light breeze that made it feel even colder, and his mind still raced with images of what he had seen.

But facing him was Sarai, who was already asleep, her breathing now slow and even.

"Fifty-eight?" he whispered. The reality of what she had revealed was just finding him. "But so much like a girl," he said, his voice almost inaudible. He closed his eyes and sighed.

Sarai screamed as she struggled against the arms that held her down. "Stop!" she begged. "Please stop!"

But they did not stop. The arms were too strong for her, and she could do nothing but feel the pain as she was cut again and again.

Then the door burst open, sunlight streaming in, and the cutting stopped. A figure dashed into the room and immediately grabbed the arm of the one that had been cutting Sarai. The hand still held a dull blade, and the intruder twisted the arm until it broke, the sound like the snapping of a green branch on a young tree. The others, who had been holding Sarai down, fled the room.

Sarai wept, her body taut, the pain still searing through her. Then she saw him standing over her, but she could not see his face; it was hidden in light.

"Shh," he said. "Shh, little girl."

Sarai woke with a start. Morning had crept up on her, and the sky was already bright. She looked at Will, who was still asleep, his head in an obviously uncomfortable position, his mouth hanging partway open.

She stood up and stretched, then started toward Will to wake him. But she stopped. As she then turned to leave, she found herself looking at the Asian man that had saved her—and Will—the night before. She stifled a gasp.

He nodded with a slight smile and motioned down the alley, away from Will.

Sarai looked at him for a moment then nodded curtly, following him as he led her to a large doorway. They both stepped into it.

"I am Kenshin Furukami."

"Sarai Rahmani," she said.

"I'm sorry we weren't able to speak earlier." He snorted, "Circumstances."

Sarai nodded.

"That was a close one for you."

Sarai smirked, "Yeah, I guess it was. Thank you."

He smiled, inclining his head toward her slightly.

"How long have you been following me?"

"Oh, no, not following you. Maybe just in search of the same thing."

"Hm."

"But for the sake of your curiosity," Kenshin said, "I only first noticed you in the club with your friends. You revealed yourself to one of *them*—not very wise."

"I didn't know who he was."

"Curious. I don't think he knew about you either."

"You were following him?"

"Yes." Kenshin stopped and leaned over slightly to look out of the doorway. He leaned back, a worried look on his face, then continued. "I have been trying to find someone in particular, and I thought that man in the club would know something about this—individual."

"That man won't be saying anything now," Sarai said.

Kenshin nodded, "That's okay. I got a little closer: Garrett Jansen."

"Veronica's father," she said in a low voice. "Why are you looking for him?"

"Well, I'm not really looking for him so much as someone close to him." He smiled sadly, "It's for someone I love."

Sarai looked at him steadily. "Vengeance?"

"Understanding," he said. But his eyes could not hide the flame that burned within.

She inhaled deeply, "Vengeance." She shook her head. "I have my own now, I suppose."

"And?"

She looked away for a moment. "My friend is still dead," she whispered.

Kenshin nodded and looked down. "I'm sorry."

Sarai turned her gaze on him once more. "How do you do that—what you do?"



"What's that?"

"Disappear. Hide yourself. Whatever it is."

He chuckled, "Well, that I suppose is a skill taught to some people where I come from. It takes a long time to master, and few ever are able to use it well—mostly for a lack of years to practice." He rubbed his chin, "It is a matter of understanding: to know what those around you expect, and to hide behind those expectations. If that makes any sense," he smiled.

She nodded.

"I, of course, disappear no more than anyone else. Call it a matter of blending in, if you will."

Sarai squinted in thought.

"What troubles you?" He quickly looked out the doorway and down the alley once more.

"How many of us are there?"

His face became grave. "I don't know. You're the only one I've ever met. I am from Japan—never seen another there, other than my wife to be. But the dark ones are numerous there, as they are here."

"And you're looking for one of them? Who? Why?"

Kenshin smiled sadly, "Too many questions. We haven't much time." Tires squealed nearby. "They are still looking for you, and if I have read things correctly, they'll find you very soon. You killed Garrett's daughter. I am not sure of her role, but she was important somehow. And he is very strong."

"Hm. Well, if it eases your mind any, there is one more of us. I will go see him."

Kenshin nodded slowly, "That may be wise. But have a care: they will follow if they can. If you don't mind me asking, who is your traveling companion?"

"Will. He's like gum on your shoe."

Kenshin chuckled, "I see."

"Kenshin, won't you tell me more? At least about why you're here?"

"I wish I had time, but I'm afraid ours is up. Wake your companion and go quickly."

"But where will you go?"

"My place is here in this city for now. Perhaps we will meet again." He smiled and turned to leave.

"But—" her plea was cut off when she heard more squealing tires.

Kenshin did not turn back. He reached the end of the alley, looked both ways, and went right.

Sarai ran to her motorcycle and donned her helmet. She started it and revved the engine. A moment later she was next to Will, who was looking up groggily.

"What? What's up?"

"Get on!" she said.

Will slowly stood up.

"Hurry!"

Will mounted behind her, and he felt himself nearly torn off the seat as she accelerated mercilessly. They barely passed between two police cars that had appeared at the end of the alley and were closing the narrow exit to the street beyond.

"Whoa!" Will shouted. He heard the crack of gunfire, and bullets flew past them.

"Hang on!" Sarai shouted. She banked the motorcycle dangerously close to the pavement. In the next instant, they were on a sidewalk, then she turned down a side street.

Will's head felt rattled from the sharp turns. He clung tightly to Sarai, who was paying him no attention, except that she occasionally warned him of another nearly impossible turn or maneuver.

Periodically a police cruiser would spot the two and give chase, but Sarai was too good on the motorcycle. She seemed to anticipate every movement of everything around her.

Will expected to die at any moment, although that moment never came. But something bothered him. They had slept discreetly in an alley—no way should the police have been able to find them so quickly. Somehow he knew what had betrayed them; it laughed at him from the shadows of his mind, but he could not bring it to the light.

And then Sarai turned into another alley. At the far end, a number of police cars blocked the exit. In the midst of a dozen officers, all of whom were aiming their weapons at the motorcycle and its riders, stood Garrett Jansen.

"Sarai!" Will shouted.

"Hang on!" she said before ditching the motorcycle, reaching her arm back and bracing Will.

Will then found himself at rest on his side, the motorcycle still between his legs and Sarai's helmet rocking back and forth on the asphalt beside him. Then he heard gunfire.

Sarai had vanished and reappeared behind the police, and she quickly took several of them down with efficient, merciless strikes. Garrett then attacked, and she lost her advantage. Bullets were flying around her, but she was also having to parry Garrett's relentless assault.

Then a bullet tore through the skin on her shoulder. Garrett's fist struck her on the side of her face, and she fell, the world darkening for a moment. She landed on the wounded shoulder and screamed.

Garrett lifted her by her hair, striking her in her gut and sending her to her knees, only to drag her to her feet again. He then drew Veronica's knife.

Sarai looked at him, her breath hissing through clenched teeth, blood running out of her mouth. She then exerted herself once more, the world around her slowing nearly to a standstill. Only Garrett still moved with any speed. Swinging her fist upward, she caught him in the chin, forcing him to release her. She then grabbed a nearby officer and pushed him toward the others.

But Garrett was already attacking again, swinging the knife in slashing arcs.

Sarai was barely able to avoid the blade. She continued to parry Garrett's strikes, but she knew her time was running out. She was too close the barrier—the boundary that she never dared cross. And she felt growing with each moment the coming penalty for that approach.

She struggled a few moments longer then let go: what she now faced in payment was almost more than she would be able to bear. The world resumed its pace, and Sarai fell to her knees.

Breathing heavily with his own exertion, Garrett raised the knife over her, but he was to be denied once more.

Will had not been idle. He had started the motorcycle and accelerated straight at Garrett, even though he knew it probably meant his death in a hail of gunfire. In one hand he held Sarai's helmet. But just before he arrived, he saw one of the police officers fly into the others as though he had been flung from a slingshot. Those that were still on their feet fell in a tangled group. *Sarai!* he thought with hope.

Then he saw her on her knees in front of Garrett. *Come on!* he shouted silently in his mind, trying to coax more speed from

the motorcycle. He brought the helmet back, then swung it with all his might.

Garrett, having been intent on Sarai, saw Will a moment too late. He brought his arm up but was only able to partially deflect the blow of the helmet as Will rode past. Garrett was knocked onto the ground, a hand covering a bloody wound on his head.

"Well?!" Will shouted, looking back at Sarai. He waited just beyond the police cars; he had barely been able to guide the motorcycle through the small space between their bumpers.

She rose—so slowly, it seemed to Will—and jogged to him. After she had thrown herself onto the seat behind him, he revved the engine and accelerated away. "Come on!" he said aloud, hoping for just one more burst of saving speed. He heard gunfire behind him, but no bullets found him.

When they were clear, Will laughed. "I can't believe we made it!" Then he heard Sarai scream. Her grip on him tightened to the point that he thought he would faint from the pain. He was barely able to keep the motorcycle upright. Her scream echoed in his head, rising above even the motorcycle's loud engine. He felt her shivering as her voice waxed loud. Then, all of the sudden, she stopped and went almost limp, just barely holding on to him.

He brought the motorcycle to a halt in another alley. "Sarai?!" He turned to her and helped her off the motorcycle.

"I'm okay," she said weakly.

"No, you're not. Were you shot?" Then he saw her bleeding shoulder. "My goodness," he said.

"It's nothing."

"But you're bleeding."

"We have to go."

"Where else were you shot?"

"Nowhere."

"But I thought you were dying back there!" Will put his hand on her wound and held it tightly.

"It'd take too long to explain. I'm okay now." She gently but firmly pulled his hand off her shoulder. "Really. This is a little messy, but it won't kill me. Let's go."

Will sighed, "Where? Where can we go?"

She furrowed her brow. "They shouldn't have found us. No one should have been able to follow the way I went."

Then Will realized what had been bothering him earlier. "Oh, damn! I'm sorry, Sarai." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his prepaid cell phone. It had been on since he had called Constantine the day before.

Sarai gave him a black look and took the phone from him. She raised it over her head but stopped short of dashing it on the ground.

Will said, "Go ahead. They can track that."

"I know," she said. She ran to the end of the alley and disappeared.

Will paced back and forth for several minutes. He mounted the motorcycle once more, but just before he was about to start it, Sarai returned.

"Going somewhere without me?"

Will snorted, "Not hardly."

"I'll drive. Get behind me."

"But your shoulder!"

"I told you it's fine. I've had worse. I'll fix it later. Now get behind me."

Will did as he was told, and Sarai started the motorcycle. "What did you do with it?" he asked.

"Tossed it in a mail truck."

Will started to laugh, but he was cut off as Sarai accelerated, forcing him to put his arms around her once more.

She resumed her meandering path, winding through the city for some time before choosing a nearly straight path west.

They rode down a highway, clearing the city and passing suburbs. Will looked periodically at Sarai's shoulder. Although he could not see the wound through her clothing, the red stain slowly grew. Finally, he reached up and tapped her other shoulder.

Sarai got off the highway at the next exit, stopping in the parking lot of a grocery store. It was nearly midday, and the lot was filling quickly.

"We've got to do something about your shoulder. Do you need stitches?"

Sarai took her canvas jacket off, wincing once when she pulled it from her wounded arm. She then pulled lightly at the wound, her head turned to look at it. "It's not that bad."

Will sighed, "It looks like it needs stitches."

"No doctors."

"Then at least let me go in the store and get something so it doesn't get infected."

Sarai nodded. "Fine. Let me give you some money."

"I got it."

"Do you have cash?"

Will groaned.

Sarai reached into her pocket and gave him a twenty. "Hurry up."

Will nodded.

Sarai sat on the pavement next to the motorcycle as she waited. Licking her fingers, she wiped the dried blood from her face. She then reached to her belt, but her knife was gone, dropped in the fight with Garrett. At one point, she almost decided to leave without Will, but something held her back. Perhaps it was pity for the man who had, in his own weak way, saved her life. His own was almost certainly forfeit now; he was as much responsible for Veronica's death as Sarai was, and Garrett had already shown his tenacity in pursuing them.

Will walked back across the parking lot, scanning the faces around him. He arrived and kneeled beside Sarai. "I got some gauze and some other things. I still think you need stitches, but maybe we'll get lucky with just these, since you're going to be stubborn. I'll fix you." He unpacked the bag as he spoke, then he raised his eyes, seeing her looking back at him. "What is it?"

She said nothing.

Will sighed, "Sarai, please."

Her breathing quickened, "Long time ago. When I was young."

He looked at her intently, holding his breath in anticipation.

Sarai shook her head. "Hurry. We need to go soon."

Will sighed. "Where to now?" he finally asked as he cleaned the wound.

Her face was expressionless. "Someone. A safe place."

"Is it far?"

"It's a ways." She looked up at the sky, "We'll get there sometime tomorrow if we ride for the rest of today."

Will applied gauze and taped it to her shoulder.

Sarai then put her canvas jacket back on, "Thanks. Let's go."

"You're welcome. But we'll need helmets, or we'll get stopped."

"I know. There's a car dealership down the road. They'll know who around here sells motorcycles and such."

An hour later, they returned to the highway, both wearing helmets. And at Sarai's belt was a new folding knife.

Will rode behind Sarai for several grueling hours. He noticed that she never seemed to move or fidget as though in any discomfort, but the hard seat became for him a misery after about an hour. He nevertheless kept it to himself, although he knew she must have felt him moving almost constantly behind her in a vain search for relief.

Only once did Will start to worry. They passed a cop sitting just off the road—an obvious speed trap. He looked over Sarai's shoulder at the instruments, but she was going almost precisely the speed limit. The cop still followed.

Sarai made no motion; she simply kept their steady pace.

Will started to turn to look back, but Sarai patted his leg and shook her head.

The police cruiser caught up to them, slowing to match their speed just behind them in the adjacent lane; there it stayed for a seemingly endless minute. Then it accelerated and passed them, and they saw it exit at the next off ramp from the highway. They saw it no more.

The sun was low in the sky when Sarai finally brought the motorcycle to a halt. They were well beyond the suburbs. No houses were visible: only mountains, trees, and the highway. A few cars passed sporadically.

"Where to now?" Will asked.

"Woods. We'll cover the bike and sleep under the trees."

Will stretched, feeling the blood slowly returning to his lower body. He followed Sarai into the woods once she had hidden the motorcycle under some leafy branches.

The sun had almost reached the mountainous horizon when Sarai stopped. "Here's fine."

Will chuckled, "Would be if there were a restaurant or something."

Sarai shrugged, "Sorry. We'll eat something tomorrow."

"You can't possibly tell me you're not hungry."

"Of course I am. I'm just ignoring it."

"Well, I can't just ignore it. So you can help me."

Sarai raised an eyebrow.

"Show me how you do what you do."

"What, ride a motorcycle?"

"You know what I mean."

Sarai stared at him a moment then nodded, "Okay, I will. First you show me something."

"Okay, name it."

"Show me how to grow a beard."

Will laughed, "You can't be serious. That's just something—I'm a man, and—that's not fair." He frowned.

"Now you know how it feels to be asked such a question."

"What are you telling me?"

"It can't be taught or learned. It's who I am."

Will sighed, "Then *explain* it to me."

"Why?"

Will's shoulders fell. "Sarai," he shook his head, "Why the hell do you make it so hard?"

She sighed, then pulled the folding knife from her belt and opened it with her thumb. The blade clicked as it locked into place. "See this?"

Will nodded, his eyes reflecting a slight worry at the thought that Sarai might just have had enough of him.

She then single-handedly folded the knife once more. "See this?" she said as she held it up.

"Yes. No blade, though," he said, his countenance rising.

"Of course not. I don't want to kill you."

"All right."

"Block my attack."

"What?"

"Block me." She slowly thrust the knife forward as if she were about to stab him in the side.

Will put his arm out, pushing hers away and deflecting the mock attack.

Sarai shook her head, "Make it more believable. Try again." She once again extended her hand at him.

Will blocked her again, this time using more force.

"Better, but more. I'm about to kill you." She did it again, but even faster.

Will blocked her.

"Again and again." She stabbed her hand at him, leaving him barely enough time to respond. Then she struck one final



time, the edge of the knife handle making contact with his side and jabbing him in the ribs.

Will did not even see her last movement; he only felt the jab. "Ow!" he said. "What the—how did you do that right there?!"

"I just did."

"Sarai, what am I supposed to think? Some kind of magic or something?"

"It's not magic or anything like that."

"What is it, then?"

She said nothing.

Will waited some time for a response but finally gave up, instead sitting down with his back to a tree. "I can tell this is going to be comfortable too," he mumbled.

Sarai sat against another tree nearby. After several minutes of silence, she said, "Tell me something about yourself."

Will looked up with surprise at her and pointed back at himself, a question unasked on his lips.

Sarai looked from side to side then back at him.

Will chuckled then shrugged, "I know—who else would you be talking to. Heck, why not." He adjusted himself and leaned his head back against the bark. "Well, I'm thirty-two years old. Been a city boy all my life." He looked around at the trees and snorted, "Never took much to this sort of thing." He then stared off into space. "Never been married or anything like that. I really just have my work. Or had, I suppose, till I met you." He chuckled softly then looked down, pushing some dead leaves around with his fingers. "It was a good job while it lasted. I was good at it, I think.

"Poor Alana," he smiled. "If she could only see me now." He looked up at Sarai.

Her gaze was fixed on him, but she said nothing.

"Alana is an intern at the office. She would have come along if I'd've let her." He sighed, "And she'd probably be dead now. So, what else about me?" He furrowed his brow, and his face changed to a slightly disturbed look of introspection. "I suppose there's not much else to me," he whispered. Then he laughed, "See what I mean? Most people are just dying to give you their life story. All you have to do is give them the chance. I wasn't even a challenge for you."

Sarai continued to look at him, her face unchanged.

"And now here I am," he continued, "following you. And if I wrote about everything I've seen happen in the last couple days, Pete would fire me in an instant. Probably tell me to go write novels or something."

Will fell silent. But to his surprise, some indefinite time later when the sun had fallen completely and darkness had engulfed them, Sarai spoke.

"I am from the Middle East. I lived there until I was about thirteen when—" she stopped short.

Will said nothing. He thought he heard her breath quickening, but she said nothing more. A minute or two later, he thought he heard it again, but this time it was slow and even. His eyes closed. He would have been surprised to have known that he was asleep almost as soon as his eyelids fell.

\* \* \*

A well-dressed bartender poured a fresh glass of champagne and set it in front of Petrovic, nodding slightly before walking down the bar to serve two others waiting for drinks.

Petrovic was a light-haired man of unremarkable appearance. He had a youthful face but no particular characteristics that set him apart, except for his eyes. They were an icy blue with a depth behind them that was like an abyss.

Like the other male guests at the fundraiser party, he was dressed in a tailored black suit. Sipping the champagne, his eyes scanned the sparse crowd that mingled in Senator Tilling's large, ornate, and well-decorated home away from home. He spotted a woman standing alone at the bar.

"Champagne," she said as she brushed aside a lock of her long brown hair. She then turned when she noticed she was no longer alone. "Yes?"

"Just admiring the view," Petrovic said, one corner of his mouth turning up.

The woman blushed, "Well, mister—"

"Petrovic," he said. That was his name. His only name.

She smiled briefly, "Mister Petrovic. I am married."

"So?"

"Look," she said, chuckling nervously, "I know how it is at these parties. No one seems to care. But I care."

"About what?"

"My marriage."

"Sure you do."

Her mouth opened in surprise, and she didn't even notice that the bartender had set a glass of champagne next to her. "I beg your pardon?"

Petrovic looked her up and down.

She stood aghast. "Keep it up, and I'll tell the senator to deal with you. My husband has his ear. And so do I."

Petrovic laughed and nodded, "I see."

"Good evening," she said, grabbing her champagne and turning to leave.

"Do you have any children?" he said as she took her first step away from him.

Something made her stop cold. Perhaps it was the tone of his voice, or perhaps some intuition about what he meant.

"Daughters, perhaps?"

She turned quickly to face him.

Just then, the senator approached the bar.

"Senator Tilling!" she said, her voice expressing both relief and desperation.

"Hello, Gretchen! Wonderful to see you as always." Tilling was an old man, his hair mostly grey, his chubby face lined with small veins that showed his overuse of alcohol.

She smiled and nodded, but she could barely contain herself until he finished. "Senator, I'm sorry to bother you about such a minor matter but—" she paused to regain her breath.

"Please, go on," the senator said, looking briefly with suspicion at Petrovic.

Petrovic smiled at him.

"Senator, this man," she turned to face Petrovic, "he's all but propositioned me, and I daresay threatened me."

Senator Tilling looked fully at the offender.

Petrovic nodded, "Well, I didn't exactly proposition her, Senator. I believe that's her imagination running a little wild. But even if I did," he shrugged and smiled, "you're not particularly interested in doing anything about it, are you?"

Gretchen's face showed her horror, and she turned to look at the senator. She could have sworn the color began draining from his face.

"No, of course not," Tilling said.

"In fact," Petrovic continued, still smiling as though the conversation were about a friendly game of golf, "I think it would be wise of her to accept, were I to proposition her. Theoretically, anyways. Don't you?"

Tilling nodded.

"There you have it," Petrovic said with a sigh.

Gretchen started to shake. "*Senator!*"

"I'm sorry, Gretchen."

"Call the police! Something!"

"I wish that would do some good," Tilling said. "Do whatever you must to survive. I'm sorry. I can't help you." He turned and left the bar without another word.

"Who are you?" Gretchen asked Petrovic as she tried to control her shaking.

"Does it matter?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a keycard that had a hotel name and a room number on it. "One way or the other." He set it on the bar.

Then a cell phone rang a peculiar tune.

Petrovic's smiling face was clouded briefly by a look of annoyance. He reached into his pocket and looked at the screen. Resuming his stare at Gretchen, he answered it. "Yes?" He paused, then said, "I understand." He returned the phone to his pocket.

Gretchen was still frozen in place.

"Well, unfortunately, business calls." He grabbed the keycard from the bar and pocketed it. "Perhaps another time. You and me. Or maybe me and one of your daughters?" He smiled and walked away, leaving the woman in her silent horror.

Before leaving, Petrovic found Senator Tilling and approached him. As he did, the others who were speaking to Tilling scattered like birds.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing?" Tilling said in a tense whisper.

"Having fun, of course. But you've no need to concern yourself with that. I have another request for you." He offered an envelope.

"Damnit, put that away! Someone will see!" Tilling hissed.

"Then I guess you better take it now."

Tilling hesitated, then grabbed the envelope, stuffing it inside his suit jacket. "This is the last time!"

Petrovic laughed, "There is no *last time*, Senator. Unless, of course, you want me to find someone to replace you."

Tilling was silent.

"Good. Just do what it says in there."

"And what is it this time?"

"How should I know?" Petrovic laughed. "Sign some bill. Overlook something or other. Get rid of some pain in someone's ass."

The senator's face turned beet red.

"Come on, Senator. You didn't expect me to stay away forever, did you?" He chuckled, "Although, I have to admit, my time in Japan was enjoyable. Had the opportunity to check out some of the military bases you and your buddies maintain over there. Even was able to sample some of the local women. I'm almost sorry to be back. But business calls, as you know."

Tilling stared silently at him.

"Well, Senator. Until next time." Petrovic turned and walked leisurely out of the house.

\* \* \*

Garrett Jansen mixed paints on his palette using a tiny brush, adding a little paint thinner to the heavy oils. He then added fine details to a canvas that rested on a maple easel.

A door opened to the finely furnished room, and a distinguished butler in a black suit entered, his posture perfect. "He has arrived, sir," he said.

Garrett nodded but did not look away from his painting.

Petrovic entered the room, and the butler left, closing the door behind him. Looking around, he admired the various paintings that were on the walls. Some were stunning landscapes, others still life, and others portraits of people he had never met. He stood and waited.

Finally, Garrett sighed and stepped back from the easel. He turned his head slightly as he looked at the portrait of his daughter, Veronica.

Petrovic said, "Another masterpiece, Garrett."

Garrett shook his head, "No, she was the masterpiece. Perfect in almost every way." He set his palette down and dropped the brush into a jar of paint thinner.

"It's been a while."

Garrett nodded as he walked up to him. He stood slightly taller than his light-haired visitor.

Petrovic raised an eyebrow, glancing briefly at the bandage on Garrett's temple.

"I require your expertise," Garrett said.

"Oh?"

"Your payment is over there." He motioned to a manila envelope sitting on a small maple table near the entrance to the room.

Petrovic nodded, "What do you want?"

"You heard about what happened?"

Petrovic nodded, "Yes. I'm surprised one of *them* is in this city—of all places in the world."

"*Was*. She left."

"And?"

"I want you to find her."

"What for?"

Garrett smiled, but it was almost a grimace. "Do I need to tell you?"

Petrovic was silent.

"Because she murdered my daughter, damnit!"

With a nod, Petrovic said, "Revenge I can understand. But I sense there's more to this than just blood for blood."

"She is dangerous."

Petrovic laughed, "A woman? Even one of *them*?"

"She killed Brian Cass."

Still chuckling, he said, "She—" But then he stopped dead. "What?"

"She killed Cass," Garrett said, his face immobile.

"You mean—"

"Face to face. She killed him. I've seen what she can do."

"That's not possible. It just doesn't work that way."

"Explain it to me, then."

Petrovic furrowed his brow.

A moment later, Garrett said, "It doesn't really matter."

"If she is like you say, then she can approach the barrier?"

Garrett nodded. "With complications, but yes."

"But she's a woman, so—"

Again, Garrett nodded.

"Damn. Does she know what that means?"

"It doesn't seem so."

"Then I see why she's dangerous."

"Yes."

"And it'll cost you extra."

Garrett snorted, "You will find what I've given you to be plenty."

"What do you want me to do with her when I find her?"

"Tell her I said hello, what do you think?!" Garrett bared his teeth. "Kill her, damnit!"

The other squeezed his lower lip between his finger and thumb. "I have to wonder why you're not doing this yourself."

"I have worked for many long years to get here." He looked at the scar in the center of his right palm, turning his hand over to see a similar mark on the back of it. He flexed his fingers as though his joints were in pain. "Now I have all I need to pursue my art without distraction, and I will not let one of *their* stinking kind draw me away. She already took my greatest work—my daughter—from me. But she will have nothing more. Besides, I have my own concern here. Another of *them*."

"Another?"

"Yes. He interfered. He's the reason my Veronica was taken from me. And I plan on killing him once I figure out why he's here."

"So you want me to deal with the woman."

"Yes. Cass was a fool and probably got himself killed because he underestimated her. She should be no challenge for you, though. This other one, though, is at least your equal."

"I see," Petrovic said. "But if she's fled—"

"I received a report that suggests she may be headed west. Information is included with your payment."

"I see."

Garrett looked at him intently. "I have no idea where she is going. I never even knew she existed until just recently. It is all very strange. But she reminds me of—" he paused. "You may run into another of *them*."

"And if I do?"

"It's your choice. But I will warn you: the only one I've ever met—other than this woman and the Asian pest that's now following me—may still be alive. And if he is, Mister Petrovic, he is not to be trifled with." Garrett looked again the palm of his hand.

"Mhm," Petrovic said.

Garrett drew his knife from his belt and in the next instant had the blade against Petrovic's throat. "He will kill you just like I could have now!"

Petrovic's eyes were wide, but he made no other movement.

Garrett stepped back. He looked with disdain at the other. "You should be glad I need you right now. You disgust me."

Petrovic smiled coldly, "I'm glad I still have that effect."

"And remember one thing," Garrett said, his lip curling. "I will not become part of your political machinations. My role in this remains quiet. If I find out you spilled your guts to anyone—I mean *anyone*—nothing in the world will stop me from finding you and ripping your heart out through your throat. Do you understand me?"

The other man narrowed his eyes, but he turned up the corner of his mouth and inclined his head.

"Get out."

Petrovic turned and walked toward the door. Before leaving the room, he stopped to take the envelope from the table. He looked sidelong over his shoulder before walking out and closing the door behind him.

Garrett bared his teeth and threw his knife, burying it to the hilt in the door and splitting the wood nearly from top to bottom. He then turned and gazed at the portrait of Veronica.

Some time later, he wandered to a wet bar and poured himself a drink. He downed it quickly and then rubbed the scarred palm of his right hand. Opening a drawer in the bar, he reached in and pulled out a small framed picture. In it was a smiling woman, her shape clearly revealing that she was pregnant. Her long, dark hair and fine facial characteristics were similar to Veronica's.

Garrett tossed the picture back into the drawer. He thought he heard some glass cracking, but he closed it without further ado. Pouring himself another drink, he swallowed it in a single gulp and threw the glass across the room. It shattered on the floor. He then set a stool in front of his nearly finished portrait of Veronica, and he gazed at it silently, his teeth clenched and his right hand opening and closing.



Sarai cried bitterly. Her hands were clenched into white fists, her arms across her abdomen.

"Shh, little girl," said the man who had stopped the cutting. Sarai couldn't see his face. It was hidden in light.

"You're going to have to help me, little girl. I can't fix this, but you can."

Sarai shook her head, closing her eyes tightly.

"Yes you can. You can if I help you."

She sobbed, "Oh! It hurts!"

"I know." He took her hand between his palms, "You have to be the one. Follow me where I go."

She cried out as she followed him.

Sarai awoke with a start and immediately sighed, realizing where she was. She looked briefly at Will, whose head had lolled to the side and dangled in a decidedly uncomfortable-looking manner.

After rubbing her face with her palms, she rose to her feet, stretching her arms to the sky. She walked to the edge of the trees and looked out toward the highway, standing there silently for some time. Finally, she said softly, "I don't know why I'm going back to you."

"Who?" Will said from behind her as he stretched his arms.

Sarai jumped, "What?"

"Who were you talking about?"

She glared at him for a moment, then her face softened. But she said nothing. Turning and walking to where the motorcycle was hidden, she threw the branches off it with a vengeance.

Will followed with a hurt look, "Hey, sorry! I just thought—well, look, I'm sorry if I wasn't supposed to hear that."

"Forget it," Sarai said. "We'll be there this afternoon if we get started now. Food's there."

Will nodded and then looked down. "Is that where *he* is? The one you were talking about?"

Sarai was silent.

"I see. May I at least know who he is?"

"No. You're here by your own choice."

"Sarai," he said, grimacing, "I don't understand. Why is this so sensitive?"

"Are you coming or not?"

Will looked around as if the resolution to his frustration was hidden in the dead leaves at his feet. Finally he shrugged

and mounted the motorcycle behind her, throwing his helmet on just before she accelerated back toward the highway.

# Johann

"Hah!" said Mel, an old black farmer. "You're full of it. Don't tell me you fix stem rot on them things by just singin' a song over 'em. What do you really do, John?"

Mel and three other gruff men in worn clothes all looked from their rocking chairs at another who sat at one end of the porch.

"Come now," said John, who was now the center of attention. "If I told you, you'd have vegetables that look as good as mine. Can't have that."

"I think he goes to the grocery store and buys a bunch of nice-looking produce and glues it to his plants," said one of the four skeptics.

John smiled, "Of course I do."

Larry, the oldest of the bunch, wore a thoughtful expression. He spoke next. "You know, John," he paused.

"Yes, Larry?" John said quickly.

"Don't try to distract me." The others chuckled. "You're good with plants, that's for damn sure. You're one hell of a farmer. One might even say you've an uncanny knack for keeping things alive. How long have we known you?"

John closed his eyes, still smiling, "Come on, Larry, don't go down this road again. I thought we'd all agreed to just agree that some people have their particular gifts. Mine's good skin." He rubbed his face.

"Bull," Larry said. "How long've we known you?"

"Nigh on forty years," said Mel.

"That long?" John said.

"You know it well," said Larry. "And us old fogies have to look at your damn twenty-something baby face. I don't get it. How old are you?"

"Larry," John laughed, "Like I said, I have good skin."

A chorus of groans followed. The four farmers rose from

their chairs, some more slowly than others, and they all started off John's porch.

John rose and walked with them to their old trucks. He shook hands with each of them.

"Come by anytime," he said, as he always did.

A few minutes later, he was alone on his porch. He rocked slowly back and forth, his head leaning against the back of the chair. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a pamphlet that had been folded over several times. He slowly unfolded it and looked at the picture on the front. It showed a sailboat on the blue ocean, a smiling woman at the helm, a man standing behind her and looking ahead, a smile on his face as well.

John sighed. He closed his eyes and hummed softly, his hands falling into his lap.

Some time later, he rose and walked around his farm. The house and a barn stood close together. An old truck sat on the driveway, which lay between the two structures. In the grass near the barn were two more trucks—one a rusted hulk with weeds growing through the cab and another in worn but passable condition. The road on the edge of the property was hidden by a thick tree line. Behind the house were rolling acres leading to tree-covered mountains.

John gave grain to the two cows that were standing near the barn, scratching their flanks as they ate. He then wandered through several plots that were filled with orderly rows of lush green plants. He stopped at one plant that was yellow and limp. Kneeling in the dirt next to it and placing his hands around it, he gently lifted the sickly leaves from the ground. They immediately turned green and stood upright with renewed vigor.

John returned to his house. It was a two-story farmhouse with a large front porch. He went to the kitchen and started a pot of fresh coffee. An old dog wandered up to him, and he reached down and scratched its head. He went to the refrigerator and pulled out a meaty knuckle bone and gave it to the dog, who took the bone with relish and promptly left. The screen door opened and slammed shut as the dog left the house in search of a safe place to chew its new prize.

He sat quietly at the table with his cup of coffee and a newspaper. He read for nearly a half-hour, sipping slowly on his drink.

A knock on the door came to his ears.

"Come in," he said.

"Hello John." An aging man walked in, holding his hat in his hands. His hair was completely grey, and his face was lined with deep wrinkles, but he stood straight and tall.

"Howdy, sheriff. Have a seat. Coffee's in the pot there."

"Obliged." The sheriff poured himself a mug and sat down at the table across from John. "How's today's fish wrap?"

John smiled, "The same as always. What can I do for you, Harvey?"

"You friends with Gil Adams?"

"Well, I know Gil. What's he done now?"

"Fool's been beatin' up on his wife. I tried to get her to do somethin', but she's stubborn. Kept sayin' it was her own fault."

"Hm," John said. "Gil's got a short fuse. I'll talk to him."

"I'd appreciate it. That dang family—I swear—it runs in their blood." Harvey sipped his coffee. "I warned him, and he seemed to be upset that he'd done it, but."

"Yes. It'll happen again."

Harvey nodded. "Same with his daddy, Ken. I thought that punk had learned his lesson when he was young, but nope." Harvey chuckled, "You remember that, don't you?"

John smiled sadly, "Yes."

"Well, what're you gonna tell ol' Gil?"

"Don't know. I'll figure something out when I see him."

Harvey shook his head and laughed.

"What?" John said.

"You. You!" He laughed some more. "You sure I can't deputize you? Cryin' out loud, I need some help."

"You do just fine, Harvey. Best sheriff this county's ever had."

Harvey snorted, "Well, dunno about that. I'm certainly gettin' too old for this. Next election'll probably be a tough one. It'll only be so much longer that I can honestly say age doesn't matter." He sipped his coffee.

"It doesn't matter much," John smiled.

"Easy for you to say!"

"You'll be sheriff as long as you want the job, Harvey."

"Well, any chance you'll take over when I don't?" he laughed.

John chuckled. "No, it's not my place."

The other nodded. "It's our loss. Well, I've one more request, if you don't mind me imposing."

John smiled, "Of all the people that come by here, you're the least imposing. What is it?"

"Old lady Jessica."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. The new pinheads on the county commission are tryin' to take her house away for back property taxes."

John shook his head, smiling. "Maybe we should let them try. I'd enjoy seeing them get caned by Jessica."

Harvey laughed, "Yeah, I know. And I know how you feel about those taxes, but there's not much we can do. Not enough folks around here care—just another bill they don't think about."

"I know."

Harvey nodded. "I gave Jessica a couple hundred—best I could spare. But that's not enough. I guess she doesn't have much."

John leaned back in his chair, "Up on top of the fridge is a box. Plenty of money in there. Take whatever you need. Give it to her and tell her to ask me next time and not be so stubborn."

Harvey sighed, "John, you don't have to always give, man. You've done enough for this town. Hell, you—by yourself—should be the county commission. I'll ask around to see what I can dredge up for the old lady."

Smiling, John said, "Don't bother. Take what you need from up there. Believe me, Harvey, I don't need all that money."

Harvey chuckled, "Do I wanna know where you got it all from?"

"Investments," John said with a smile. "Even a little interest adds up over time."

Harvey drained his coffee and walked to the refrigerator. He opened the box and took a number of twenties. "Okay, I've got five hundred here. Please count it." He held the money out to the other man.

"I trust you and your conscience."

Harvey nodded, then offered his hand.

John accepted, giving the other a firm shake.

"Really appreciate everything you do. I mean it."

"Keep up the honest work, Harve," John replied with a smile.

Harvey put his hat on and walked out of the house. "Adios!" he shouted as he got in his car and drove off.

When darkness fell, John washed his face and brushed his teeth as he did every night. He sat on the cool, fresh sheets of his bed. Reaching over, he opened a drawer in his night stand and slowly pulled an old picture from it. For several minutes he looked at it.

It was black and white, and it had yellowed with the passing years. In the picture was a young girl in her middle teens. She had short black hair, and she had been captured in the middle of throwing hay with a pitchfork. Her face bore an expression of focus and, perhaps, a hint of anger. A cow stood nearby, watching her.

John smiled and put the picture back in the drawer. He closed it carefully and lay down on the bed, sighing as he did so. He reached over and turned the light out. But sleep did not find him that night; he only lay there, staring at the ceiling, his mind flying through memories.

The next day, he arose when the sun was just beginning to light the sky. He washed his face and dressed as he did every morning, then walked around his farm, feeding his cows and checking on his crops. Nodding in satisfaction, he walked back to the house, humming softly as he went.

The old dog stood on the porch to meet him, its tail wagging slowly as he walked up the steps.

"Hi, old guy," John said. "Need some food?"

The dog simply looked at him.

John filled a bowl with dog food and looked at it. "Doesn't this get boring?" he said to the dog.

It sat down, its eyes never leaving him.

John shrugged, "Here you go." He set the bowl on the floor, and the dog began eating.

After eating breakfast, he worked among his plants, sowing some seeds and pulling up the few weeds that were mingled with his crops.

The sun had passed its peak and was heading down to the west when he heard the sound of a motor. He furrowed his brow.

Walking to the front of the house, he saw a motorcycle come to a halt. Two riders dismounted. John cocked his head, pursing his lips. He inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, then walked to meet the visitors.

\* \* \*

Sarai removed her helmet, as did Will behind her. She immediately saw John, who was walking slowly toward her. The old dog looked at her from the porch, its tail wagging slowly.

"Nice place," Will said, looking around.

But Sarai was silent.

"Oh, is that who I think—" Will stopped as John approached.

John came within a few feet. "Hello, Sarai," he said softly, smiling.

Sarai nodded, looking up at him silently.

Will adjusted his stance.

"John," the other said, extending his hand to Will.

"Will Owen," he said, shaking hands firmly.

John turned back to Sarai. "Been a long time. Just passing through, or do you need a place to stay a while?"

The woman said softly, "Need a place, if you don't mind."

"Course not. You know you're always welcome. Well, don't just stand there," John said, still smiling, "Come on in. It's hot out here for this time of year." He walked toward the house.

Sarai stood still, her eyes now looking downward.

"Hey," Will whispered. "What's going on?"

"You're the one that chose to come along," she said, looking up at him.

Will raised his hands and let them fall in resignation.

Sarai kept her gaze on him until he finally looked away, then she followed John toward the porch.

Shaking his head, Will walked a few paces behind her.

Inside, John went to the kitchen. "Something to drink? You both look tired." He opened the refrigerator and took out a pitcher of lemonade. "Made this myself. Real lemons," he laughed. Setting it on the table, he took three glasses from a cabinet.

Sarai stood in the kitchen for a moment looking at John, but she said nothing.



When he caught her gaze, John froze momentarily, just as he was tilting the pitcher to pour the lemonade. He then returned his attention to the task at hand, filling the three glasses. He offered one to Sarai.

But she simply turned and walked out of the kitchen toward the back of the house. A screen door creaked as it opened and then slammed shut.

John stood motionless for a moment, then set the glass on the table and offered another to Will.

Will accepted sheepishly but did not drink the liquid.

John returned the pitcher and Sarai's full glass to the refrigerator, then he sat at the table and drank some of his own. He motioned to a chair across from him. "Don't worry, it's good stuff. I promise."

Will smiled nervously and took a sip. Indeed, it was good. He sat down at the table.

"So, you all had a long ride?"

Will looked up from his glass, "A couple days."

John nodded.

The two sat in silence for a few moments.

Finally, John laughed.

Will smiled tentatively, not knowing whether he was the butt of some secret joke.

"You're a real trooper," John said.

Will pointed at himself, a look of confusion on his face.

"Yeah, you. Most people would have already asked a million questions about her."

"Sarai?"

"Yeah."

Will shrugged.

"I'm actually impressed. You must have some compunction about asking me things she won't tell you. And to make it easy on us both, I'll say this: don't ask me about what she won't or hasn't said. If she wants to tell you something, she'll tell you eventually."

Will's face flushed.

"And please don't be embarrassed," John said. "I may not have all the details, but I have a few guesses for why you're here. And I know it all must be a little confusing. But please, try to feel welcome here. My house is yours, too."

Will nodded, "Thank you."

"So?" John smiled at Will.

Will blinked.

John laughed heartily. He then sipped his lemonade, "I'm sorry. It just never gets old for me. Anyhow, I was wondering when you were going to ask me something."

"But you said Sarai is off limits."

"Of course I did. And I won't answer even those questions that try to bring her in obliquely. But I figured you'd probably ask me something about me—you seem the inquisitive type."

Will just stared at him.

John smiled, "Yeah, I've become pretty good at judging people's character. And I've been asked just about every question known to man. So, what's your first one? How old am I?"

Will shook his head and chuckled, "No, I've learned not to ask that. Besides, if I had to guess, I'd say you were about eight or nine."

John laughed, "I'm surprised you had the courage to say that to me."

"To be honest, I'm so confused right now, I feel like I don't fear anything. Maybe I'm just going crazy."

"Nah. Not crazy." He took a long drink. "To be honest, I'm being a little more forthright with you than I am with most people—even those that have known me for decades. And that's because you came with Sarai. Means she at least trusts you a little bit, and you've learned a little about her. I also know you're tenacious, because she's very difficult to get to know."

"I thought you weren't going to talk about her."

"No, I'm just not going to tell you anything you haven't already figured out one way or the other. Do you deny she's very closed?"

"Not hardly."

"There you go."

Will smiled and sipped his lemonade.

John then sat there silently, his gaze locked on Will.

"Are you her father?" Will asked finally.

John chuckled, "Well, that's good—make me have to really think about whether I'm transgressing my word by answering. Eh," he cocked his head, "I guess it's just a factual question about me. Do you think I am?"

"I don't rightly know."

"Hm." John smiled. His eyes were still directed at Will, but he fixated as if on a distant point. "It's a good question," he said finally. "But I think I'll let her answer that one." He rose to his feet and downed the rest of his drink. "Listen, as I said, you're welcome here. What's mine is yours. But please excuse me for a while. I need to go talk to Sarai."

Will nodded, "Of course. I really appreciate the welcome." He extended his hand.

John smiled and shook the other's hand. He then turned and left the kitchen.

Sarai scratched the nose of the cow outside John's barn. She then slid open a great barn door and walked in, grabbing a pitchfork that hung on the wall just inside. She went to a pile of hay and used the fork to throw several scoops outside the barn. The cow chewed on it fitfully.

She hung the pitchfork back up and closed the barn, then turned to find John standing nearby.

The other smiled.

"What?" Sarai said.

"It's good to see you again."

She turned to walk away.

"Sarai," John said.

She stopped.

"Look at me."

Sarai turned back to him.

"Tell me."

Looking at him steadily, struggling to keep her face still, she said softly, "You can't fix this."

"Why'd you come here, then?"

"I have nowhere else to go."

John gazed at her intently but said nothing.

Sarai stood as if she was trapped by his look. Finally she said, "They killed my friend, Johann." A tear ran down her cheek, but she quickly wiped it away. "They just killed her."

John stepped toward Sarai, but she immediately stepped back, keeping her distance from him and shaking her head.

"Don't touch me," she said.

He pursed his lips. "I know how much it hurts, little girl."

"No, you don't. I couldn't save her, as much as I wanted to.

I couldn't do anything but watch her bleed." Her face grew dark. "Chloe's blood is on my hands, Johann. *My* hands! And it's your damn fault!"

John kept his eyes fixed on her. "Maybe. But even if I had known what would happen to Chloe, I still would have done what I did."

"You had no right."

"I had no right to what? Fix you? Sarai, you couldn't have done anything to save Chloe. I know you. You would've, had you been able."

"You'd tell me that Chloe's life was worth less than—" She paused for a moment in a silent struggle, then said, "It wasn't worth Chloe's life. Her *life*, Johann."

John sighed, "I saved a little girl who was hurt terribly. What happened, happened."

"You shouldn't have. I would have lived."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"I would rather have lived with it if I could have saved Chloe."

"You know what, Sarai?"

"What?"

"That wasn't your choice. Think back. Think how it felt to a thirteen-year-old girl to be cut like that. Tell me she would say 'no, don't help me.' Tell me that, Sarai."

"That's not fair."

"No? And would you deny a man his desire to take a young girl's pain away? To save her just like you wanted to save Chloe?"

Sarai clenched her teeth, but she didn't look away.

"I'm glad you came back. You can stay as long as you want. But no matter what has happened or what will happen, I will never regret what I did. I don't care what it did to you—or to me."

She said nothing.

"You're tired, I know. Come back to the house and rest a while. Come on." He turned and walked.

Sarai watched him for a moment and then followed at a distance.

Will walked around the house, finding it cozy but not very informative about its owner. Everything was neat and clean,

and it was lacking any clutter. The walls and bookshelves displayed no pictures or other memorabilia. On one of the shelves was a line of neatly arranged CDs—mostly 70s and 80s rock, with a few newer albums and a smattering of other genres and eras.

Books of all manner lined other shelves. Some were obvious classics—some Dickens and Twain, Greek philosophers, and religious texts—others were popular novels that many a grocery store might sell.

Will walked to the kitchen. He opened several cupboards, finding nothing of particular interest. Their contents were neatly arranged, but they didn't say anything about the man who stocked them. Bread, cereal, a jar of spaghetti sauce next to a box of macaroni, a box of crackers, some canned vegetables, and so on. The refrigerator was the same: a glass bottle of milk, some condiments, some meats and cheeses wrapped in plastic, a few opaque containers with invisible contents.

The screen door creaked and slammed.

Will didn't bother trying to hide his investigation.

"Hungry?" John asked as he moseyed in. "Or trying to find out something about me?"

Will chuckled, "A little of both, I suppose."

John held up a hand, "Whatever you'd like, go ahead. I'll make dinner in a little while. Meantime, I'll go and get a couple rooms ready for tonight."

Will nodded. But when John left, he didn't try to find any food. Instead, he wandered to the front of the house, stepping onto the porch and looking out. Only after a minute of gazing around the farm did he notice Sarai sitting in a rocking chair nearby.

"Hey," he said softly.

Sarai simply looked at him.

"I'm sorry."

"For?"

Will shrugged, "For being difficult. Sticking my nose in where it doesn't belong."

"It's okay. I might have done the same if I had been where you are."

Will smiled, then sat in another rocking chair. He sighed and turned his head toward her. "You look tired."

Sarai said nothing.

"May I ask you something?"

She nodded.

"Is John your father?"

Sarai was silent for a while, her gaze on Will, but her attention obviously elsewhere. Finally, she said, "No."

Will started to nod, but something in her expression caused him to stop. "What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing. He's not my father."

"Oh. Well, how did you meet him?"

Sarai fell silent.

Will sighed. "Sarai, I haven't a thing to offer you in return, so I can't bargain to get you to at least let me in on who you are. John won't tell me anything—as I'm sure you know. I've got nothing to go home to, other than probably an arrest warrant. So I'm left completely in the dark, and I get snapped at whenever I try to just find something out. But you let me tag along for whatever reason. Do you want me to leave?"

She neither spoke nor moved.

Shaking his head, he said, "I just want to understand."

"I let you come along," she said quietly, "because you would be dead if you had stayed. They would have found you and killed you."

"Why? What did I do?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, it matters!"

She fell silent once more.

"So, I'm guessing it all has to do with who you and—" he flicked his thumb back toward the house, "and whoever he is—it's all about who you are. So, please, *please*, tell me something. Anything!"

"I will give you one more question."

Will laughed, "Well, there it is. One question! Is that going to make it better or worse?"

Sarai shrugged.

"Fine. Might as well stick to my guns. How'd you meet him?"

Sarai looked down at the wooden planks of the porch then rocked back and forth in her chair. But she said nothing.

Will looked at her, trying to hold back the tide of his impatience. Just when he thought he must surely explode, to yell with all his might at the woman, she spoke.

"I was thirteen, living in the Middle East. He heard me trying to make them stop."

Will swallowed. "Stop?"

Sarai looked at him, "Stop cutting me."

Will's mouth fell open in spite of himself.

Sarai smiled sadly.

Will closed his mouth, "You mean—" he stopped.

Sarai nodded.

"My goodness."

"That's how he found me. That's how we met," she said, turning her head to face out on the farm.

"I—I'm sorry."

Sarai shrugged, "You didn't know."

Will sat in brooding silence. He occasionally glanced over at her, but she did not look at him. Several times, he opened his mouth to speak, but whatever words came to his mind fell dead before they reached his tongue.

Sometime later—perhaps minutes, perhaps hours—John stepped out onto the porch. "Dinner's ready."

Sarai rose and walked inside.

Will stayed in his chair.

"Coming?" John asked.

Will started and looked up at him, "What?"

John smiled sadly, "I'm guessing she told you."

Will just looked at him.

The other nodded, "Yeah. Be patient with her. Come on in and eat something."

The three ate dinner in silence. John was the first to rise, sighing contentedly and tossing his napkin on his plate. "Well, that hit the spot. Will, first room on the right. Sarai, second. Stay up as long as you like. I'm going in the other room to read a while and listen to some music. You're welcome to join me, of course." He smiled and left the table.

After John had left, Will spoke, "Sarai." He sighed, "I'm sorry."

"For?"

"Prying. It was none of my business."

She shrugged.

Will struggled to find more to say.

"It was years ago. Many years ago."

"Yes, but that doesn't change it. I mean," he shook his head, squinting, "to do that to a young girl—"

"Don't dwell on it."

"It's hard not to."

Sarai raised her eyebrow.

Will's face flushed, "I'm sorry. I mean—I don't mean to think about your—I—"

The corner of her mouth turned up slightly, "It's okay."

Will finally chuckled, covering half his face with his hand. "Still sticking my foot in my mouth after all this time." He then nodded. "Well, I'm going to bed before I do it again."

"Good night."

"Night," he said, rising and going upstairs. He found his room neatly prepared, with clean linens set on the end of the bed. He set them aside and crawled into the fresh sheets. All was quiet, except maybe for the muffled beat of music and the sound of the breeze in the limbs of a tree outside the partially open window. Almost as soon as a contented sigh left his chest, he was asleep.

Sarai sat down in a plush chair across from John.

The other set down his book and smiled. Then he peered closely at her, "Are you injured?"

Sarai shook her head emphatically.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Sarai, it's not something to mess around with. If you're hurt, you need to take care of it."

"Yes, Johann, I'll take care of it."

He sighed and lightly scratched his forehead.

"You know, don't you? You know what happened to you and me."

John extended his fingers, "I've given it some thought over the years, anyway."

"Then you know how to fix it. Just like you fix everything. You fixed me. And you fixed Chloe. Fixed her right up, you did."

"I don't know how to *fix* it. And I'm not sure anything's broken."

"Look what you did to me! Look at me! You turned me into the exact opposite of what I was." Her voice was tense, but it remained low.



He said nothing.

"You turned me into what you were. I have to live with that now. I have to look at it in the mirror. I have to look at my hands and see blood. I have to see the things I've done because of what you did to me." Her voice then became soft and monotone, "And I hate you for it."

"Tell me about Chloe."

"Why?"

"Because I care about you. And you need to deal with what's happened."

"I've already dealt with it. Want to know what I did?"

"No."

"You should know. You should know what you made me. This is what I am: I killed the bitch that murdered Chloe!"

John sighed, "Sarai, I know you would never take a life in vengeance."

"You don't think I killed her?"

"I know you did. I can hear it in your voice. But you didn't do it in the way you want to convince me you did. You didn't murder her, even though she may have deserved death. That's over now. So tell me about Chloe."

Sarai snorted.

But he sat quietly, looking at her with a gaze that betrayed no anger.

Finally, Sarai said, "She was like a sister—a little sister. So very kind to me. I loved her so much." She shook her head. "No more. Not for you."

John nodded, "Well, I know one thing: she was what you needed."

She stared at him, her face expressionless.

The two sat without speaking for some time. A song on the stereo faded out, marking the end of a CD and leaving silence in the room.

"Are you sleepy?" John asked.

Her eyes snapped open from a half-lidded state, "No, no."

He nodded and smiled.

"No. I'm just tired." Her eyes closed.

John sat for a while and then stood up, walking over to her and gently sliding one arm under her knees and the other around her back. When he lifted her, he was surprised at how light she still felt—like she did so many years ago.

He carried her up the stairs to her bedroom. Perhaps he had known it would happen this way: the sheets were already pulled back. He laid her down.

Sarai groaned when her shoulder touched the bed.

John reached under the collar of her jacket, gently pulling the bandage away from her wound.

She winced in her sleep when his fingers explored it.

He then pulled his hand away, taking the bandage with it. Looking down, he shook his head, "All I've ever wanted to do is take your pain away," he whispered.

Sarai grimaced, still sleeping, yet hearing his words. "I know," she mouthed silently.

John blinked furiously. Finally, he said, "Sleep, little girl." He turned out the light and left the room, closing the door behind him.

# Revelation

"I can't fix this, but you can," Johann said.

Sarai shook her head. "No! I can't!" she sobbed.

"Yes, you can. I'll help you. Follow me where I go," he whispered in her ear. He held her hand between his own hands, and the light around him grew, as did the light around her.

She felt pulled with him, but she wasn't sure what direction they were going, if any. Or perhaps it was in all directions at once. Still, she lay on the cold table, bleeding. But the world around her was slowing down.

"Here it is," he said finally, his eyes closed. "Can you feel it?"

Still crying, Sarai nodded. She felt the barrier: a line that she could not see but knew was there.

Sarai woke, but she lay whole in a comfortable bed in John's house, not cut and bleeding on a table in a distant country. The morning air was cold. She rose as the sun was just beginning to brighten the darkness to a faded pink in the east. Walking into the hall, she looked to her left. Will's door was closed. John's bedroom, at the end of the hall to her right, was open.

She walked into the bathroom and turned on the light. After staring at the face in the mirror for some time, she quickly washed. Her short hair was messy, but she ignored it.

In the kitchen a pot of coffee was brewing, but the downstairs was empty. Stepping out onto the front porch, Sarai drew in the cold air, filling her lungs almost to bursting. Then she exhaled and leapt off the porch, hitting the ground at a run.

She followed a path that was no longer the dirt trail through the grass that she had once made; it had been decades since she had run it. But it made her feel like she was young again.

She came to a tree with many low-hanging branches. She could almost see Johann—the name she had always known him by—standing there, waiting.

*Draw!* he had said. He would pull at the branches of the tree, sending limbs at her from all directions.

Even now, as she came to a halt, she pulled her knife from her belt. She practiced the forms he had taught her, her arms swinging to block unseen attacks, the blade slashing and stabbing. When she felt the forms had returned to her, obeying her command, she resumed her run. She extended herself toward the barrier, governing her strength and speed to hold off the penalty for her approach. And she flew through the trees like the wind.

Several more times she stopped, always at places where Johann had waited for her, teaching her and testing her.

*Concentrate!* she could still hear him say.

Then she had only the last dash to bring her back to the house. She set her jaw and ran, approaching the barrier but no longer holding herself back. Closer and closer she came to it, feeling the coming payment building, but she was determined to stand firm before the line he had told her never to cross.

Higher grew the penalty—the inexplicable pain that came from approaching the barrier. And then she was at the house once again, standing still and breathing heavily.

*Now, Johann had said, close your eyes. See it for what it is and learn from it.*

She exhaled slowly as she felt the pain begin. It wracked her body, and she struggled to stay on her feet. Every time, it felt as though she were being turned inside out—or maybe that in approaching the barrier, she had turned herself inside out and was being forcibly restored. Her knees began to buckle, and a groan passed between her clenched teeth. As the pain waxed, her groan turned to a high-pitched whine, but she did not give in to the urge to scream. And just when she thought the agony would break her, it waned.

Sarai sighed with the release, and even the slight ecstasy, of feeling herself whole once again and free of the pain. Then she remembered: she reached her hand up to her shoulder, but her wound was gone. The skin was smooth once more, except, just maybe, she felt the smallest scar. She turned to look at the house and saw John standing on the porch.

He sipped his coffee and smiled, raising the mug to her.

In spite of herself, she smiled back. For an instant, she saw him as he was when she was young: a man who had fixed

her and taken her far away to a new home. But the other memories of what had happened crowded these feelings out of her, and the smile fell from her face.

John chuckled and shook his head, "Sarai, Sarai. How many times have I told you what a wonderful thing your smile is?"

She looked at him as she walked past and into the house, still breathing heavily from her exercise. But she said nothing.

John shook his head and laughed softly.

Then Will stepped onto the porch, looking back in after Sarai.

"Morning," John said. "Sleep well?"

"Best in my life, I think," Will said, yawning.

John nodded.

"She doesn't quit, I see."

The other smiled, "Nice try."

Will smiled, "Oh well. I guess I figure one of these days you'll let something slip about her." He then looked down and patted his belly with both hands. "I suppose I ought to do some exercise one of these days before I really start getting pudgy."

"Hm," John said. "Ask Sarai to train you." He drained his coffee to the dregs, then smiled and patted Will on the shoulder before walking back into the house.

After breakfast, Sarai wandered around the farm, doing the chores that she had once done every day of her life.

Will found her outside the barn. "Hey," he said.

Sarai nodded.

"How are you?"

"Fine."

"Do you think you can go see a doctor for your shoulder? Anyone around here—"

"No," she cut him off. "It's fine."

"Well, I'm no doctor myself, but I've seen my share of wounds. And that one needs stitches. Please, won't you go see someone?"

"You're worse than he is," she muttered.

"Fine!" he shouted. "Get a damn infection!" But he couldn't quite make his feet turn to leave her behind.

She looked at him for several moments then took off her jacket, leaving only her sleeveless shirt. "Happy?"

Will took a step toward her and stopped, his brow furrowed. "What? How?!" He then held up his hand, "Know what? Never mind. I probably won't get any decent explanation anyway."

"Cancel the pity party," Sarai said. "It doesn't become you."

Will looked at her, dumbfounded for a moment, then he laughed. It was hearty laughter that echoed off the hills behind the farmhouse.

Sarai smirked.

"Yep," Will said, "I do believe I will get your life story yet."

"You certainly won't if you quit as easily as you were about to."

Will chuckled. "Not to let that go entirely," he said, pointing to her shoulder, "but how long do you think we're going to stay here?"

"I'm not sure."

Will nodded, looking at the ground, "Well, listen, I need something to do. I can't just sit around all day. I figure maybe I can do a little exercise or something—I'm getting flabby around the edges. John said you might be able to help?"

"What a surprise," she said with a straight face.

"His words were that I should ask you to train me. Mostly, I'd just like someone to talk to. I've tried running, weightlifting, and all that before. It's dull, and I can never keep it up for more than a week or two."

Sarai looked at him steadily. "That's not what he meant by training."

"What did he mean? More of a Rocky Balboa type thing?" He held up his fists and threw a couple mock punches, smiling as he did so.

Sarai snorted. "He meant that I would train you how to defend yourself against *them*."

"Them?"

"They are like me. But they are—well, dark. Veronica. Her father."

"Dark? You mean, like evil?"

She shrugged.

"And they're like you?"

"In some ways."

"So—"

"You're right. You can't defend yourself from them. You will never be strong enough or fast enough. Never."

Will sighed, "And Garrett Jansen is one of these—these dark ones?"

"Yes."

"Do they really have any interest in me?"

"Unfortunately for you."

"But why bother? What am I to them?"

She sighed, "They don't have much interest in fame. They prefer the shadows. You're a journalist, and you're involved with me. Do the math."

"So, what'll they do?"

"Eventually, if the one you saw—Jansen—if he is looking for you, he'll find you. And he'll kill you. Or one of his underlings will."

He threw up his hands, "Well, that's great. The fix is in."

"What?" she said.

"I'm screwed either way."

"Yes, pretty much."

"Thanks," he said, glaring at her.

Sarai shrugged. She turned to resume her chores, but then stopped. Over her shoulder, she said, "If you want, I will show you a few things. They won't protect you, but maybe—maybe they will help you to not be afraid."

Will nodded slowly. "Thank you, Sarai."

"For what?"

"For opening up a little."

"Hm. Don't get used to it." She turned to face him once more and threw him the pitchfork that was in her right hand.

He almost caught it, but he bumbled at the last instant, dropping it to the ground.

"Come on. First we finish the chores, butterfingers."

Will finally picked up the pitch fork and smiled as he followed her.

Gasping for breath, Will tried to keep up with Sarai's grueling pace. They had finished the chores around the farm after an hour, and he had been ready to call it a good day's work.

"Who said we'd started training yet?" Sarai had said to him.

"S—Sar—Sarai!" Will gasped as they ran through the trees.

"I—need—to stop!"

"Not yet," she said, showing no sign of fatigue or even heavy breathing.

Finally, they stopped by a large tree with low-hanging branches. Will immediately leaned over and put his hands on his knees, trying to recover his breath.

"Up," she said. "Stand up."

"I—can't," he said.

"Yes you can. See the pain for what it is and learn from it."

Will stood up straight, still gasping for breath.

Sarai grabbed a branch of the tree and pulled it back. "Defend yourself." She let it go.

Will cried out when it smacked him, giving him a face full of leaves.

"Wake up!" she said. She pulled other branches and let them fly, and she pulled down branches from above.

Will found himself being pounded from all directions.

"Stop flailing! Feel the flow of it and defend yourself!"

Finally, Will growled and slapped away two of the branches.

"Good."

She repeated the exercise.

Will struggled once more.

After several minutes, Sarai stopped.

"What is all this?" Will said.

"Learning to see what's around you."

"By getting whipped in the face by branches?"

"Yes." Sarai gave him a stinging slap on the back. "We'll do it again tomorrow. This was just an introduction."

"How about just giving me a gun or something?"

Sarai glared, "A gun?"

"Yes. Why not?"

She stepped close, looking up at him intently. "If you're going to kill someone, you'll do it with your own hand."

"But wouldn't it be easier to just shoot—"

"That's the point. It shouldn't be easy. If you take a life, you should feel it in here," she pointed to his heart.

Will furrowed his brow. He almost thought he saw her tremble.

"And guns won't help you against *them*."

Finally, he nodded.

"Back to the house. Follow me."

Will groaned as Sarai started running once more.

"Sore?" John chuckled.



Will growled, "This is your fault." He slowly sat on a plush chair in the living room. He sighed when he finally came to a rest.

John put his book down. "Ask and get it off your chest."

"Who are *they*?"

"Ah. Well, hm," he rubbed his chin. "That's a deep question. What if I told you," he smiled, "that the answer is on that bookshelf over there?"

Will turned his head and looked. A quick glance showed that little, if anything, had changed since his initial investigation of the house and, in particular, the bookshelf. And he recalled nothing that struck him when he had perused its contents. "That's not very helpful."

John cocked his head, "Oh, it's like so many things in life. What good is it to you if you haven't earned it?"

"Why do I have to earn it?"

John leaned forward, his gaze intent on Will, "Because knowledge unearned is harmful more often than not."

Will sighed.

"Do you know more about Sarai now than when you first met her?"

"Of course."

"Would it have been better if she had just opened up to you right from the start? Told you everything?"

Will looked down.

John sat back and nodded, "Your answer is on that bookshelf. Find it and you'll get your reward."

"What's my reward?"

"You'll know who Sarai is, too."

"Any hints on where to start?" Will said with a chuckle.

John snorted, "Come on, man. Would you prefer that I had told you the answer's in the public library? That's a small bookshelf. Use your noodle; it'll do you some good."

Will sighed and struggled to rise to his feet. Hobbling to the bookshelf, he ran his finger along the spines of the books.

"Well, I'm off to bed," John said. "Don't stay up too late. It's going to be worse tomorrow," he laughed.

"Great."

"But it'll get better after that. Goodnight!"

"Night," Will said.

For the next hour, Will took selections from the bookshelf. He read the synopses, if they were available, and cursorily flipped through the pages. He was unsure if he was looking for something in the texts, or perhaps some piece of paper with a secret message, or something else altogether.

"Hell with it," he said finally, grabbing the first book on the shelf—a Dickens novel—and taking it up to his room. He rolled into bed with a groan and opened the book.

The next thing he knew, the book slid from his fingers and fell off his chest and onto the floor. He looked at his watch: three-thirty in the morning, almost two hours since he had fallen into bed. He reached over and turned off the light.

Will rose painfully from his bed the next morning. The sun was already bright in the sky. He groaned and hobbled to the bathroom, then walked downstairs and onto the porch. Reaching down, he scratched the head of the old dog sitting on the edge of the steps.

Sarai walked by with a shovel over her shoulder. She gave Will a black look.

He raised his hands, "What?"

"Day's half over."

Looking up at the sky, he said, "Only about a third."

"Let's go."

"Ugh," he grumbled.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Sarai sprang nimbly up the steps to the porch and stood within inches of him. She looked up at him and said, "Hey. You wanted to do this. If you want to quit, then quit. Otherwise, keep your complaints to yourself and do what I tell you."

The blood drained from Will's face. "I'm sorry." He found it far too easy to think he was dealing with a girl half his age, when in truth she was much older than him, and much smarter, as he was quickly discovering.

Sarai pursed her lips, looking up at him for several long seconds before finally bounding back down the stairs. "Come on," she said.

Will stood motionless for a moment. What had that look on her face been? Disappointment? In him? He stood in thought

for a moment, then came back to himself. "Right behind you!" he shouted as he nearly tripped going down the stairs, but he broke into a run to try to catch up to her.

John stepped onto the porch, a cup of coffee in his hand, and watched Sarai lead Will across the farm. "You've grown up, little girl," he whispered. He reached back into his pocket and pulled out the sailing pamphlet. Gazing at it, he turned and walked back into the house.

\* \* \*

"You SRT guys are friggin' crazy," said Harold Jones, a beat cop who had returned to the precinct headquarters to file paperwork. He sat in a room with a number of couches and chairs, and a flat-panel television mounted near the ceiling in a far corner.

"Come on, you've never played?" said Michelson, who wore a black uniform.

"What moron *really* plays Russian roulette?"

Michelson looked at the two other men in the room, both of whom wore similar black uniforms, and put on a face of mock fear.

Jones waved his dismissal and returned his attention to his clipboard.

Michelson clapped his hands, "Nolan, throw me your magnum."

One of the two men in black uniforms reached to the small of his back and pulled out a stainless steel revolver. He tossed it to Michelson.

"Come on, Jones. One game. One pull each." He opened the cylinder of the revolver and dumped the six bullets onto a table. He then selected one and tossed it into the air, catching it again with the same hand.

Jones said nothing. He didn't even look up from his clipboard.

"Come on, Jonesey. Just one game."

The other finally looked up, "I said no. Now leave me alone, punk ass."

Michelson chuckled and slid the single bullet into the cylinder. He spun it and flipped it closed. "Just one game. Your chances are good! You want to go first or last?"

Jones paused. Something in Michelson's voice bothered him.

"Last chance. You call it or I do."

He was silent.

Michelson sighed. "I guess I'll go first then. Slightly better odds. Five in six instead of four in five." He raised the gun to his head and pulled the trigger without flinching. The hammer cocked and released with a loud click. "Well, well." He offered the gun to Jones.

"You're insane," Jones said, rising to his feet.

But the two other black-clad men immediately stepped to either side of Jones, each grabbing one of his arms.

"What the hell?!"

"I gave you the chance to go first. You made me do it instead. Now it's your turn." Michelson smiled.

"I ain't putting that damn thing to my head!"

Michelson cocked his head. "You do it or I will. Or are you just gonna scream like a little girl?"

Jones struggled against the two that held him, but they each kept their grip.

Finally Michelson shrugged. "It's the rules, man." He raised the gun, placing the end of the barrel at Jones's forehead.

Jones froze in shock.

The hammer cocked and clicked once more.

"Damn!" Michelson said with a laugh. "You a lucky son of a gun." He motioned to the other two men. "Let's go. This joker is no fun."

The two dropped Jones, who fell back into his chair and sat in a silent daze, and followed Michelson.

As they stepped outside, Michelson's cell phone buzzed. He pulled it from its clip at his belt and flipped it open, "Michelson. Right. On my way." Turning his head to the side, he said, "You two go get geared up. I think we've got some work coming our way."

"Michelson, get your team ready," Petrovic said.

"You got it. How many?"

"Thirty."

Michelson raised his eyebrows, "Talkin' some serious business, eh?"

Petrovic nodded.

The other chuckled, "On my way. We'll get a couple vans ready. Where we headed?"

"Not entirely sure yet. It'll be a long-term project, so everybody should be ready to be on the road for a while. Maybe weeks."

"And payment?"

Petrovic's eyes narrowed.

Michelson chuckled, "That's what I like about you, Petro. Take no prisoners. We'll be ready."

Petrovic returned to his desk and sat down, looking through the contents of the envelope Jansen had given him. A fuzzy picture of his mark: a woman of unimpressive appearance. A police report on a westbound motorcycle from the previous day: two riders. A dossier on Will Owen—just a chump journalist. A few other papers and pictures. And a handwritten description of another man: one of *them*. The one Garrett had warned him about.

He gathered the papers and threw them in the trash—all but the picture of the woman. The other material pointed him in roughly the direction he needed to go. That was all he needed. Everything else he'd find out on the way.

Several hours later, Michelson returned, clad in black body armor, a machine gun strapped around his shoulder. "Ready."

Petrovic nodded, "Let's go."

Petrovic rode in a black SUV driven by Michelson, and thirty men rode in four tall, black, unmarked vans. Down the highway they flew, a dark convoy that inspired in those who saw it much less fear than it should have.

The police cruiser was parked beside an off ramp from the highway. The black convoy pulled up behind it, and Petrovic exited the SUV, followed by Michelson.

The officer stepped out and waited beside his vehicle, his hands on his hips. "That was fast! Just got the call earlier today that you all would be stopping by."

Petrovic nodded. "You saw the bike?"

"That's right. Had a funny feeling about it, but I couldn't find any reason to stop 'em."

"Two riders?"

"Yep. Looked like a woman in front, guy in back."

"Anything else?"

The officer shook his head, "Can't think of anything else."

"Why didn't you stop them?"

"Told you—no reason to."

"I see." Petrovic nodded to Michelson.

The other quickly raised his machine gun, pointing it at the officer.

"What the hell?!"

Petrovic calmly took the pistol from the motionless officer and handed it to Michelson. "I need to know what else you saw."

"What is this?! I didn't see anything else, damnit! Now gimme my pistol back!"

Petrovic nodded, "You see, I don't have much to go on for this one. So every bit of information, no matter how insignificant it may seem, will help me. I will only ask once more: what else did you see?"

"Go to hell."

Petrovic smiled and pulled a knife from his belt.

In the lead van, the men talked in low voices. Some cleaned their weapons, others honed knives, and some sat stoically with stone faces. Nothing changed when the screams started. And nothing changed minutes later when they stopped with the crack of gunfire.

A moment later, the engines of the entire convoy started, and following the SUV, they returned to the highway and resumed their course.

"Where to?" said Michelson.

"Stop at the first gas station," said Petrovic as he wiped the blood off his knife with a dirty rag.

"So, you wanna fill me in on what exactly we're doing? I mean, that was fun and all, but my boys back there are gonna get bored."

"I'm looking for a woman—the one on the motorcycle."

Michelson chuckled, "Ain't we all looking for a woman?"

Petrovic ignored him.

"Aw, come on. What you want her for?"

"I'm going to kill her, as I'm sure you know."

"Well, why not throw her to the boys? When they're done with her, you can kill her. I wouldn't be surprised if they took care of that for you, though."

"No."

"Why not? It'd be a good motivation for them."

"Stop the vehicle."

"What?" Michelson looked sidelong at Petrovic.

"I said," he paused as if relishing the moment, "stop the vehicle."

Michelson shrugged and put on his turn signal. A moment later, the convoy was lined up on the shoulder of the highway. A few cars passed randomly.

Petrovic exited the SUV. "Tell them all to get out and line up over here."

Michelson furrowed his brow. "Uh, okay." He grabbed his walkie-talkie and pressed the button, "Everybody out and form up shoulder side."

The men exited slowly, some stretching, others yawning. They lined up.

Petrovic stood silently, but he folded his arms.

Michelson looked at him with a questioning glance.

In a quiet voice, Petrovic said, "Michelson here tells me you need some motivation. He thought maybe our mark—a woman—would be good motivation for you."

Several of the black-clad men nodded and laughed lewdly.

"I thought of a better way to motivate you." He pulled his knife from his belt, went to the rear of the convoy and stood in front of the last man in the line.

In the next instant, blood sprayed from the man's neck, and he fell choking and gurgling. Then he lay motionless.

Another near the end of the line raised his weapon at Petrovic, who was fifteen feet away, but never got the chance to put his finger on the trigger. He fell in like manner, struggling on the ground for several seconds before lying still.

Petrovic stood calmly, "I welcome any more attempts to disobey me, kill me, or otherwise piss me off. You want motivation? You have it. Now get your asses moving or I'll kill every last one of you." He turned to Michelson, "Let's go."

Michelson clenched his jaw, but he nodded to the men to reload into the vans, and they did so smartly. He had worked with Petrovic before. He knew the man was serious—and

deadly. But this was different. He turned and walked to the driver's side of the SUV and sat down behind the wheel.

Petrovic was already sitting in the passenger seat.

Michelson looked over at him, then laughed. "That was *really* good. Woowee!" He started the engine and spun the wheels before screeching onto the highway. The vans followed more sedately, but soon the convoy was moving together again.

"Fourteen eighty," said the greying man behind the counter.

A customer pulled several bills from his wallet. His wife walked up to him, "Maybe we should get a map, too. I'd like to go by some back roads."

"Sure," he said. Looking up at the cashier, he raised his eyebrows.

"Ah," said the other, "I've got exactly what you need." He groaned a little as he reached to the opposite side of the counter and grabbed a map off a rack. "Now, this one here," he trailed off and his eyes locked onto the black vehicles that pulled in next to the gas pumps.

A light-haired man walked into the convenience store, followed by several in black, all of whom carried automatic weapons.

"Well," the cashier said with a smile, "some of America's finest. What can I do for you?" But as he spoke, the enthusiasm bled from his voice, and his smile melted away—for a reason he would not have been able to explain.

Petrovic said, "I am looking for this woman. Have you seen her?" He held up a picture.

The cashier glanced at it, but shook his head.

"Please look again," said Petrovic.

"I ain't seen her, really," the other said, his voice beginning to shake.

The customer at the register dropped his bills and grabbed his wife by the arm. They moved toward the door.

"Wait!" said Petrovic.

As if his voice had the power to turn flesh into stone, the two stopped instantly.

Petrovic moved closer to the cashier. "You have to understand something. I need to find the woman in this



picture, and I need to know you're not holding anything back from me."

"Believe me! Believe me, I wouldn't!"

Petrovic smiled and nodded, "You know what? I believe you." He nodded further. "But."

The blood drained from the cashier's face.

"I have to be *absolutely* sure. So, please, look again at the picture. Fred," he said, looking at the man's nametag.

Fred nodded convulsively, and he looked at the picture. "Uh, well," he stuttered.

"Just be honest. Nothing?"

"No! Honestly!"

Petrovic nodded again. "You see," he said quietly, leaning on the counter. "Those two folks over there, they are counting on you remembering something." He held up the picture and waved it slightly in front of Fred's nose.

Fred's mouth opened in spite of himself. "But I don't know her! I've never seen her in my life!"

"She would have been riding a motorcycle. Had someone else with her—a man."

Fred shook his head, his face a ghostly white.

"Okay. Well, like I said, I believe you. But I have to be sure." He turned to Michelson, then looked at his watch. "Pick a dozen or so of your men. And," he looked more closely at it, "you have fifteen minutes. Take her with you." He pointed at the woman.

The man with her said, "What?! What is this?!"

Michelson nodded to one of the men who proceeded to grab the woman.

She screamed, and her husband tried to intervene. He was then struck in the head with the butt of a machine gun. He groaned but did not rise.

"Wait! Wait!" Fred said. "Let me see the picture again!"

"No. I think you need fifteen minutes to settle down a bit and regain your memory."

"You can't do that to her!"

The woman screamed as she was dragged out the door toward one of the vans. She struggled, but the men held her firm. The back doors to the van opened.

"Come on!" Fred shouted. "Leave her alone! I'll look at it again! I will!"

Petrovic shrugged and motioned to Michelson.

Michelson nodded curtly, and the men stopped just before they were about to throw the woman into the van.

Petrovic set the picture on the counter, "This is your last chance. Because if you don't tell me what I need to know, I'm going to have to do something to jog your memory."

"Okay, okay," Fred said, exhaling and squinting hard over the picture. "A girl, a motorcycle, a man," he muttered. "I think—I think—I must have seen her—I must have—"

Petrovic waved the men back into the store.

The woman was sobbing, but she was limp, no longer struggling against the overpowering strength of the men that held her.

Her husband was now recovering, saying her name. "Helen? Helen?! What the—"

Petrovic beckoned Michelson to him.

The other responded and stood at his side.

"So," Petrovic said, "Fred. Give me some good news."

"I think maybe I saw her."

"Really?"

Fred shook his head, still staring at the picture. "I—I just can't be sure."

"Too bad," Petrovic said. He reached to Michelson's belt, drew his pistol, and shot the woman in the head, spraying blood across the two men that held her.

They dropped her body. Her husband screamed until he was struck to the floor once more by another stroke from a machine gun.

Petrovic handed the pistol back to Michelson. "Still nothing?"

Tears ran down Fred's face, and he shook violently.

Petrovic sighed. "This is useless, I see." He pulled his knife, leaned over, and slashed the throat of the groaning man on the floor. "Still nothing?" he looked up at Fred.

"My goodness! Stop!"

Petrovic sighed again, "Too late for that. Guess you're all that's left."

"No! No, please! Please don't kill me!" he held up his arms around his head.

"Why would I bother?" Petrovic laughed. He picked up the picture and wiped a spot of blood off it. "Sometimes it's

easier to die than to live with what you've seen—and done. See those two, Fred?"

The man did not respond to Petrovic's question; he just continued to grovel.

"Well, those two are dead because of you. Remember that." He turned to Michelson, "Security cameras. Find all tapes, receipts, everything. Bring them along. It'll give your men something to do until we get to the next gas station."

Michelson nodded, "You heard the man, get to it."

Minutes later, the men exited the store with several boxes of papers and tapes.

"You want the local cops following us?" Michelson asked Petrovic as they walked toward the SUV.

"I don't really care."

"Cause, I mean, well, that guy in there'll—"

Petrovic sighed, "Do whatever you want."

Michelson chuckled and waved over several men. They then sprayed the store with gunfire, focusing on the counter.

"I got him!" said one of the men when the firing had ceased.

The black convoy then returned to the highway.

\* \* \*

"Up, up, up," Sarai said rhythmically as she pulled herself up and let herself down from a tree branch.

Will, who was right next to her, struggled to keep up, but he quickly fell behind. He let out a cry of fatigue.

"Stop paying attention to the pain," she said. "Again. Up!"

"I can't!" he said, hanging limply.

Sarai pulled herself up once more then dropped to the ground and stood under him.

"This is the last one. This is the only one that counts. Up!"

Will shut his eyes tightly and shook his head, "Can't!"

"Stop wasting energy by talking. Pull yourself up."

He breathed heavily.

"Look past the pain. What you need is on the other side. Use it. Pull yourself up."

Will exhaled and then pulled, grimacing with the effort.

"Up! Up!" she said.

Slowly, Will's arms flexed, and he reached his chin toward the branch.

"Almost there! This is the one that counts!" she said.

He growled as he made his final effort. And then he had his chin resting on the branch. He chuckled, his laughter fighting with his heavy breathing. Then he let himself down.

Sarai smirked, "Good."

Will nodded and laughed more as he put his hands on his knees.

"Nope. Stand up straight."

"Aw, I need a rest!"

"Defend yourself!"

She grabbed a long, leafy branch off the ground—one she had used earlier—and she started swinging it at him.

He was unable to keep up with her mock attacks. The branch kept hitting him from the left, right, up, and down, and occasionally it was jammed into his face.

"Why now?" he started to ask, only to get a mouthful of leaves.

"Because it won't matter if you're tired." She kept swinging the branch. Finally, she stopped when she saw that he was doing nothing but standing there.

"I have my limits, you know," he said. "You said yourself I'll never be fast enough."

Sarai said nothing.

"Why are you bothering with all this, really?"

Still she was silent.

"It's not about me, is it?" Will nodded, slowly walking toward her. "I know what it's about. It's not about me, or them. It's about Chloe. Isn't it?" He stood within inches of her, looking down at her.

But her gaze was fixed, and she looked through him.

"Come on, Sarai, won't you at least talk to me?"

"What do you see when you look at me?" she said, looking up at him.

"What?"

"What do you see when you look at me?"

"Well, I—"

"Be honest."

"I'm not sure. A girl. A woman. I guess it depends."

"You want to know what I see when I look at you?"

He was motionless for a moment. Then he nodded.

"A journalist. Someone who just wants to use me."

"I see."

"You're no different than you were when I met you. This is all a game to you."

"No, it's—"

"Sh," she said, holding up a finger. "You don't yet understand. If you did, you would be different."

"I don't understand because you won't tell me anything!"

Sarai shook her head, "You don't understand because you don't want to."

Will sighed.

"Time to go back," she said.

"No, Sarai, wait!"

But she had already turned and started running.

And still he followed. He ran as fast as he could for several minutes. Finally he caught sight of her. "W—wait!" he said, gulping for air. Speech was nearly impossible when it was all he could do to get enough breath for his next step. He pushed himself to his limit, and then he was running next to her. He reached out and grabbed her arm.

Sarai struck with her other arm, knocking his hand away, "Don't touch me!" she shouted.

They both stopped and faced each other.

Will rubbed his arm, a wounded look on his face, his breath coming in heavy gasps.

Sarai stared at him, her face twisted in anger.

"Now I see a girl," Will said.

"And I still see through you."

"Oh yeah? What am I doing now?"

"Being what you are—a journalist. Trying to fit me on a page with some easy answers to your stupid questions."

Will put his hands on his knees, but he still looked at Sarai, "Okay. How's this? What exactly was it between you and Chloe? What was she to you?"

"I'm not ready to tell you—or him—about Chloe."

"You mean," he squinted at her, "you and Chloe were—"

"Get your mind out of the gutter!"

"Hey, sorry! Never know, and you won't tell me differently."

Sarai shook her head and turned. She started running again.

Will groaned and fell to the ground, hanging his head between his knees.

John found Sarai curled up on the ground in the barn, groaning in pain. He didn't approach her, but instead waited until she slowly returned to her feet. Her face was streaked with tears.

"This," she said, turning to him, "this is what *you* did to me." She turned away, closed her eyes, and exerted herself once more.

John watched the white light shining around her grow brighter.

"Sarai," he whispered. "Sarai, stop."

She turned to look at him, "Why?"

"It's not your fault Chloe is dead. Stop trying to pay for it."

"Someone has to."

"Sarai, please."

Her erect posture eased, and she hung her head. "I miss her so much," she said softly, her face twisting as she struggled to control it.

John nodded silently.

"Chloe was—she—I would have—"

"I know," John said. "You would have shared yourself with her. Made her like you."

Sarai nodded.

He sighed, "I'm sorry, little girl. Did she know about you?"

"She knew almost everything. I never told her how old I was, though. Didn't want her treating me like I was her mother or something."

"Did she know what you wanted to do?"

Sarai looked at him. "She had some idea. I'm not sure she really understood it. But she wanted to. And I wanted to. We would have the night she—" Sarai paused, then spoke deliberately, "The night she was murdered."

John nodded.

"All I wanted was a friend who would understand me. Who would share what it's like to be this way. I wanted her to know how much I loved her. Now she'll never know."

John sighed, "Sarai, she knew. She knew." He smiled sadly, "A person can't be loved by you and not know it."

Sarai looked at him silently.

"It's lonely being this way, I know. Very lonely. And when you find someone to share yourself with, and then have her taken away," he paused. "Well, I know it hurts." He put his hand on her shoulder. "But don't take it out on Will. And don't expect him to change in a day. He's trying. And he's as good for you as you are for him."

Sarai snorted, "He's stubborn."

John chuckled, "Yeah, I know. An all-fire pest, constantly asking questions and often having the wrong motivations for doing so. Reminds me of a girl I knew a long time ago."

"I'm not young anymore."

Smiling, he said, "I know. Realize something, Sarai. You and he both need to make a choice: whether he is to stay here with you or to go his own way. If he's to go, he needs to go now. But if he's to stay, well, you need to be prepared for what's going to happen."

She snorted, "Are you blind? Have you ever looked at me? Seen the way I look?"

John smiled, "You hide it very well, but it's still there. Underneath. And he will see it, sooner or later."

"If he leaves, they'll kill him."

"Yes, they will."

"But it won't be like you say if he stays."

"No?"

She shook her head. "No. I'll make sure."

"I'm sure you will," John said.

"Are you just saying that?"

John simply smiled at her and turned to leave.

"Johann."

He turned back, "Yes?"

"I don't hate you."

He nodded, "I know."

Will struggled to keep his eyes open as he flipped through another book. Music played softly in the background. "He can't expect me to read all this," he mumbled. Then he looked up.

Sarai was standing at the doorway to the living room.

Will closed the book. "Hey, listen," he said. "I'm s—"

"I'm sorry."

He rose slowly to his feet and started to laugh in surprise. "Why?"

She looked around, "For being so hard on you."

"No," he said, taking a step toward her. "No! You were right. I've treated you like—well, like a story. It's hard to break the habit. And I shouldn't have said what I did about Chloe. I should have known better."

"Sit," she said, holding her hand up in the direction of his chair.

He returned to it and sat back down.

She walked slowly over to a couch and looked at it for a moment before sitting down. She fixated for a while before looking at Will. "What do you want to ask me?"

Will smiled sadly, "Sarai, I—I don't know *who* will be asking you. The man who wants to look at your world or the man who," he sighed, "wants to live in it."

She looked at him steadily, "Let them figure it out another time."

He chuckled and then shrugged. "I don't even know what to ask now. I guess everything I've seen is just starting to become real to me."

She nodded.

"May I tell you something?"

"Of course."

He looked around the room, pursing his lips. "I've been away from my home for a week now. Seen some things that make the journalist in me ecstatic. And I've seen my life turn upside down. Now I'm scared. And alone. I feel all alone."

She looked at him silently for a moment. "Then you have the answer to your question," she said softly.

"What question is that?"

"Who I am. Now you know—I am alone. Johann always said that if there's one thing that we can believe about ourselves, it's that we were never meant to be alone. But I have no one now."

He nodded. "Is that why—Chloe? Was she like you somehow?"

The corner of her mouth turned up for a moment, "You don't disappoint when you try. Not exactly, but close. I would have made Chloe like me."

"How?"

"Each of us, those like Johann and me, we can—hm—share ourselves. We can do it only once. He always told me that it was because it wasn't good that we should be alone. That no



matter where we went, we would have everything we need: Strength. Health. And a friend." She nearly gasped. "But I waited too long. Now she's gone. And I too am alone."

"But what about John? He's like you."

"He's like me, but it's not the same. Haven't you ever felt lonely in a crowd?"

Will nodded.

"I don't know how to say this right. Hm. Well, you and I are different. We are different kinds. That will always put a distance between us. But there are so few of my kind, the only way for us to ever have someone really close is to make one of your kind like us. That is our gift.

"And as for Johann, something happened between him and me that should never have happened. We went to a place that changed us both." She looked at him intently, "I wasn't always this way. Once, long ago, I was able to heal things. People. It took a lot of effort: the worse the wound, the more it would take out of me. But I could do it."

"What happened?"

"I changed when he fixed me. He knew there was no way I could heal myself—it just doesn't work that way. Don't ask why. So he took me to a place I was never meant to go, and when I came back," she held up her hands and looked at them as though they were not her own. "When I came back, my hands brought death, not life. No more life.

"So Chloe died alone, and I could do nothing to save her." She rose and walked to the doorway. Not looking back, she said, "I will see you in the morning."

He nodded, "Okay." Even after she was gone, his gaze was still on the doorway.

"Here it is," Johann said. "Can you feel it?"

Sarai nodded.

"Reach across it." He took her hand and seemed to move it in no direction, or in every direction. His hand slid down her arm and rested on her shoulder. "I can't. It has to be you."

She felt the barrier as her hand moved past it, the feeling like a plunge into cool water.

"Now use me. Let me help fix you," he said. "Try."

She sighed as she felt the healing fire burning away her wounds. But at the same time she had another feeling: part of

her was slipping away, as if she was being drained. She felt at the same time as if she was being filled with something else.

Then they were back in the dark room—if they had ever left it to begin with. Sarai was still lying on the table, her blood around her, but she felt whole. The memory of her pain was sharp in her mind, though, as if she was still being cut. Then an even worse pain began, this time filling her whole body: a feeling that her very marrow was being torn from the inside of her bones. Her body tensed and she screamed, but the pain soon began to fade. She cried bitterly.

Johann put his arms around her and gently rocked her back and forth, “Shh, little girl. Shh. It’s okay now.” He reached over and pulled down the skirt of her dress, covering her. “It’s okay now.”

Sarai woke in the dark, and tears ran down her cheeks. She rolled over and cried, but moments later she was asleep once more.

“I—I don’t understand,” Chloe said.

Sarai smiled, “It’s my gift. I can give it to one other person. Anyone I choose.”

“But why me, Sarai?”

“Because you are closer to me than anyone. Because you have been nothing but kind to me.”

“But—”

“You don’t have to accept. Just think about it.”

Tears came to Chloe’s eyes, “Sarai, I’m not good enough for that. You—you need someone else. Someone else who is as strong as you are. You—”

Sarai shook her head and smiled, “Chloe, I love you. You’re like a sister to me. I want to share who I am with you, if you’ll let me.”

“Yes. I—I want to.”

“No, just think about it. Give it a couple weeks.”

“But—”

“Chloe,” Sarai said, “it’s not something you can give back. It’s for the rest of your life. And that could be a very long time. I want you to be sure, and when you are, I’ll be here.”

Chloe smiled at Sarai, tears running down her cheeks.

“Chloe!” Sarai said, bolting upright in bed. Her breath was heavy, and she fell back onto the bed, rubbing her eyes with her fingers.

The sun was already up, and the sky almost to its full brightness. She groaned and rolled out of bed quickly and prepared for the day ahead.

When she had walked down the stairs, she peeked into the living room.

Will was still on the same chair as the night before. A book rested on his chest, and his breathing was slow and even. Several other books were stacked on an end table beside the chair. They were mostly obscure historical texts; several were open.

Sarai walked in on her toes and looked down at him. She surveyed the books around him. One was an ancient text written near the end of the Roman Empire by a historian named Germanus Caelius. It was open to somewhere in the latter half of the tome. She slowly reached out and grabbed most of the pages on the left, flipping them over and then opening to an early portion. She looked once more at Will. He was still fast asleep and probably would be for some time.

She turned and left the room.

In the kitchen, John sat at the table with a cup of coffee in one hand and the morning paper in the other. "Been brewing this stuff since before the sun, and still he sleeps." He chuckled.

Sarai stopped and looked at him.

He raised his eyes to meet her gaze, "You cheated," he said with a smile.

"That's because you wanted me to."

He chuckled again. After a moment of sharing Sarai's gaze, he said, "What's on your mind?"

She was silent for a moment, then said quietly, "I don't even know if they buried her. I don't know what they did with her."

His face became grave.

"I tried to find out. I tried. She's dead, and I can't even find what's left of her to—" She paused, fighting for control of herself. "To say goodbye."

John nodded, "It's difficult, I know." His brow furrowed. Then he looked intently at her.

"What?"

He looked down in thought. "I'm not sure."

"Tell me."

"You have no idea what happened to her?"

She shook her head.

"Well," he sighed, "like I told you, I've given thought to the barrier over the years. What it is, and what's beyond it. Hm."

"What does that have to do with Chloe?"

He smiled sadly at her and shrugged.

She looked away for a moment. "Sometimes even I just need a little hope."

"I know," he said, nodding. "I know you do. Listen to me."

She looked at him again.

"If I'm right about the way things work—if I'm right about what the barrier is—and if I understand rightly what you've told me, then you have every reason in the world to be hopeful."

Sarai inhaled deeply and let out an unsteady breath. "I just wish Chloe was here." She closed her eyes for a moment, then said, "My nightmares are back again."

"I'm sorry. Did she help you?"

Sarai nodded. "She let me call her at night and would stay on the phone with me as long as I wanted. She always fell asleep before I did, but at least I didn't feel so alone."

He smiled sadly.

"I can't live this way, Johann."

He nodded. "Be strong, little girl. Just a little longer. All that life ever requires of you is to just take the next step. All the other steps are for another time."

She nodded. "Tell lazy bones to come out and find me when he wakes up."

"Okay," John chuckled again and returned his gaze to the newspaper.

Sarai left the house and stretched on the porch. She stayed there for some time.

"Hey, sorry," Will said behind Sarai as he opened the screen door. "Didn't mean to sleep this late."

Sarai rose from one of her stretches and looked at him, nodding silently.

"Give me one minute to put my shoes on and I'll be ready." He went back into the house. A moment later, he returned. "Okay."

They started running. But instead of stopping at the tree with low-hanging branches, they ran past it.

Will looked back at it twice before he was fully convinced Sarai didn't intend to stop and beat on him with branches. "Where are we going?" he asked quickly between breaths.

"Somewhere else. I've changed my mind. I can't train you like Johann trained me. We will do this differently."

"Oh?" he gasped for air. "How?"

"You'll see."

When finally they stopped—it was a place with no remarkable features—she reached into a pocket and handed him a plastic bandage.

"What's this for?" he said, receiving it in his left hand.

Then she gave him a knife from her belt. "You learn with the real thing."

He accepted it in his right hand. "Don't you think it'd be better just to give me a gun?"

"No! I told you they're useless. You will learn to use a knife. It takes years to master, of course, but few people—even few of *them*—really know anything about it. They just count on being stronger and faster than everybody else, so skill is not as important."

"Okay. So what's the bandage for?"

"You need to learn something right now."

"What?"

"Knives will cut you." She drew her own knife from her belt and slashed.

"Ow!"

She had just nicked his wrist, and although it was not even very painful, a rivulet of blood ran down his arm.

"Damn it, Sarai!"

"That's so you won't be afraid of it."

"I damn well am gonna be afraid now! You just cut me!"

"Look at it."

"What?"

"Look at it, and remember."

"Remember what?"

"That you are vulnerable, that it hurts, but that it's not too much for you to bear."

He sighed, "You could have just told me that."

"No. Now, put the bandage on it and stop whining. It won't kill you. Remember when we practice: knives cut, and they should be respected, but you should not fear them." She

waited until he had put the bandage on, then said, "Now trust me."

He nodded.

She stabbed the blade of her knife toward his face, stopping a hair from his eye.

He crouched back.

"No, don't flinch. Trust me."

"Okay," he said.

She did the same thing, except to the other eye.

His face contorted as he closed his eyes tightly and turned his head away.

"Better, but not good enough." She did it again. And again. And again.

"Why?" he said. "What's the point?"

"To learn not to fear the blade. You know it can kill you, but you must not fear it. Every time you flinch, you give your enemy all the time he needs to kill you. You don't have time to flinch. Your one and only hope is that his attack assumes you are no match for him."

"What will that do for me?"

"Attack me."

"You mean, with this?" he held up the knife as if it was burning his hand.

"Stop that. Hold it in your hand. Now, attack me."

"But I don't want to hurt you."

"You can't. Attack!"

He slowly moved the knife toward her.

"No!" she slapped his hand away. "Look at me!" She walked up to within a breath of him. "Look in my eyes."

He did so, but he felt the sudden urge to look away.

"Steady. Look at me. Listen to me. You will only ever have one chance. And it may still not be enough. But you never know—you never know who might be counting on you, even if defeat is your own destiny."

Will nodded, struggling to hold his eyes on hers.

"Listen to me. You have to trust me. When I say something, I mean it. When I say attack, I mean attack. This isn't for me, it's for you. Look at me!" she said when his eyes started to drift from hers. She held his gaze for what seemed to him like an eternity, then she stepped back. "Attack!"

He struck as quickly as he could, stabbing the blade at her.

But she was gone—and she was right in front of him, his knife hand deflected. She was almost touching him, and she held her knife flat against his chest.

“Do you know what I just did?” she said.

“No.”

“Once more, then.”

He stepped back and attacked again, with the same result. Each time, she had shoved his knife hand aside and stepped forward, using his own forward motion against him to press her own knife flat on his chest.

“You must learn to be faster up here,” she flicked him above his ear. “And yet to act without hesitating. Do it again.”

He stepped back and attacked, but instead of stabbing with the point of the knife, he brought his arm back to slash.

But Sarai stepped in as soon as he had drawn his arm back, pinning it against him. Once again, she had her knife flat against his chest. “Learn from that.”

He nodded, although his eyes still revealed his confusion.

Again and again they repeated the same scenario. Will tried every different attack he could think of. Regardless of what he did, each time Sarai stepped into him and placed her knife flat against his chest.

Finally he stepped back and rubbed his forehead, “Sarai, how many times are we going to do this?”

“Until you understand what I’m doing, and then we’ll switch.”

“This is pointless! Look at what you do! Every time, no matter how hard I try, you do the same thing! What good is it?”

“Do you remember that I said to trust me?”

He nodded.

“Then trust me.”

Will walked over to a tree and sat down with his back to it. “You don’t know how frustrating it is. I look at you, and the things you do, and I feel like I have lead in my arms. In my whole body.”

She walked over and sat next to him. “Good,” she said. “That means you’re starting to know your own limitations and to feel what I can do.” She sighed, “I’m too fast for you to see, so you have to stop trying to use your eyes and analyze

and anticipate. You need to do something more than just guess when and how I'm going to attack."

"But how?"

"Give me your hand." She held hers out to him.

He slowly raised his own to hers, and he flinched when her fingers closed over him.

"Close your eyes."

He breathed deeply and then lowered his eyelids.

"Follow me, if you can."

"But—"

"Shh. Just follow me." And she was silent.

For a time, Will sat with muddled thoughts. He now had nothing to do, and nothing to see, to help him ignore the mass of confusion in his head. And it didn't help that she was holding his hand. At first he simply felt embarrassed, but the feeling changed. He slowly became aware of the energy in her. It was actually comforting. It calmed him, and he was able to brush aside the cacophony of thoughts in his head. And then all was at rest in his mind—maybe not at peace, but at rest.

"Now," Sarai said softly, "feel where I'm taking you."

Then he felt, ever so slightly, that she was gently pulling him, but he knew not in what direction. It felt like it was in every direction, but also in no direction. And he sensed that somehow the world around him slowed, like a heart that has skipped a beat

He returned to where he was, his back against a tree, the world going on as it always had. He gasped for air. "What was that?!"

Sarai shrugged.

"You don't know?"

"I know, but it's not something I can describe or explain."

"But it's how you are so fast and strong?"

"Yes."

"So, it's what, another dimension?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by that."

Will raised his hands, unable to speak further to his suggestion.

"I suppose you might look at it this way: it is something of a shortcut from here to there. Or maybe time is different."

"So, how far can you take it? Could you run around the world in a second?"



Sarai snorted, "Why would I want to do that? It has limits, if that's what you mean."

"What kind of limits?"

She paused. "Well, it depends."

"On?"

"For most of my kind, it's an exertion. Like pulling yourself up—you can only hold on for so long. Some can hold on longer than others."

Will nodded, remembering keenly the strain of pulling himself up on a tree branch. Then he said, "What about the rest?"

"Of my kind?"

"Yeah. I assume you're talking about yourself."

Sarai smirked. "It's different for me. It's not an effort, but—"

"But what?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. But for all of us, my kind and *theirs*, we reach a point where we can go no further."

"And that's the ultimate limit?"

"Yes. Johann calls it the barrier. He warned me never to cross it."

Will gave her a confused look, "Well, is it really a limit then? Can you cross it or not?"

"I can cross it, yes. A woman can cross it. A man cannot."

Will chuckled, "Well, that's stupid."

Sarai glared at him.

"Sorry. So why can you?"

"No more questions for now."

Will sighed.

"At least now you're aware of it. Maybe that will be enough to help you." Then the corner of her mouth turned up, and she looked at her hand and then back at Will.

"Oh!" he said, "I'm sorry." He released her hand and quickly pulled his own back, his face flushing.

"It's okay. Let's go back. We've done enough for today."

They rose and ran toward the house.

That night, Will fell asleep immediately after dinner, not having the energy to even look at the books he was searching.

The next day was much the same as the previous. Will and Sarai returned at a (slightly faster) run to the same place and did a number of strength exercises. Sarai continued repeating the same maneuver on Will time after time, telling him to

attack and then moving in for a faux kill before he could even complete his first strike.

"How many more times are we going to do this?" he asked.

"Until you see what I'm doing."

"I know what you're doing—killing me before I can even get my knife anywhere near you.

"That's the point."

Will shook his head but continued nevertheless.

At dinner that evening, he was silent. He chewed slowly on his food, his eyes avoiding both John and Sarai.

When the meal was over, he rose and wandered into the living room. He sat among his mass of books, which was spreading across the room like a fungus. He grabbed one and flipped through it cursorily—getting absolutely nothing out of it—and then tossed it on the floor.

"Hopeless," he mumbled. He grabbed another book and then leaned back in the chair, feeling its soft comfort surround him.

Will's eyes snapped open.

"Goodnight," Sarai said as she walked past the living room and then up the stairs.

"Damn," he said, rising slowly. He had fallen asleep; it was broad daylight last he remembered, but it was now the dark of night. Sitting up straight, he set on the floor the book that had fallen against his chest. As he rose, he noticed that something was different.

"Aw, man," he said. The copy of *Record of Times* by Germanus Caelius had been disturbed. "I know I looked through more than that." It was open to nearly the beginning. He picked it up and started to flip back to where he thought he had left off.

And then he stopped. Looking intently at the other books around him, he failed to find any other disturbance.

"Damn." He flipped back toward the beginning. "Somewhere near the front."

Sitting back down in the chair, he finally turned to where he thought the book had been opened when he had so carelessly flipped forward. Then he moved back several pages and started reading. He tried to hold back the flurry of thoughts that flew in his mind—why here?

A few minutes later, he closed the book with a snap and ran from the room and up the stairs. He pounded on the door of Sarai's bedroom.

"Sarai?!" He kept pounding.

A few moments later, she opened the door. "Keep it down, for goodness sake. What?"

He held the book up.

"Yes?" she said, undaunted.

"Is this true? What it says in here?"

"How should I know? I wasn't there at the time."

"Come on. You did this, I know. He wouldn't," he nodded his head down the hall toward John's closed door.

She looked at him but said nothing.

"Well, at least do you believe it?"

"Believe what?"

"What it says."

She sighed, "What difference does it make what I believe?"

"It makes a difference because you're right in the middle of it all! So, you're what? An angel?"

"Not hardly."

"Then what are you? Caelius says that," he paused as he flipped through the book.

She held up her hand, "Like I've told you before, I'm a woman."

Will stopped, "Part angel, then?"

Sarai shrugged. "Angel. Messenger. Celestial being. Whatever they are or were. I suppose it's possible. Who's to say what happened a long time ago?"

"What kind of answer is that?"

Sarai snorted and rubbed her forehead, "How would you like it if I asked about your genealogy from thousands of years ago? What do you expect from me? I don't know everything."

"Well, look—do you believe what Caelius says?"

"Why does that matter, Will? Maybe you should ask yourself if *you* believe it."

"I'm trying to decide that."

She shook her head, "No, you've already made up your mind. This isn't the type of thing you can investigate like a journalist. I just figured you'd get the most out of this book—it's written one journalist to another."

"So, say I believe every word of it."

"That wouldn't be wise."

"I know, but say I did. What am I supposed to make of it all? Are you part angel—or part demon, I suppose—or just able to see something about the world that the rest of us can't see?"

"Maybe both. Maybe neither. Maybe it makes no difference."

"No. Enough games. I can play along up to a point, but this is asking too much."

Sarai looked at him steadily, "Then I'll be silent and you can teach. Explain it all to me."

"Sarai—ugh." Will grimaced and turned to leave. He stormed down the few paces to his own room and slammed the door behind him. Sitting on the bed, he ran his fingers through his hair. After a few minutes he opened the book again and read from Caelius's history.

*I look about and am bothered by the destruction they have brought. I, even I, Germanus Caelius, have seen it. But no one else does. Men of darkness now control everything, but they do so from the shadows. Their faces do not occupy the offices of the Great Empire; instead they scheme and manipulate our leaders.*

*Although my Record of Times does not, nor is it intended to, deal solely with the threat they pose, one cannot rightly view the events of the twilight of the Great Empire unless one recognizes their role. Their purpose is not clear to me. They gain power and riches, but what does that avail when the whole world crumbles under their weight? But whatever their purpose, their role is to steal the light, and so my home falls into deepest night.*

*Call them what you will. Stories of their origin abound. Even the superstitious followers of Christus and their Judaic brethren have their stories, although they are quick to dismiss their clear meaning. Their own story of the beginning of the world says that what they call angels, or sons of the one God, mated with women. Their offspring were mighty men of renown. But so little is known of who they are. Have they been among us all along, but we cannot see them?*

*So what shall we call these beings, whatever their origin? Evil? Demons? Half-angels, fallen from their high estate? Gods? I don't know what they are. But they are the darkness that falls on the Empire.*

*Thus, we are surrounded by them. One might ask how I, Germanus Caelius, know they are even there, for many a reader of my Record of Times might quickly dismiss me as a madman. But in the twilight of the Empire, I met one who is like them, yet unlike them. He showed me things that my mind is still reluctant to accept but unable to dismiss.*

*This man explained to me that the dark ones who control from the shadows are counterbalanced by hidden ones of light. Brethren they are, having the same origin, yet their paths have diverged. However it happened, they are set against each other: darkness and light. And although the balance be not by number—the dark ones (demons, if you will) are countless—the scales are yet balanced. On the side of darkness are numbers, but on the side of the light is strength unbounded.*

# Monsters

"Sarai."

"Yes, father?"

"Today is your day."

Sarai shook her head, "No. I told you I won't. It is wrong."

The man shook his head, "You are a disobedient daughter—it makes this all the more necessary."

Another man entered the room, "We are ready, Muhtadi."

"No!" she said. "You can't!"

"Yes, Sarai. All girls must do this for their protection," Muhtadi said. "Take her, Essam."

Sarai screamed when Essam grabbed her, but she could not break free of his grip. "No, please let me go! Please!"

The man said nothing, but he took her into a dimly lit room where several others were waiting. Their faces were hidden. Hands grabbed her arms and legs, pinning her on the cold table.

She struggled with all her might when the skirt of her dress was lifted, but she was unable to break free. Then she felt the knife.

Sarai whimpered when she awoke. She sat up, her breath hissing through her clenched teeth. Tears ran down her face, and she clenched and unclenched her fists. She then rose from the bed and wiped her face. Pulling on her pants, she walked down the stairs and out of the house. Standing on the porch she sighed and extended herself toward the barrier. And then it was in front of her—so close. She ran her hand over it, ignoring the penalty that was building and was already far beyond anything she had yet risked.

Just as she started to push her hand against it, she heard her name.

"Sarai! No! Come back!"

When her concentration broke, she saw John standing beside her, his hand on her shoulder, his face twisted in fear.

"Oh, Johann. What do I do? What do—I—oh my!" Then the pain crashed into her like a great wave, picking her up and rolling her in liquid fire. She felt as though she was being torn apart from the inside, and she fell to the wooden deck, screaming.

Will was on the porch a moment later, watching as John held his hands on Sarai.

John's eyes were closed, and a look of concentration was on his face.

Sarai's body was stiff, her hands clenched into fists pressed against her eyes. She now only whimpered softly.

"Shh," John said, "I've taken it away."

Then Sarai shook her head, "No, I still feel it. I feel it every night! I can't even sleep anymore!"

He whispered, "Have courage, little girl. Courage!"

She closed her eyes, her body relaxing.

John then picked her up in his arms and carried her into the house as Will opened the door for him. John walked past him without a word.

"Shh, little girl," Johann said. "It's okay now." He put his arms around her and held her close to him. Rocking her gently back and forth, he said, "Shh." A moment later, he stopped. He gave Sarai's hand a squeeze and then walked over to Essam, the man who had been cutting her.

He was on the floor groaning and cradling his broken arm.

"Get up," Johann roared.

"I—I can't!"

"I said get up!" When Essam didn't comply, Johann pulled him up by his hair. He turned him around and grabbed his chin from behind. He slowly turned Essam's head. "This is for her, you pig!" he hissed in the man's ear.

Essam's attempt at a plea for mercy was cut off by the growing strain in his neck.

Sarai watched as Johann twisted the man's neck, and she cried.

He stopped and looked over his shoulder at her. He then turned back to Essam, who was now a hair's width from death, and threw him to the ground.

Essam fell on his broken arm and screamed loudly before falling silent in unconsciousness.

"Come on," Johann said, rushing over to Sarai. "We need to get you out of here."

"What is this?!" said Muhtadi, who had entered the room. "Sarai!"

Johann gently helped Sarai to her feet. "What do you want?" he said, looking over his shoulder at Muhtadi.

"That's my daughter. What are you doing to her?"

"Saving her from that butcher. Where the hell were you?!" Johann said.

"That *butcher* was doing exactly what I told him to. He was protecting her."

"By cutting her up?!" Johann started toward the man, but Sarai stepped in front of him.

She wasn't looking at Johann. She was looking at Muhtadi. She shivered, and she held her arms tightly across herself. "Father," she said, "you let him hurt me." Her mouth opened as if the words brought back the pain of the knife as it cut her. Tears ran down her face. "You don't know what it's like to be cut."

"Change your tone! Of course I know!"

"No *you don't!*" she screamed. "You have no idea!"

He looked at the blood on the table, "I see it was at least started." He reached to his belt and pulled out his knife, "I must finish it, then. You," he looked at Johann, "get out or I will kill you! And you," he looked down at Sarai, "get back on that table. It's for your own protection, and for ours."

Sarai's face slowly twisted into a grimace. She didn't even hear Johann's cry of *No, wait!* before she swung her hand with all her strength. And in that instant, she neared on her own the barrier that Johann had shown her. She felt like she had been flung toward it and then ripped back.

In front of her, Muhtadi crumpled, his neck snapped by the force of her strike.

She looked in horror at him and then at her hand. And then the pain returned.

"Oh!" Sarai said, waking up once more in the chill hours of early morning. She was in her own bed. Will was nowhere to be seen.

"Shh," said John, gently running his hand over her hair. "Shh, it's okay."

"Why did you let me kill him? Why?"



"I tried to stop you, and you didn't know what you were doing. It was an accident."

"But I should never have done that. I did it out of—"

"You did it because he hurt you, Sarai. He hurt you in the worst way. He betrayed you. And he would have done it all again if you hadn't stopped him."

"I didn't want to kill him."

"I know."

She sighed, "I'm so tired."

John nodded, "Sleep as long as you need to. Take the whole day for once, please. I'll look after Will."

"But he—"

"I know what you've been doing with him, don't worry. I won't undo any of it."

Sarai nodded and relaxed on her bed.

"Now sleep, Sarai."

But her eyes were already closed, her chest rising and falling slowly.

John left her bedroom, closing the door behind him.

"Is she going to be okay?" said Will, who was peeking out of his bedroom.

John smiled sadly and nodded, "She's as strong as they come."

"Come on," Johann said.

"No!" Sarai shouted, tears still streaming down her face. "I can save him!" She kneeled down next to Muhtadi and put her hands on the neck she had broken. But nothing happened. She closed her eyes and grimaced with exertion.

"Little girl, we need to go now!"

"It's not working!" she cried hysterically. "It's not working!" She stayed where she was and continued.

"Hey," Johann kneeled and looked at her. "Hey, he's dead."

"But I can save him! I should be able to save him!"

"No, not anymore." He looked away for a moment then back at Sarai. "Something happened to us. Didn't you feel it?"

But Sarai was still intent on what she was doing. Her voice became more and more frantic.

"Hey!" he shouted at her, finally getting her attention. "Look at me! He's dead! Now let's go or we'll be dead too!"

"No! I killed him! I *killed* him!" She retched repeatedly.

Johann grabbed her arm, lifting her and all but carrying her out of the room and into the sun.

"Stop!" shouted another voice.

"Damn it," Johann said under his breath.

"Where are you going with her?" said a tall, muscular man.

Johann curled his lip.

"Do I know you?"

Johann's eyes narrowed.

"Khalid," Sarai whispered.

"No matter," he said, looking intently at Johann.

Sarai shivered next to Johann. He stepped away from her.

Khalid turned his black gaze on Sarai, "You. You have brought shame on us all by resisting your purification." He drew his knife.

The girl crumpled to the ground and whimpered.

Johann looked over at her and then back at Khalid. He then drew his own knife.

Khalid returned his gaze to Johann. "You dare stop her purification?"

Johann was silent.

Another voice howled. A man emerged from the building in which Sarai had been cut, shouting, "Muhtadi is dead! He's dead!"

Khalid's gaze became blacker.

Johann cursed under his breath. He barely had time to react when Khalid attacked, his knife slashing. Johann extended himself toward the barrier. The light around him rivaled the black cloud that surrounded Khalid.

But Johann was slow — too slow. Something was wrong. He was barely able to fend off Khalid's attacks. No way should he have felt as sluggish as he did; he was quickly being thrown back onto his heels. Then he made his final move. Falling back slightly and feigning a loss of balance, he drew Khalid on.

The other drew his knife back and flexed his legs for the killing strike.

But Johann was already moving forward. Then he was next to Khalid and inside the striking range of the other's blade, having deflected the knife arm with his left hand. His knife was buried in Khalid's chest. He watched the tall man's eyes go blank and the black cloud disappear, and he withdrew the knife and stepped back. Khalid crumpled to the ground.

Then he turned and ran to Sarai, who was shaking on the ground.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," he said. "Come on, we have to go."

Shouts were sounding from all around.

"Come on!" Johann shouted, causing Sarai's eyes to snap to him.

Her dress was stained with her own blood. Her hands shook, and her face was a ghostly white. But she rose and followed him.

Sarai awoke alone. She looked around the room and sighed. Morning light was just beginning to add a touch of blue to the blackness. She laid her head back on the pillow and fell asleep once more.

Will woke at sunup. He looked down the hall toward Sarai's room, but her door was closed.

"Come on," John said from down the stairs. "Let her sleep."

Will looked down at him and nodded. A minute later, he was outside helping John with the chores. After a couple hours, they both sat on the steps to the porch, resting.

"So, ask," John said, not looking at him.

"Where do I start?"

"Up to you."

"The book by Caelius—is that the one you wanted me to find?"

John smiled and shrugged, "Who said I only sent you to find one book?"

"So I would have found the same thing in other books?"

"Surely no, not the same thing. For goodness sake, man, you're a journalist. I would think that you of all people would know that different people tell different stories about the same thing."

Will glared at him.

"Come, now, don't get huffy. If you want to play your game, you have to play by the rules. You expect precision in the answers I give, so be precise in your questions."

"Okay," Will said, "where else would I read about you?"

"About me?"

"About your kind."

John sighed, "Schools do teach people these days how to think, don't they?"

"Well, I—yes, of course they do."

"Oh," John said, smiling.

"Okay, so what am I missing?"

John laughed, "It's too bad Sarai cheated. You haven't earned it yet. I had hoped you would be forced to look harder. So, Mister Journalist, what did Caelius say about the matter?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ever heard of a reference? They even did it back then from time to time." He shook his head and chuckled, "Every culture thinks it's so much smarter than the one before."

Will furrowed his brow, then his eyes opened wide, "Christus—Christ? The story of the beginning of the world—Genesis."

John smiled and nodded half-heartedly. "Yes. The sixth chapter or somewhere thereabouts. That's just one example—one that would be more familiar to this culture. Or at least it would be if they read some books every now and then."

"Angels and women? Is that really what it says?"

"Sure seems to."

"So, you're what? Half angel?"

John chuckled, "Well. Had you done what I intended—meaning had you read more and found out for yourself instead of relying on Sarai—you would have discovered this after more searching that would have, hm, mellowed you a bit to the possibilities. Am I half angel? Well, no, not half, even were I part angel. But what I intended you to find, and what you found with a little help, was a perspective. A possible explanation for something that is difficult to understand. But at least you know you're not the only one who's struggled with it."

"Okay," Will rubbed his chin, "I'm trying to decide if you answered my question."

"Sometimes yes *and* no is the best answer."

"So there really are angels?"

John shrugged, "I've never met one."

Will sighed. He was silent for a time, then said, "What happens to Sarai? I mean, what causes her so much pain?"

"Hm, well, that has to do with the barrier. You see, something happened to her and to me when she was young. When I found her, she was horribly mutilated. She might have ended up bleeding to death. As she's probably told you, she was once able to heal, but she could not heal herself. That's the way it works." He looked away and squinted as if he was peering into the past. "I didn't rightly know what to do for her. All I knew was I had to try something. I wasn't sure what would happen, really. But the poor girl was a mess." He sighed.

Will looked at him steadily.

John smiled, "Ah, yes, your question. A man like me can move into that place—wherever it is—that changes time, or is timeless, or something. Eternity, maybe. I suppose in some sense time loses its meaning entirely at the barrier. A strange thought. Hm. But whatever it is, going there requires an effort, just as any other motion.

"Anyhow, a woman cannot approach the barrier on her own. But when Sarai crossed the barrier for that brief time—just a part of her—it changed her. Somehow she mixed with me, and we both changed. It was always intended, I suppose, that a man of my kind would take a woman of your kind to the barrier, and a part of her would cross it. He would share himself with her, and she would become like him. It was never meant for two of my kind to do that, so the result was—unpredictable." His face grew dark.

"But you said women can't approach the barrier. How does that work?"

"Same way she showed you a glimpse," John smiled, the darkness passing. "I took her there, just as she took you there. Well, more like she helped you become aware of it. Truly taking someone to the barrier is, well, it's a solemn thing and not to be done lightly. We really only do it once."

"When you share yourself?"

John nodded and smiled. "But anyway, she couldn't go there on her own, just as you can't." He sighed, "But now, she can approach the barrier, even though she wasn't meant to do this. It does something to her every time, and I don't really know quite what it is. And I'm not sure if it's causing her any permanent harm."

"Doesn't look that way."

John chuckled, "Astute."

"So, since I'm supposed to apply my journalistic sense, what made you help a lone girl like that?"

John looked at him but was silent. Finally he said, "What?"

Will shrugged, "Not many truly good Samaritans out there. Most people do things for selfish reasons. What was yours? Why help a stranger?"

John smiled, "Shrewd. Suffice it to say, my selfish reasons are my own. But maybe I just wanted to help one of my kind."

"Curious."

"What's that?"

Will chuckled, "Don't you know? I feel like I've been getting schooled this entire conversation. But you seemed to be short a ready answer for that question."

John peered at him steadily. "Sarai was young at the time. Still a child, really. Have you ever heard a child cry out hysterically for help when she's in grievous pain? When someone is hurting her and she can't reason with them? Have you ever heard a child beg someone to stop cutting her? She had no comfort. No way to block it out. All she could do was feel the pain and the fear."

Will was silent.

"It chills you to think about, doesn't it?"

Will nodded slowly.

"It's worse to hear. You'd never want to hear it again. But let's not dwell on that. She wouldn't want either of us to."

Silence followed for several minutes.

"So," Will began once again.

"Here we go," the other smiled.

"Do I need to ask?"

"I suppose not. You want to know how old I am. Are you prepared for the answer?"

Will shrugged.

"I don't know for certain, to be honest. Maybe you know how difficult it is to keep track of your age when you get older. The years fly by so fast, what's one or two?" He smiled, "Well, the answer to your question is somewhere around twenty-one or twenty-two hundred."

Will's jaw fell in spite of himself. "How — that's not possible. Okay, Sarai — she looks young for her age, that's one thing. But you?"

John raised his eyebrows and shrugged, "You're inquisitive—you know when someone's lying. Or at least saying something they don't believe. So," he pointed to his own eyes, "either I'm crazy or I'm telling you the truth."

Will nodded, "I know you're not crazy."

"Well, there you go. But this sort of thing isn't what you really want to know, is it?"

Will was silent.

John smiled, "You want to know how to get close to her."

Will looked away.

John shrugged, "Nothing wrong with that, I suppose. It's just difficult. But I could see how someone like you would look at her. She's distant, unique, and yet so very human. In her own way, innocent, yet not naive. A girl who seems like she needs protection—until she shows you that she's a woman who's so much stronger than you are. She knows and is capable of so much, but she stays hidden. Surrounded by darkness, but when she wants to, she can make every last shadow flee." He looked down but said no more.

Will looked at him. *How someone like me would look at her?* he thought. *What about you? What is she to you?*

"Come on," said John, "let's go finish up the chores for today. The rest of this matter you should hear from Sarai. And I think you know what you need to do to get her to open up to you."

Will sighed and pulled out the knife that was in his belt—the knife Sarai had given him. He looked at it for a moment and nodded.

Sarai didn't appear for the rest of the day. At one point, Will asked John if he thought they should check on her.

"No. Let her sort things out for herself. She's been through a lot, but she'll be okay."

As Will was about to enter his bedroom for the evening, Sarai stepped out of her room. He thought she looked exhausted.

She looked over at him briefly.

"Hey," he smiled slightly at her.

She nodded curtly then looked away. Turning, she walked back into her room and closed the door.

Will started to take a step toward her room, but he clenched his fist and went into his own.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Will asked between breaths. Sarai, as usual, hardly breathed more than normal. "Yes, fine."

Will nodded.

"Let's start again. Attack."

"Sarai," Will said, holding his hand up.

"Nothing to talk about."

"Maybe not to talk about, but something for me to do."

"What?" she asked, her face immobile but her voice betraying ever so slightly her impatience.

Will stepped toward her. "Here," he pulled a small handful of bandages and gauze from his pocket and handed them to her.

She looked at them as she accepted, and then looked up at him.

He stepped back. Taking his knife from his belt, he looked at it and swallowed.

Sarai watched him silently.

Will's breathing quickened. He was almost gasping when he looked up at her, "I know it's not a game, Sarai. I know."

Still she was silent and motionless.

Will raised the knife in his right hand. He turned the wrist of his left arm to look at the soft underside. He swallowed again. "I know," he said through clenched teeth. "And I want to understand." He then set the edge of the knife against his arm and slowly and deliberately drew it up along the length of his wrist. Water ran from his eyes and he let out a high-pitched cry. Blood ran steadily from his arm.

Sarai's face softened, and she walked up to him slowly.

He stood silently as he watched the blood flowing from the slice in his arm.

She put her hands over his wound. Blood welled between her fingers. "Why?"

"To understand."

Sarai nodded. "I would fix this if I could," she whispered.

He gave her a slight smile through his grimace.

She opened the bandages and unrolled the gauze, then did the best she could with what he had brought.

"I can't feel what you felt," he said, wincing as she worked on him. "But I think about it every day—how much it must have hurt you."



"You shouldn't think about it," she whispered.

"But I do."

She finished tending his arm and then looked up at him.

"Please don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like how?"

Sarai sighed, "Don't let that feeling start. I can't, Will. I can't feel that way."

He stepped back and looked at his arm. A red line was already forming through the bandages. He looked at her again.

She smiled sympathetically, "I can't, Will."

He nodded, "You see me better than I see myself."

"I'm older," she said. "I know it's hard to see me as older than I look. Chloe was that way too. She always thought of me as a girl. Just like Johann does."

"Aren't we all children to him?"

"I suppose so."

"Okay," Will said, "I'm ready."

"No, sit down for a minute. You look like a ghost."

They sat together, their backs against a tree.

"Tell me about them," he said finally to break the silence that had fallen.

"What do you want to know?"

"Are they like you?"

"Yes and no. They are—hm—you wouldn't be able to tell who they are, really. But when they approach the barrier, they reveal themselves to those who can see. Just as we do."

"How so?"

"I don't know how to describe it. It's like they are surrounded by shadow, or a black cloud, or something."

"And you?"

"Light. White light."

"Makes sense, if they're evil and you're good."

Sarai snorted, "It's not nearly so simplistic."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever met anyone who's perfect?"

"Well, no."

"Do you think I'm perfect?"

He was silent.

Sarai smirked, "Didn't think so. So what makes me good and them bad? I don't always do what's right, although I might try. They don't always do what's wrong." She shrugged, "Who knows? Besides, it's a philosophical question that I'm not particularly interested in answering."

"How many are there? Your kind."

"I don't know. Very few of us. Four or five maybe. Them? Who knows. Thousands. Millions."

"I guess that's what Caelius meant. Why such a difference?" Sarai shrugged.

"And you live—what—forever?"

Sarai held back a laugh. "You watch too much television."

"Well, how long then?"

"That depends on the person. I don't know for sure. I can't give you a statistic, if that's what you're looking for. We live much longer than you do. So do they. If it helps any, I will tell you that we do die of old age eventually, even if we don't ever look the part."

Will paused for a moment. He then said, "You said you used to be able to heal?"

"Yes. That is how it is for women—the few that are ever born. Johann said I'm the only one he ever met."

"Are any of *them* women? And," he snorted, "what should I call *them*, other than *them*?"

"I guess it happens with them. It's happened once, anyways. And I don't know what to call them. They're people."

"So, Veronica was one of them?"

"Yes."

"And she—"

"She's dead."

"I know, but—"

"I have nothing else to say about her. We should get started now. You look a little less like you're dead."

Will sighed, "Sarai."

"Yes?"

"Why do you shut down like that?"

She paused a moment, holding his gaze steadily. Then she said, "Let's go. Day's wasting."

He rose to his feet.

"Now we switch. Slowly, first. I will attack, and you must do what I've been doing to you. Clear?"

Will nodded.

"Defend yourself." She stabbed her knife forward, the point of the blade stopping a hair's width from his chest.

He didn't flinch, but he was unable to respond in time.

"Try again. Defend yourself." The same result. "And again."

They continued, Sarai striking again and again like a snake, but Will wasn't able to do any better than think about responding when the blade was already within an inch of killing him.

"Keep trying. Look at me and see what I do. I am no different from you until the moment I attack."

Will nodded, but he was still unable to do anything to fend off her strikes. Once, he stepped forward even when he knew she was not about to attack. But she was gone, and her knife appeared at his throat.

"Don't ever do that," she whispered in his ear from behind. She walked around him to face him once more. "Again."

They continued the same way: Will always a beat behind Sarai.

After an hour, his frustration overflowed. Sarai had her knife at his chest, and he swung his left forearm to knock it away. But he struck her unyielding arm and disturbed his wound, which was already becoming more and more painful. He screamed and backed away, holding up his wrist and looking at it. The makeshift bandage was soaked through with blood, and the wound burned like fire. His hand quivered.

"Come on," Sarai said softly, "let's go home."

He looked at her, "I feel lost."

"I know. Let's just walk."

Will woke on the sofa in the living room. He groaned as he rose. He felt lightheaded, and spots swam before his eyes.

"Ah, you're awake," said John.

"Barely," he said.

"You're probably dehydrated. Lost a lot of blood. Probably lucky to be alive. You were half asleep when you got back here, and you collapsed on the front porch."

Will looked at his arm, but his wound was gone. "What? But—"

John smiled, "You're welcome."

He shook his head, "The only surprising thing is that this doesn't surprise me more. But you shouldn't have done this."

"Hm, well, I know why you did what you did. She's very distant, and it's hard to find something to share in common with her. So, you tried to share her pain." He held up his hand when Will opened his mouth to speak. "I'm not criticizing. I understand why you did it, and I think it took a lot of courage, even if it was a little foolish."

Will sighed, "I wanted it to last longer, though."

John nodded, "I know. But it would have been a hindrance. Sarai also knows what you did and why you did it. You don't need to go on suffering. You won't forget it, I guarantee, and neither will she."

"I'm starting to wonder what good it will all do. The way things are going, I'm probably going to be dead soon."

"You're probably right. But you never know." He shrugged, "We never know how much time we have. Make the best of it, whatever it's going to be."

Will nodded.

John sighed, "Ask."

"I don't understand the whole man-woman thing."

John smiled, "Well, man and woman are complements. One has the strength to kill, one the strength to heal—a balance for such a great power that was never meant for us. In the same way," he looked off to the side, "they are our opposites. Call us half-angels and them half-demons, if you want. I don't think that's anywhere near accurate names, though. They are darkness, we are light. More opposites than complements. I'm not sure how any of it came to be this way, although I heard stories when I was much younger—stories like the one you found." He smiled. "But people are too smart these days to believe in such silly things. Anyhow, like I said—opposites. Sarai, who is the only woman I've ever known to be born this way, could give life. Although I didn't know they could have daughters, from what little I gathered from Sarai, it sounds like a dark woman consumes life." He shook his head, "Opposites."

"Sarai said it wasn't a matter of good and evil."

"Oh, everything's a matter of good and evil. But you cannot draw a nice, neat moral line between us and them, if that's what you mean. It's like Solzhenitsyn said—the line between good and evil passes through the human heart."

Will looked at him.

John rolled his eyes, "How many times do I have to say it? Ask."

"Is your heart human?"

John chuckled, "Is yours?"

Will found the obvious answer not quite so readily acceptable.

"You've seen some horrible things. The things people do to one another. Are such people human? Or monsters?"

Will looked down, "I don't know."

John nodded, "The line passes through your heart, too. Hm." He left the room, returning to the kitchen.

Will finally rose to his feet. He wandered around the room, picking up the books that he had taken from the shelf but never returned. He slid them back into their places then left and walked out onto the porch. He looked out on the farm and then sat on a chair, rocking back and forth slowly.

"Feeling better?"

Will looked over and smiled, "Why do you keep doing that to me?"

Sarai was sitting in another chair.

"I'm fine, thanks."

She nodded. "I want you to know that I think—well, what you did took courage. Thank you."

"For what?"

"For trying to understand."

Will nodded, "You're welcome. I wish I could understand better than I do."

"Maybe one day," she said.

"Well, in the meantime, you can keep right on killing me for several hours a day."

She looked at him and smiled—a free and unburdened smile. Then she laughed.

Will's breath caught in his chest. Sarai's face lit up with her smile, and her unremarkable appearance shone with a hidden beauty like he had never seen. And it cut him to his heart. He looked away quickly.

"Something wrong?"

"No! I'm fine," he said. He could hear his voice shaking. "I'm fine."

That night, after they had all eaten and cleaned up, he lay in bed and struggled to push the image of Sarai's smiling face out of his head. He rubbed the palms of his hands against his

eyes. But her voice echoed in his head, *Don't look at me like that. I can't feel that way.*

And all that had happened to him since he first approached Sarai in a distant night club—all the overwhelming emotions—washed over him, and he cried until he fell asleep.

\* \* \*

Petrovic pulled the trigger of Michelson's pistol, spraying blood from the head of another man in the gas station's convenience store.

"Woo!" Michelson shouted.

Petrovic even chuckled before he turned back to the woman behind the counter. "How many times do I have to do that before you'll give the picture an honest look?"

The cashier shook and cried, but she did nothing.

"Aw, man," Michelson said, "Looks like you pretty much spaced her out."

Petrovic raised and lowered his eyebrows, "I suppose so." He aimed the pistol at her face.

"No!" she shouted, raising her hands, "please!"

"Look at the picture, then."

"I told you I don't know her!" she shouted hysterically.

Petrovic turned to Michelson, "Do you believe her?"

"Yes."

"So do I." He shot her several times, then handed the pistol back to Michelson. He looked at the three other patrons that crouched near the counter. He turned to Michelson and then nodded toward them.

Michelson smiled and motioned for one of the black-clad men outside to enter the store.

The man walked in calmly, sprayed the three shivering people with bullets, and then left. Petrovic was already gone. Michelson followed.

"Where to now?" Michelson asked when he had returned to the driver's seat of the black SUV.

"Back. We go back about fifty miles to exit thirty-two."

"So sure?"

"They gassed up too soon at that station. They probably still had half a tank at that point. Meant they were leaving the highway."

"Not much out that way," Michelson said as he looked at a map, rotating it several times.

"No. That's probably the point."

"So, tell me about this other guy Jansen warned you about."

"You don't need to know anything about him right now," Petrovic said.

"How you plan to find him? Or her? I mean, your strategy so far seems to be working wonders, but how long can we keep that up?"

"As long as I want. I told you I don't care about local cops. I can have them taken care of with a call. Or your men can do it—it makes no difference to me."

Michelson chuckled, "Petro, you're something else." He started the engine and left the gas station parking lot followed by the four black vans.

They drove for about forty-five minutes before reaching the exit Petrovic had mentioned.

"Which way?" Michelson asked

"North."

"You sure?" Michelson looked back and forth between the other man and the road.

"Yes."

"I mean, how many different roads and places we tried so far? There's no reason to think that—"

"I said go north."

"Going north! Going north. I just thought maybe you could explain to me why—" In the next instant, Michelson felt the tip of Petrovic's knife in his ear. He continued to steer the vehicle, but the rest of him froze.

"Don't ask me anything more than once. Is that clear?"

"Crystal."

Petrovic returned his knife to his belt. He sighed, "There isn't much to the north. A few mountains, and a lot of trees. Too much to the south. He—and she—would go someplace secluded. There's one small town that probably has everything someone would need, but not too many eyes." He looked at his watch. "We stop in one hour. It'll be dark. We'll reach the town tomorrow morning, and hopefully head home tomorrow evening."

"What the hell's the matter with you?!" Sarai shouted at Will. "Stop standing there!"

Will shook his head, "I can't do this anymore, Sarai."

"Damnit, Will, try again."

"What difference does it make?"

She put her knife in her belt, "Look at me."

Will turned his back to her.

"Look at me!"

He looked over his shoulder, but his gaze was downward.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to me."

"I said it's nothing!"

"No, something's changed. What is it?"

He turned to her, his face twisted in anger. "You're just in complete control, aren't you?"

"What?"

"You can perfectly control everything about yourself—and everything around you, for that matter. I can't!"

"You need to keep trying," she pointed half-heartedly at the knife in his hand.

"No, it's not that," he sighed and put the knife in his belt. "I'll never master what you're trying to teach me. I just don't have it and I never will. You know that."

"Then what is it? Explain it to me."

"I just—I can't be around you anymore."

She walked up to within inches and looked up at him.

"Just get away."

"No. Look at me. Look in my eyes."

He struggled and finally did as she told him.

She held his gaze for almost a minute. She then started and stepped back.

"I guess," he sighed, "I don't need to tell you what's bothering me."

"I told you not to—not to feel that way about me," she said.

"I know. And I wish I could obey."

Sarai looked away.

"I'll leave. When we get back to the house I'll—I don't know. Catch a bus or something. Just stay on the road."

"No. This is my fault. I was not careful enough. I should have known this would happen."



"It's not your fault," he whispered. "I just figured when I finally stepped in it," he snapped his fingers, "it'd be over like that. I didn't expect so many—complications."

Sarai's face was twisted in confusion. Finally, she looked up at him, "Will." She smiled sadly. "What happened to me—everything that's happened—I can't share what you feel." She sighed, "Let's continue."

"But—"

"Leaving would be foolish."

He nodded slowly. "But you have to understand—"

"I understand. You'll learn discipline, one way or the other. You need it as much with your emotions as with any other part of you."

Will clenched his jaw and nodded.

"Don't let your emotions control you," she stepped close to him again. "I know it's hard. I've had to fight it all my life, and sometimes I lose. But you have to recover, just like I do. Control them or they'll control you. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

"Look at me."

He looked into her eyes.

"Good. Don't let it control you."

"Okay."

"Now come on, let's get back to it."

They resumed their short mock battles. Sarai continued to attack, always before Will could even move a muscle to respond.

"Stop trying to anticipate. It's not rational, so you can't analyze it. Just know when I'm about to attack." She continued to strike, always ending with the point of her blade a hair away from his chest. "Again," she said.

Each time they went through the exercise, her face grew cold, and her legs flexed slightly in preparation for her attack. This last time was no different.

But Will thought he could sense something; he thought he had sensed it the last couple times. It was as if he could feel Sarai somehow doing more than just moving faster than he could; it was as if she was moving in every direction, or no direction. He felt it the instant she attacked.

When she attacked the final time, her blade ended up not at Will's chest, like the countless times before, but at his

shoulder. His own arm was up slightly, and he had moved toward her just a bit. And his blade had moved.

She looked at him. "Now," she said, "you know you can do it."

Will looked at the knife in his hand and then back at Sarai. She put her hand on his shoulder.

"Boy," John said with a groan as he sat in one of the rocking chairs on his porch in the cool of twilight. Will sat in another. Sarai had gone to bed. "How's it going?" he asked Will.

Will just grunted.

"I know what you're going through." John sighed, "I wish I could tell you what to do. Ignore it. Fight it. Give in to it."

Will looked at him.

"Yeah, I know all about it. A couple thousand years of seeing it in others—it's pretty obvious to me now."

"It's obvious to her too."

John chuckled, "Yeah. Sarai's perceptive. She learned far too much from me. You look at me and see someone who might—*might*—be almost your age. But inside," he sighed, "I'm old. So very old. And very tired. A bit of a cynic, I suppose. I've seen it all. And Sarai," he looked back at the house, "well, she picked up too many things from me. Even at her age, she should act much younger than she does."

"Aren't you breaking your word now?"

John chuckled, "Yeah, probably. But at this point it doesn't matter, because I know that the things you really want to know about her, now you'll ask her about them and not me. Besides, she's the only one that can answer them now."

"Like what?"

"Does she feel the same?"

Will shook his head, "I already know the answer to that one."

"Do you? Are you sure?"

He nodded.

"Hm." John leaned forward and rested his wrists on his knees. "Okay, for her good, and maybe for yours, I'm going to tell you something about her that will really break my word."

Will swallowed.

"She tries to control her emotions to the point that they have no sway over her whatsoever. You don't see much of

them—only when they are really intense and come close to overpowering her. But they're always there. She feels the entire range, just like you and me. Underneath it all, she's a girl. She's a girl who was hurt in a way no girl should ever be, and then she changed into something she was never meant to be.

"You have to understand what she's fighting against." He looked at Will. "Pain. Guilt. Shame. All of those horrible things. And to live under that burden, she has had to be very strong—maybe to a fault. But don't think she doesn't feel things, even if she says she doesn't." He smiled, "I should shut up now. Don't pay too much attention to the ramblings of an old fool. Try to find out for yourself if you want. But be warned: she does everything for very good and well-thought-out reasons. Remember that."

Will nodded.

"So, tomorrow you and she will go out and get some things for me. Be a good chance to get away from here for a while."

"Is that wise?"

"No, but you both need it."

"Are you trying to—"

"Hook you two up?" John laughed. "Not in the least. I think that would be foolish."

Will fell silent.

"Not sure what to make of that, right?"

He nodded.

"I'm sorry. I know that probably stings. But it's true." He nodded slowly. "Were you two to ever go down that road, you would both have to be very careful. Frankly," he sighed, "I couldn't see it ending any way other than both of you getting hurt." He paused for a moment, then said, "Well, time to read a while then go to bed." He rose and returned to the house.

Will sat for a while by himself. He rubbed his forehead and then slapped his hand onto the arm of the chair. He ignored the resulting ache in his hand and rose to head back to his bedroom.

# Collisions

The next morning was overcast. The clouds were high, with greyish-blue tones and wavy patterns. After he had washed his face and prepared for the day, Will walked down and onto the porch.

Sarai was standing there already.

"Sorry, overslept a little," he said.

"It's okay."

"Did John say something to you about—hey, what's wrong?"

"Not sure."

Will looked around, "Anything I can do?"

"Go get the keys. We'll go now and hopefully get what we need before the town old fogies clog up the stores."

Will started to nod then stopped, looking at her and smirking.

"Wipe that off your face, wise guy. I'm not *that* old." She smiled at him.

Will laughed, "Okay, I'll be back." A moment later, he returned and jingled the keys in front of her. "Let's go! It'll be nice to get out for a change."

Sarai followed, and they came to an old truck parked just out of sight of the porch.

"A little old fashioned, but it looks like it'll work. You driving?" Will said.

Sarai shook her head, "Go ahead."

Will chuckled, "Cool. I think old trucks are pretty neat." He climbed into the driver's seat and inserted the key. It started right away. He nodded and backed the truck out far enough to access the driveway, and they drove off.

Sarai navigated the twenty-minute drive, giving Will minimal directions and nothing further. Their first stop was an animal feed store.

"You go in," Sarai said.

"Not coming?"

"No."

"Okay, well, I'll be back as soon as I can."

Sarai nodded and sat silently in the truck.

A few minutes later, she saw Will walking back from the store. An older man was wheeling several bags of feed on a hand truck. A nametag on his shirt said *Ralph*.

Ralph parked the hand truck and threw the bags into the truck bed. When he had finished and was in the satisfying process of clapping his hands together to shake off the dust, he stopped and peered at the passenger-side mirror.

"Oh, crap," Sarai said as Will sat down in the driver's seat.

"What?" he said.

Ralph walked up to the passenger side of the truck and tapped lightly on the window.

Sarai rolled it down and looked sidelong at him.

"Well, I'll be danged!" he said. "Sarai! Been a long time!" he chuckled. "Why didn't you come in and say hi to the boys?" Then his face fell, "For crying out loud. What *is* it with you people?"

"I have his good skin."

"You ain't kidding. Either that or he's brewed some fantastic elixir to keep you all lookin' young." He put one hand on his hip and scratched his scalp under his hat with the other. "Never could figure him out—now you, too."

"It's good to see you too, Ralph."

"Well, you listen here, Sarai. If you're back in town for a while, you tell Johnny boy that you're both invited over for dinner as soon as you can make it. I'll have Maggie fix her famous cornbread and beans."

Sarai faked a smile and nodded.

"Oh, and 'course, your boyfriend's invited too," he grinned.

"He's not my boyfriend, Ralph."

"Well, whatever. Any friend of yours is a friend of mine. But you be sure to tell him, sister. Got it?"

"Got it," she said.

"All right!"

"Go," Sarai grumbled to Will.

"Oh," Ralph said, leaning over to see Will, "I'm Ralph!"

Will smiled and nodded, "Will. Friend of the family."

"See you then! Maggie makes great cornbread and beans!"

"Go," Sarai repeated. "Or we'll be here all day."

Will smiled again and waved to Ralph. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise, and remember—"

They heard no more.

Will chuckled, "So what's the problem with Ralph?"

Sarai snorted, "He doesn't shut up, and I heard his wife's cooking could kill a cow."

Will laughed.

Their next stop was the grocery store. On their way from the feed store, they saw two sheriff's cruisers parked outside a gas station, their lights flashing. Tape was being strung around the adjacent convenience store.

"Wonder what happened there," Will said.

Sarai was silent, but she peered at the scene closely.

Will slowed the truck down to rubberneck, but he returned to speed as soon as they had passed. A few minutes later, they arrived at the grocery store. Sarai again waited in the truck.

Will returned with a cart full of groceries, the experience having been entirely uneventful. He loaded the brown paper bags into the bed and stepped back into the truck. "Boy, you're not kidding. The store's already full of—" he paused and looked at Sarai. "What is it?"

"I don't know. Something's not right. Let's go back."

"But we only have a couple more places to go. I think—"

"No, we need to go back now."

Will shrugged, "All right." He started the truck and drove back the way they had come. When they passed the gas station, they found even more sheriff's cruisers and a number of ambulances.

"Stop."

"Sarai, do I need to remind you that you're wanted for murder?"

"I said stop!"

Will held up a hand, "Okay, okay." He pulled the truck over across the street from the gas station.

Sarai immediately opened the door and ran across the street.

Will watched her talk to several people and one deputy. A minute later, she was running back. This time, she came to the driver's side.

"Move over," she said when she opened the door. "I'm driving."

\* \* \*

John watched the truck roll away, and he sipped his coffee. Then he looked around as if some odd smell were in the air. Shaking his head, he returned to the kitchen and sat down with his newspaper. He heard a vehicle coming toward the house, but as usual, he waited for the visitor to come to his door.

Several heavily shod feet sounded on his porch. A knock.

"Come in," John said.

A moment later, a number of machine guns were pointed at him, and a light-haired man walked to the other side of his table and sat down.

John set his coffee and newspaper down.

The other man smiled, "I am Petrovic. Please forgive my intrusion into your home with such excessive force, but," he raised a hand, "I need to protect myself."

"What do you want?"

"Let's not play games. I want Sarai."

"I don't play games," John said.

"Neither do I." Petrovic snapped his fingers, and another grinning man stepped forward and handed him his pistol. Petrovic set in on the table. "You see, I do my homework. I asked around a bit about you, and, well, I found out some things. I would really, really love for you to simply tell me where I can find the woman. Then," he leaned back, "I can just leave."

John chuckled grimly, "You're a comedian, I see."

Petrovic laughed, "I like to think I have a good sense of humor." He nodded to the other man, "Michelson."

Michelson nodded back and rushed out like a child that had been told where to find a surprise gift.

"He'll be back in a moment."

The other men in the house—all black clad—took various positions around the room, all with their machine guns aimed at John.

Petrovic watched them. "You see, I know how it works, as I'm sure you realize. Guns—so crude. Not overly effective. But when you have enough of them, well, there's not much anyone can do. Even one of *us*." He smiled.

Michelson came back, followed by two men dragging a woman in with them. She was crying, and her face was a ghostly white.

Petrovic picked up the pistol on the table and shot her in the head.

John sat motionless.

Petrovic sighed, "I don't know if you knew her. Her children were none too pleased by us taking her from them."

John clenched his jaw.

"And yes, it was senseless to shoot her. Get over it. Let's now avoid any more such senselessness. Tell me where Sarai Rahmani is. And please don't try to attack me—I'll kill you and then find her on my own. I just thought," he raised his hand again, "this would be a little bit easier on everyone involved."

John said nothing.

Petrovic sighed. "Michelson."

Again, Michelson left, along with the two men who had dragged the woman in with them. When they returned, they had a boy—probably no more than ten years old.

Petrovic pursed his lips. "Come, now, let's be reasonable. Tell me."

John said nothing.

Petrovic picked up the pistol and aimed it at the boy's face. He then looked at John, "Well?"

The boy stood aghast, tears streaming down his face.

John rubbed his forehead, "I was an old man when your sorry-ass granddaddy was in diapers. I know how this ends."

A cloud passed across Petrovic's face. And he pulled the trigger, shooting the boy in the shoulder.

Amidst the screams of pain and terror, Petrovic said calmly, "You have my word, I will let this boy live if you tell me now. I will also let the others in the van outside live."

John stared at Petrovic silently.

Petrovic sighed and gave the pistol to Michelson. "Then I fear I can no longer approach this in a reasonable manner." He drew his knife and walked over to the screaming boy.



Will nearly screamed as Sarai pushed the truck to its limits, taking corners on two wheels and accelerating to the point that he was sure the engine must explode.

“What’s going on?!”

Sarai’s eyes snapped to him and then back to the road, “They found us.”

Will’s stomach sank and he felt dizzy. His mind filled with a single thought: *I’m not ready*. He looked at Sarai.

The woman was intent on the road in front of her, but she showed no emotion, except maybe that her eyes betrayed some hidden anger.

She looked over at him briefly. “Have courage,” she said and was silent.

He nodded and turned his head to face the road. Biting his lip, he tried to disconnect his fear.

When the turnoff to the long driveway leading to John’s farm came into view, they saw two black vans and a number of black-clad men positioned all around them.

Sarai looked into the rear view mirror and saw another van closing quickly behind them. “Damnit,” she said. She looked over at Will, “This is going to be rough. Follow my lead or you’ll die. Got it?”

Will nodded, his eyes wide.

Sarai floored the gas pedal, and the old engine roared.

\* \* \*

Petrovic wiped the blood off his face. “Wow,” he said looking at John, who was still sitting at the table. “Quite an experience, don’t you think?”

The other’s face was set like stone.

Two bodies now lay dead on his floor.

“Come on, doesn’t that do anything for you?” Petrovic said.

“I’ve done far worse to better men than you,” John whispered.

Petrovic paused for the briefest moment. A look of uncertainty crossed his face, as though he realized that he didn’t know as much as he thought he did. Then it passed, and he said, “Well, this isn’t working, I see.” He turned to Michelson and nodded once more. “So, we’ll go to our last resort.”

Michelson returned followed by two of his troopers dragging another unconscious man. They placed him in the chair across the table from John.

It was Harvey, the sheriff. His face was bloody, and his invariably neat uniform dirty and wrinkled, with blood stains on his collar.

John remained silent.

Petrovic slapped Harvey's face several times until the man awoke. "Good," Petrovic smiled. He then drew his knife and looked at John. "So, please, I beg you, tell me where she is."

John was silent.

Petrovic sighed and tapped Harvey's shoulder with the knife. "You know, I suppose a man could possibly—assuming he is a completely cold-hearted bastard—ignore the suffering of someone he doesn't know, like that boy. But I would tend to think that if it's someone you do know, well, that's different. Don't you think, sheriff?" he looked down at Harvey.

"Go to hell," the sheriff groaned.

Petrovic looked at John, "Thankfully, I'm not as concerned with his answers to my questions as I am with yours. So, can we stop this now?"

John smiled sadly, "I guess deep down I'm just a cold-hearted bastard."

Petrovic laughed. "Before I cut off one of the sheriff's fingers here, you should know something." He leaned over the table and whispered. "I'll find the woman and kill her without your help. Oh, I know she'll be back soon, and when she returns—assuming Michelson's men don't do it for me—I'm going to gut her. Might even let the boys have their way with her first." He chuckled, "No, this isn't about her. It's about you. Garrett told me to watch for another of your stinking kind. He said you could kill me just like that," he snapped his fingers.

John's eyes widened for the briefest moment.

Petrovic continued as though he hadn't noticed any reaction. "I wanted to find out if that's true—if you're really that good a killer. I love a challenge." He smiled and stepped back. "So, come on. Show me what you've got. Let's see how good you are." He grabbed Harvey's hand, and two other men held him still.

Sarai shouted, "Head down!" She drove the truck straight at one of the black vans. The crack of gunfire rose even over the roar of the engine, and holes peppered the windshield.

The next thing Will knew after being jarred to his core by the impact, Sarai was gone. The gunfire around him was deafening. Then he saw a black-clad man aiming a machine gun into the window at his face. But before Will could even raise his hands in a vain attempt to protect himself, the man disappeared in a cloud of blood. In a panic, Will unfastened his seatbelt.

The van that had been pursuing them had stopped, and more black-clad troopers were unloading. Will felt his arm nearly jerked from its socket when Sarai pulled him through the shattered passenger window of the truck.

She had a machine gun in her hand, returning fire in short, fast bursts. She stopped near the rear of the tipped van. "Listen," she shouted over the gunfire. Her eyes were moving quickly. "We're in it deep. There's about twenty of them still, and I don't have—" she paused to send two short volleys from the weapon. "We don't have much time or much of anywhere to go." She handed him the gun. "Return fire or we die!" she yelled and then disappeared.

Will raised the gun until it was above his head and pulled the trigger. The weapon almost flew out of his hands.

And then Sarai reappeared. She had two more guns, and she joined Will in returning fire.

A bullet struck close to Will and he quickly lowered himself, rubbing his eye.

"You okay?!"

"Yeah," he said, his voice barely rising above the gunfire. "Stuff almost got my eye."

But she didn't hear his last words. She was returning fire. "Damnit," she said, dropping the gun and picking up the other.

"I'm out!" Will said, having risen to return fire in a long burst.

"Look at me!" she turned him to face her. "When I say, you run straight that way. Don't look back, just run as fast as you can." She pointed away from the concentration of troopers, who were already moving to flank them.

"But what about—"

"I can take care of myself!" She glared at him. "Ready?"

Will nodded.

"Go!" She disappeared.

Will ran, hearing the gunfire crescendo. But in the midst of the cacophony, he was able to make out screams.

\* \* \*

John's kitchen had become a veritable pool of blood. Petrovic slapped Harvey to wake the man again from unconsciousness. "Time's up, pal," he said.

John had barely moved a muscle the entire time Petrovic had tormented Harvey. And still he sat silently.

Petrovic beckoned Michelson, who handed him the pistol.

John looked into Harvey's eyes.

The other's breath was shallow, and his eyes were opening and closing as though he were struggling to stay awake. One mangled hand hung limp on his right side, but his left, although wounded grievously, was still useful. He looked at John. And his elbow tightened ever so slowly.

Petrovic stepped close to Harvey and whispered in his ear, "Sorry, pal." He aimed the pistol at the sheriff's head.

But gunfire sounded from outside, and everyone paused, except for Harvey and John. The sheriff threw his elbow back with all his might.

Petrovic saw Harvey begin to strike, and he exerted himself, watching the world around him slow. But the distraction had been enough. Although Harvey's elbow was unable to catch him in the groin or abdomen, it glanced off his leg, turning his attention from John just slightly.

By the time Petrovic had shot Harvey, John was gone. The men positioned around the room had already opened fire.

"Damn it!" Petrovic shouted. He turned to Michelson, "Join the others, go!"

Michelson waved at the men in the room, and they ran out to the waiting van.

\* \* \*

Sarai methodically took down the black-clad men one at a time. On one occasion, she slowed long enough to give two of them a shot at her, but when they pulled their triggers, she was gone. Neither realized that the other was beyond

the target, and they both paid with their lives. When she had brought sufficient chaos in the black ranks to give her a chance to follow Will, she exerted herself and approached the barrier, ignoring the penalty that was starting to build.

Will was still running when he felt himself swept up and accelerated. He gasped but did not resist. A moment later, feeling completely jarred and slightly wind-burned, he fell to the ground.

And Sarai was standing there, her breathing heavy.

“Sarai?”

She looked at him briefly and turned away.

Will knew what he saw in her eyes: fear.

She then screamed, covering her face with her hands and falling to her knees.

Will watched her agony in horror for a few seconds before rising and rushing to her side. Her body was rigid, and although she no longer screamed, he could tell she was still in pain. Tears ran down her face, and she struggled to breathe. He put his arms around her and pulled her close to him. “Oh, Sarai.”

A few seconds later, she began to relax, but she sobbed.

“It’ll be okay,” Will whispered. He was unsure if she was crying because of the pain she had just endured or for some other reason. All was silent about them—no sound of pursuit or of gunfire. He gently brushed a lock of hair from her face. “It’ll be okay.”

\* \* \*

From the barn, John heard yelling and the roar of engines. In the distance, the crack of gunfire sounded. He grabbed a pitchfork and shoveled away a pile of hay. Before long, an area was clear, and he kicked away the last of the hay to reveal a wooden trap door. Reaching down to lift it, he pulled out a metal box, which he set down and opened. Inside, wrapped in a cloth, was a knife. He unwrapped it and ran his thumb along the blade. Still sharp—his thumb started bleeding. He put the knife in his belt. His face was expressionless as he left the barn. After emerging from the shadows of the interior, he disappeared like a vapor.

\* \* \*

"Sarai?" Will whispered to her. "We need to go." He heard voices nearby.

Sarai still shivered. The pain had been so intense, she had been sure she was going to die. She wiped her eyes, and her face became expressionless.

"Come on, Sarai," he said, his voice more urgent.

She nodded and struggled to rise to her feet. Finally, standing up straight, she looked around.

"Which way?"

She nodded away from the voices that were approaching, "That way."

"Are you going to be okay?"

She nodded. "Go."

\* \* \*

Nolan, one of the black-clad men, looked back; he had heard the sound of a twig snapping. He cursed Michelson under his breath and then scanned the trees, only seeing several others from his team. He faced forward once more. The woman was nearby—he knew it. And then in front of him was a ghostly figure of a man.

The man's clothing was covered in splatters of blood. His face was expressionless, but not in a blank way. It was cold and calculating, as though he was processing every bit of information around him and arriving at a conclusion like a computer.

Nolan gasped and tried to move his finger to the trigger of his weapon. But he was too slow.

John ripped the weapon away and then was gone. He reappeared behind Nolan, wrapping his arm over the man's eyes and pulling his head back. He slowly slid his knife under the chin and into the man's head. Nolan groaned and stiffened, then went limp. John let him fall and looked down at him, his face still expressionless. Then he disappeared once more.

\* \* \*

"Sarai, what's the matter?" Will whispered intently.

Sarai was gasping for breath. She shook her head, "It took a lot out of me. I'll be okay. Keep going."

"No, we can't stay ahead of them at this pace."

She stumbled and fell.

He ran back to her and tried to lift her, but she shook her head.

"Go on."

"Not without you. Up you get."

She closed her eyes tightly and then rose once more. But it was too late.

A trooper had found them, and he had his machine gun trained on them. Holding his aim, he raised his radio to his mouth, "Got 'em. What do you want me to do?" He waited a moment, but heard nothing. And then John was behind him.

All Will saw was the trooper stiffening and blood spraying from under his chin. And then the man fell. "John!" But Will's excitement quickly faded.

John approached and stood over them. His face was expressionless. He looked at Sarai.

She looked back at him steadily, holding his gaze.

Then he looked down, the emptiness on his face draining away as tears filled his eyes.

Sarai walked slowly toward him and put her arms around him.

The tears ran down John's face, but he made no sound or movement, other than to put his arms around Sarai as well.

Will hung his head and was silent.

Finally, John stepped back and wiped his cheeks. "Sarai, are you okay?"

She nodded.

"We need to follow him—Petrovic."

Again, she nodded. "What about Will?"

John looked at the other man, "You're on your own."

"Hey, let me help!"

"No. You'll slow us down."

"Sarai!" Will turned to her. "What have I been training for if not this? I'm not afraid!"

John walked up to him, "That's because you didn't see what Petrovic did to one of my friends."

"Then what do I do?" He raised his hands.

"Come on, Sarai," John said.

"Hey! She's not in any shape to go! She almost died a second ago!"

"I'm fine," Sarai said when John looked at her.

Will snorted and shook his head.

John pursed his lips then turned and, Sarai with him, disappeared.

All was silent around Will. He placed his hand on the knife at his belt then sighed. Looking around, he saw the dead trooper nearby. He walked over and stood silently. The man's eyes were open, his face still showing the shock of his unexpected death. In his belt was a pistol.

*If you're going to kill someone, you'll do it with your own hand. It shouldn't be easy. If you take a life, you should feel it.*

Will remembered Sarai's voice. Then, after his moment of indecision, he reached down and took the pistol from the trooper's belt and checked it. A round was chambered, and fifteen were in the magazine in the handle. "Aw, hell with it." He ran back toward the house.



# Home

"If everything looks good to you, just go ahead and sign here, and it's yours, Mister Rahmani."

"John, please. John will do."

The other smiled, "John."

John signed the purchase contract, and the agent handed him a set of keys. The two men rose and shook hands.

"I think you'll be pleased. The place needs some work, but I don't think it'll be too much for you and your daughter."

John smiled and nodded, then he turned to the young girl sitting in a chair next to him. "Okay, let's go home, Sarai." He held out his hand.

Sarai reached up and took it, but she fixated on some point in distant space.

"She's very tired. Still trying to get used to a new country — and a new time of day."

The agent nodded, "I understand. Where are you from?"

"The Middle East, actually. I was very fortunate to have learned English from a native speaker while I was there. My daughter, though, only knows Arabic."

"How old is she?"

"Thirteen."

"Not a bad age to start in a new place." The agent smiled and leaned over slightly toward the girl. "Welcome to America," he said slowly, as if the lesser speed of his speech would make her comprehend.

She smiled, her expression confused, but she did not look the man in the eye.

He chuckled nervously.

John said, "Yes, our cultures are quite different. But I'm sure she will soon fit in like any American girl."

"I'm sure. I have to admit, though, your English is impeccable."

John laughed, "Well, thank you. I have some ability with languages—a talent of mine from years of experience."

"Indeed. And I understand you had to take a taxi to get here? Please, allow me to drive you both to your new home."

John shook his head.

"Please, I insist."

"Very well." He looked at Sarai and spoke in Arabic, "You're being a very strong girl. Can you hold it together a little longer?"

Sarai's lip quivered.

"Be strong, little girl. Just a little longer."

She nodded.

He turned back to the agent and resumed his English, "Okay. We're ready."

The agent ushered them from the office and out to his car. John rode in the passenger seat and Sarai rode in the back of the blue automobile—a Cadillac convertible.

"Very nice," John said. "I find the style very interesting."

The agent chuckled, "Yeah, I feel like king of the road in this thing. Cost me more than I could afford, really, but it's been my one treat to myself."

"I understand the property's previous owner is leaving behind several vehicles?"

"Oh, yes. I think two or three. All old trucks. I would be surprised if any of them worked, but you might be able to get one of them into running order."

"Very good."

"But in the meantime," the agent continued, "I happen to know your neighbor, Lew Stanton—a retiree, now a farmer. Good man. Quite a ways from your house to his, as he owns a fair bit of land. But he's a generous man, and I think he'll be willing to help you get started. Transportation's going to be a sore matter until you get some wheels under you."

"I would certainly appreciate his help."

"As soon as we stop, remind me, and I'll write his number down for you. 'Course, you can always just drop by his place. Most folks around here enjoy a surprise visitor."

A short time later, the blue Cadillac pulled into a long driveway. It was nothing more than two dusty ruts surrounded by ragged grass.

"Here we are!" said the agent.

John smiled and nodded. He looked back briefly at Sarai.

The girl noticed his look and quickly wiped a tear from her face.

He gave her a reassuring smile and spoke in Arabic, "Just be strong a little longer."

Finally, after several more minutes of cordial speech, the agent returned to his Cadillac and drove off with a wave.

"Come here," John said to Sarai in Arabic.

The girl took slow, staccato steps toward him, the tears flowing down her face. "I want to go home, Master Johann. I want to go home!"

"I know, Sarai. I know. I wish you could." He put his hands on her shoulders. "But do you know why we left? Why I brought you with me?"

She nodded slowly.

"Tell me why."

She shook her head.

"Please, little girl. I need to know that you understand."

"To protect me."

"Do you believe that's why I did it?"

She nodded.

"Okay." He sighed, "I know this is going to be difficult. But you're almost grown up. At least here no one will ever hurt you like they did over there. Here is our new home." He knelt in front of her. "Look at me."

She closed her eyes, tears still streaming from them.

"Sarai, little girl, look at me."

She opened her eyes and looked briefly in his before looking away.

He smiled sadly. "We'll work on that," he whispered in English. He then returned to Arabic, "We'll make this work. You and I. Okay?"

She nodded slowly, finally looking at him steadily through her tears, her face twisted in a grimace.

"Such a very strong girl," he said, reaching up to gently wipe her cheeks. Then he spoke in English, "Home." He raised his hand to the farmhouse behind him. "Home."

"H—Home," she said tentatively, her accent thickly coloring her first English.

He smiled and nodded.

"Sarai?"

"Yes?"

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, please moment."

"Say, *please wait one moment.*"

"Sorry. Please wait one moment."

"Good."

"Yes, I am ready go."

"To go. Ready *to go.*"

"I am ready to go."

John put his hand on her shoulder, and he spoke in Arabic. "I'm really proud of you, Sarai. I know you're trying very hard, and you're very patient with my corrections. You'll be able to speak like an American soon."

She smiled.

"And you look very nice in your new dress."

Sarai blushed. "Miss Stanton was very nice to give me this," she responded in Arabic.

"Yes, she was. The Stantons invited us to dinner tonight. Maybe you can wear it there too."

She nodded and smiled.

John chuckled, "You're a very pretty girl when you smile. Come on, let's go."

They walked together to a truck that John, with the help of Lew Stanton, had returned to satisfactory condition. They drove into town at a leisurely pace. It was only Sarai's third trip since their arrival a month before. In the meantime, John had purchased a number of animals for the farm, stocked the house with everything the two needed to live, and even began restoring some of the more dilapidated rooms.

Sarai had done her best to help as she was able. She knew a little about cooking, and she often assisted John in preparing their meals. She did all the laundry—she wouldn't let him do any of it. And she did her best to keep the house clean and the animals well cared for.

"I'd like you to go into the feed store and buy it for us, Sarai," John said in Arabic as he drove.

Sarai shook her head, "No. I cannot, Master Johann."

John looked over at her, "Of course you can. You've already learned enough English to be understood."

"But they will think I am stupid."

"No. They will think you're making an effort to learn the language. And that means something. Are you going to hide until you feel like you know enough?"

She was silent.

"You'll be fine. But remember: you must look others in the eye."

"But they will think I am out of place—"

"No. Not here."

She swallowed, her breath quickening. And then she relaxed.

John nodded, "Good. Don't be afraid. You have every right to be here—as much as I do."

A few minutes later, they pulled into the parking lot of the store.

John turned off the engine and faced Sarai. "Look at me."

She turned her head and held his gaze steadily.

He smiled, "Be strong, like I know you are. Look people in the eye. You have a right to be here, too." He then switched to English, "Now off you go. I'll wait here."

Sarai's face twisted in confusion for a moment, then she nodded. "I come back."

John smiled.

She left the truck and walked into the store.

Fans hanging from the ceiling were spinning. The morning air was warm, even for early June.

"Hello there, missy," said a man from behind a counter. A patch on his shirt read *George*.

Sarai walked to the counter slowly, her eyes shifting nervously. *Look people in the eye*. She looked up at George. "Good morning," she said slowly. "Please four cow food." Her accent was still thick.

"I'm sorry, missy, say again?"

"Sorry. Four," she held up four fingers, "cow food."

"Ah! You need four bags of grain for your cows?"

She furrowed her brow as she tried to comprehend the words that were flying at her. Then she nodded, "Yes."

A snicker sounded behind her.

"Who's this? The village idiot?" said a tall, lanky young man.

"Aw, shut up, Ken," George said.

"Me not speak English!" Ken said.

Sarai was silent.

"Kenny boy, I hear another word out o' that foul mouth o' yours and you can find somewhere else to get grain for your ratty herd. Got it?"

Ken snorted and walked out.

George shook his head, "I'm real sorry about that, missy. What's your name?"

She started and looked at him. "Sorry, not understand."

"Name. What's—your—name?" He pointed at her.

"Ah! Sarai."

"Well, I've not heard that before, short of every now and then at church. I like it! Well, you listen here, Sarai. Usually it's two-fifty for the four feed bags, but today, it's on me. Do you understand?"

Sarai looked at him, then reached into a pocket on her dress and handed him five dollars.

George chuckled, "No. Today—today. It's okay for today."

Still she struggled. "Sorry I not know English."

"No!" he chuckled again. "You'll pick it up eventually. Just don't learn from that chump, Ken." He smiled, "You probably don't understand still. Come, I'll help you out." George waved to a boy that was stocking shelves in the store, "Ralph! Come take over at the counter for me."

"Okay, boss," Ralph responded.

"Now, I'll go get the feed and help you load it." He paused, "You certainly didn't drive here. Your daddy bring you? Daddy? Father? Outside?" He pointed outside.

Sarai's face lit up, "Yes! Father!" Then her face darkened and she fell silent.

"Okay, you head out there and I'll meet you with the feed." He pointed at her and then outside, "You go outside." He then pointed to himself, "I bring feed. Okay?"

Sarai looked around and then back at George. She nodded.

Stepping outside, she saw the truck still sitting where it was when she had entered the store. John was still behind the wheel.

As she started walking toward it, she heard a splattering sound in front of her. She looked down and saw a smear of slimy yellow on the ground. Then she heard a loud crack and at the same time felt a smack on her head. She quickly reached up and felt the slime of a broken egg. Two others landed nearby. Then she heard laughter.

Ken and another young man were standing near the edge of the street.

"Damn, Ken, I hit her in the head!"

"Lucky shot, Jimbo," Ken said

The two then strode toward her.

Sarai struggled to hold back her tears. She tried in vain to get the slime out of her long, black hair. It was already running onto her dress. She looked to the truck, but John was not moving. *You have a right to be here, too.*

"Gimme another one," Ken said as the two approached Sarai.

Jim handed him another egg.

Sarai wanted to run—to the truck or away from it. She didn't care. She felt the entire world closing in on her. *Don't be afraid. Be strong, like I know you are. Look people in the eye. You have a right to be here.*

She turned and looked at the two young men as they approached. She saw Ken raising his arm, an egg in his hand, and she looked straight at him.

For a moment, Ken paused, his arm back and ready to swing forward. And then he chuckled and let the egg fly.

Sarai saw it moving toward her, but she didn't know what to do. It hit her on her thigh, exploding over the skirt of her dress.

"Wow, she really is stupid," Ken said.

And then they were next to her, one on either side. Both were laughing.

"I think maybe she's so stupid she won't even mind if I do this," Ken said. He reached his hand toward her breast.

And then Sarai felt herself once more on the cold table, being held down and mutilated, her own blood pooling under her. Before Ken had even touched her, she swung her arm as hard as she could, once again flinging herself toward the barrier before being washed back as if by a wave.

Ken's forearm snapped cleanly, the lower portion dangling by only the skin and muscle. He howled and jumped back, his eyes filling with horror.

Jim raised his hands and took two paces back from Sarai before turning to run.

Ken then did likewise, screaming and cradling his arm.

The next thing she saw in her mind was Muhtadi lying dead, his neck snapped by her own hand—her hands that

now brought death instead of life. Looking in horror at her quivering hands, she sobbed.

And then John was next to her, "Shh, little girl. It's okay now."

She looked at him, and then her mouth opened. The pain started, and she closed her eyes tightly and screamed through clenched teeth.

John put his arms around her and held her close to him until the pain subsided. Sarai went limp and cried weakly.

George came out a moment later pushing a hand truck loaded with four bags of feed. He whistled some random tune until he saw John and Sarai. He immediately jogged over to them as quickly as his large frame would allow. "Hey, you folks okay?"

John looked up at him.

George then saw Sarai clearly. Her face was streaked with tears, her hair and dress covered in egg. "Damn him! I'm gonna tan his hide and his daddy's too!"

John smiled sadly, "No need, sir."

"Oh you betcha I need to. A guy who picks on a girl needs to be taught a lesson, and so does the scum as raised him."

John stood up. "The young man has learned his lesson. At least I hope he has, for his sake."

George looked at him with a twinkle in his eye, "Ahah! Her daddy whipped him, then!"

John chuckled, "Well, let's just say he got his due."

George clapped his hands, "How wonderf—oh, I'm sorry!" He groaned as he slowly and painfully lowered himself onto one knee before the girl.

"Hey, you listen to me, Miss Sarai. You come on into my store, and I'll help you get cleaned up. And I'll give you some money to buy yourself a new dress. Okay?"

John chuckled and translated into Arabic for her.

Sarai shook her head, "No, it okay."

"Nope," George said. "No girl gets treated that way in my store. You come on in." He looked up, "And you too, sir, if you please."

John smiled and then translated into Arabic.

"Ralph!" George shouted. "Come load these bags into the truck!"

Ralph trotted out of the store a moment later, glancing for a moment at Sarai.



About a half-hour later—during which time John spoke at length with George and quickly won the other’s high favor—John and Sarai emerged from the store.

George, an experienced farmer and jack-of-all-trades, had quickly and easily helped the girl. He knew exactly how to get the egg off her without leaving a stain. “Oh yes, I learned quite a bit dealing with chickens—and with my momma.”

Although John had accepted George’s help with Sarai, he turned down the man’s repeated efforts to give him money. Finally, they reached a compromise. “How about some feed instead?” John suggested. George happily agreed.

The spots on Sarai’s dress were just damp, and they were drying quickly in the warm air. But she was quiet.

When they had both sat down in the truck, Johann started it and then turned to her. “Little girl, I’m sorry about what happened to you.” He spoke in English.

“Why didn’t you help me?!” she yelled back at him in Arabic, her eyes filling with tears. “You said no one would hurt me! He was going to—going to—he—”

John returned to Arabic. “I know. But he didn’t, did he?”

She shook her head.

“I left you alone to teach you a difficult lesson. Even in a good place like this, some people will still hurt you if they can. George in there, he is a good man. An honest man. You will meet all kinds, just like you did over there.”

“I might have killed him, just like—” she covered her mouth with her hand.

“Yes. I know. I will teach you to control it.”

“I don’t want to be this way!”

“I know, Sarai. More than anything, I wish I could change what happened to you. Even if it cost me my life. But I can’t.”

She wiped her face and looked at her dress.

“Don’t worry about that. George did a good job, and you’ll make it like new, I know.” He sighed, “Sarai, for almost all your life, you lived apart from anyone like you—or like me. You never learned what we need to know to survive.”

“I learned one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t remember when. I just have it in my mind. I learned never to let anyone know I can—could—heal things.”

John nodded, "I didn't know that. She was wise, whoever taught you that." He put the truck in reverse and left the parking lot. Driving down the road, he looked at her occasionally, but her gaze was straight ahead, and she was silent.

When they arrived home after visiting several other stores, they found a sheriff's deputy standing next to his vehicle. He was flipping through a small black pad.

John parked the truck and stepped out, as did Sarai. "Good morning, deputy. What can we do for you?"

The deputy looked up. He was clearly a young man. "Mornin', sir. Just followin' up on a report here." He looked at Sarai and then back at his pad. He snorted. "You all live here?"

"Sure do. Just moved here. I'm John, and this is my daughter, Sarai."

The deputy shook his head, "Strange."

"If you'll tell me what's happening, perhaps I can help."

"Well, to be honest Mister—"

"John, please."

"Certainly. I'm not sure what's happenin', actually. Got a report here about Ken Adams gettin' injured pretty bad. Busted arm. He said," the deputy chuckled, "your daughter did it." He looked at Sarai. "Did you hurt Ken, little one?"

"I'm sorry," John said, "she doesn't speak much English. If you will, I'll translate for you, Deputy—" he looked at the man's shirt, "Deputy Ford."

The deputy chuckled, "Please, call me Harvey. Everyone else does. And yes, go ahead and do whatever you must to help her understand."

John smiled and turned to Sarai, "He's asking about what happened with the young man at the feed store."

Sarai's face turned white, but she said nothing.

"Well," John said, "if I may answer for her, what happened is—"

"No need to explain yourselves. Believe me, you're in no trouble. Kid had it comin', as far as I'm concerned. The only reason I came out really was to make sure he wasn't lyin' to me—tryin' to blame someone for an accident or somethin'. Mostly wanted to make sure *he* didn't hurt anyone."

John looked at him steadily, "Deputy—Harvey—Sarai is a very special girl. She comes from a difficult place, and she had to learn to defend herself."

"Say no more." He took off his hat, turned to Sarai, and said with a smile, "Maybe sometime you can teach me how you did it."

John spoke to Sarai in Arabic, "He said not to worry about it. You did absolutely the right thing."

Sarai smiled briefly.

Harvey nodded, then placed his hat back on his head as he turned to face John. "Hey listen, you all need anything—anything at all, I mean—you call me. The office is small: just me and Greg, the sheriff."

John smiled, "Well, thanks, Harvey. The same goes for you."

Harvey shook John's hand. "I'm sure we'll be seein' more of each other. You take care now." He winked at Sarai and got into his car. A moment later, he was gone.

"Really, Sarai," John said in Arabic, "you can't even tell."

Sarai rubbed at the skirt of her dress several times. "I can still see it."

"Sarai."

"Yes, Master Johann?"

"We need to talk about—the way you are."

She swallowed.

"What happened today, well, you are now strong like I used to be. And fast. But," he squinted and shook his head, "it has a strange twist. I will start teaching you tomorrow how to control it and use it when you need it. But it must be like with your healing: you need to keep it to yourself."

She nodded without question.

He smiled sadly. "Did you know about Khalid?"

"Yes. I was always very afraid of him."

John nodded, "He was one of the dark ones. Like you and me, but—"

She nodded. "I know. I could see what he was. And I knew in here," she pointed to her heart.

Johann chuckled, "The more I come to know you, little girl, the more you surprise me." He stepped close to her and looked in her eyes.

She held his gaze steadily.

"We need to speak in English. No Arabic—it's rude to those who cannot understand."

She nodded.

He smiled at her, "Let's go."

"Come on in!" said Lew Stanton, offering his hand to John for a firm shake. He put his hand on Sarai's head as she walked by, and he chuckled. "So, how're my number one neighbors this evening?"

"Quite well," John said, "thank you. How're you and Abby?"

"I'm doing well. She's hard at work in that kitchen o' hers. Just where a woman should be." His eyes twinkled at his own jest.

"Lew, watch your mouth!" a voice sounded from the kitchen.

Lew laughed, "Come on in." He led them to a sitting room. "Make yourselves at home."

John sat down, but Sarai stood next to him. "Sarai," he said. She looked at him.

"Sit. Please."

"No. Not right."

"We're guests here. Please sit."

"Oh," Lew said, "don't be too hard on her. We know you're from a different land. We're hard to offend."

John smiled at him.

"Sarai," Lew said, "why don't you go on in and see if ol' Miss Abby needs some company while she works?"

She paused for a moment then nodded before walking to the kitchen.

John sighed.

"Don't be too hard on her. I can tell she means nothing but good."

He nodded, "I know."

"Well, hello, Miss Sarai."

"Good evening, Miss Abby."

"I see you're wearing that dress!"

Sarai nodded, but her face turned red.

Abby walked over and looked down at the girl, "Hey, I know what happened."

Sarai looked up at her and pursed her lips.

Abby chuckled, "It's okay! You're my kind of girl." She smiled and then leaned over to give Sarai a hug. "Sarai, you're okay!"

Sarai spoke little during the meal. The conversation regularly returned to her, and she always noticed when they spoke her name. She understood some of what they said. She gathered that Lew needed some help around his farm, and John seemed to be honestly considering the possibility of Sarai filling that role.

"Heard what happened with Ken," Lew said at one point. "Harvey swung by to find out a little about you all—told him he didn't have a thing in the world to worry about."

John nodded, "He was very polite when we met him."

Lew nodded, "He's a good man. Now that Ken fellow, he's another story altogether. His pappy is just as bad as he is; most folks think he's a no-good wife beater."

"Hm."

"But, from what Harvey said, you gave him a good reason not to mess with little Sarai anymore."

John chuckled, "Well. That's not exactly how it happened, but."

Lew looked over at Sarai, but the smile slowly faded from his face, replaced by a somber, contemplative look. "I tell you, Miss Sarai—" he shook his head. "Something about you."

John smiled.

Sarai looked at Lew, holding his gaze steadily.

"You did it to Ken, didn't you?"

She said nothing.

"She might not have understood you," John said.

"No," Lew smiled shrewdly at her, "she understood. Didn't you, dear?"

Sarai nodded.

Lew chuckled, "You don't need to say anything. In fact, I know that what you have in your heart is good. Most young folks I know would be braggin' all over town if they had pulled somethin' like that. But you," he reached out tousled her hair gently, "You're special. I can see that."

He turned to John, "You know, you said something about her maybe bein' able to help around here, and I was a little worried by the thought. Figured it'd be too difficult for a young girl. But, no," he said thoughtfully, "No, I think she would make a fine assistant." He turned back to Sarai, "What

do you think, Miss Sarai? You be willin' to come here and help out? I'll pay you—not much, but I'll try to make it worth your while if you make it worth mine."

Sarai looked back and forth.

John started to speak, but Lew held up his hand.

Finally, Sarai's eyes opened wide and she looked at him, "Yes, it okay for me."

"Well, that's that, then. When you all are all settled in, you just start comin' over here a couple days a week. But you're gonna have to wear somethin' other than a dress. It's gonna be hard work."

"I'll make her some strong pants fit for a girl her size," Abby said, winking at Sarai. "That is, if it's okay with her daddy."

John shrugged, "I think it'll be good for her to interact with some people who don't know Arabic. Too easy for both of us to get lazy with our English."

Soon, Sarai was working at home and at the Stantons' farm. In the evenings, John taught her her letters and then how to read, all the while helping her develop her English skills. Beyond this, though, he gave little guidance in scholarship, being content to instead let the girl's natural curiosity take her where it would.

Most mornings after finishing the farm chores early, John trained Sarai in how to govern her strength. They ran for miles around the farm, stopping at places he designated to practice exerting herself in ways that would avoid bringing the pain of too close an approach to the barrier.

"Sarai," he said to her when they began to train together, speaking in Arabic, "you must always be careful about the barrier. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

She nodded.

"It's dangerous to you. As far as I know, you're the only girl who can approach it on her own. And because you're a girl, you can cross it. A man like me can approach, but I cannot cross. Sarai, look at me" His voice lowered, "You must never, ever cross it."

"Why not?"

"Because, little girl. I don't know if you'd be able to come back. And even if you could," he sighed, "Well, you know what happens when you just get too close to it."

She nodded. "Why does it hurt so much, Master Johann? Why doesn't it hurt you?"

He smiled sadly at her, "I don't know, little girl. Women weren't meant to be able to approach the barrier on their own." He put his hand on her shoulder, "You're unique. I can't explain what's happened to you. And to be honest, there may come a day when you have to cross the barrier. But I can't imagine why you'd need to, and if you ever did, you'd have to be prepared for the consequences—whatever they would be."

And then John's aura flared, and Sarai followed him as they both approached the barrier.

"Learn to feel where it begins to hurt you," he whispered.

She closed her eyes. They came closer and closer to the barrier. Then Sarai gasped and came no further.

"Do you feel it?" he asked.

Sarai nodded.

"Remember it. Remember where it is."

At first, little of Sarai's training ever passed this point, and for several months after he began teaching her, John never asked her to go beyond it. But when he was satisfied that she was in control and had reached her potential in that region of safety, he started pushing her further.

"Faster, Sarai."

She shook her head.

"Yes. You don't always have a choice, and if you won't do it here, you'll hesitate to do it when you need to. Faster."

He attacked with his fists swinging, his speed just beyond what she could match without incurring the penalty.

She approached the barrier—nearer than she wanted—and blocked his attacks.

Then he stopped and stepped back from her. "Look at me."

She looked at him, swallowing. Her face twisted in fear.

"Don't fear it! Close your eyes. See it for what it is and learn from it."

She closed her eyes, and then the pain began. She screamed.

"Stay on your feet!" he shouted as he tried to be heard above her screams.

But she fell to her knees. When the pain had subsided, she looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "Why?"

He sighed and shook his head, "I don't know." He helped her to her feet. "Let's do it again."

"No!"

"Yes."

"But why?!"

"Because you still fear it. We'll repeat this until you can accept it for what it is."

"What difference does it make?"

"Sarai," he sighed. "I can't defend you like I could have before we met. You are stronger and faster than I am now. You lost something; I lost something. It changed us both. Now you have to be the strong one."

"But if I became like you, then—" Her mouth opened and she stepped back from him. "You became like me?"

He looked at her steadily.

"When were you going to tell me?!"

"I never planned on telling you. I didn't think it would do any good. There's nothing I can do about it now."

"You could have saved him! You could have!"

"I don't know. But even so, I didn't know at the time what had happened." He paused. "Sarai, I only do this for your good." He attacked her again. He extended himself as far as he could toward the barrier, feeling the new limit that had been placed on him when he had taken Sarai to its edge.

She responded in spades. She blocked his attacks with ease, approaching the barrier and ignoring the coming penalty that she could feel building inside her. And then she counterattacked. She struck him several times, knocking him to the ground.

But he did nothing to make her stop. He continued in vain to try to defend himself until finally she held him by his shirt with one hand, her other hand clenched in a fist above her head.

Her face was twisted in rage. And then it faded, and she let go of his shirt. "How could you?!" She turned away and covered her face. Then she screamed in pain, but the entire time, she stayed on her feet.

John rose to his feet behind her and wiped the blood from his face.

Finally, Sarai turned back. She cried, but she looked steadily at him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "And I know it hurt. You have only one thing left to learn from me."



"What? Haven't you done enough to me?"

He reached to his belt and pulled out a knife.

Sarai looked at him in horror.

He gazed at her steadily, "I know this will be difficult. And I know, little girl, that you had to feel one. I wish that had never been so. But you need to learn not to fear it." He held it by the blade and offered her the handle.

She shook her head.

"You must."

"But—I can't!"

"You will, and I will teach you to use it. I'll teach you everything I know. Everything. And you'll be as strong as I once was."

Sarai stared at the knife. She could almost see Essam in the darkness, his face frozen in hideous concentration as he cut her.

"Be stronger than what happened. Take it."

She slowly reached her hand out, finally closing her fingers over the handle.

Under John's tutelage, Sarai quickly mastered the knife. But much of their time spent in training was still dedicated to approaching the barrier—not to spar, nor even to race. He made her do it for no other reason than to make her experience the penalty of her approach. Some days he made her do it so many times that at the end of their session, he simply held her in his arms as she cried bitterly.

And the tension between Sarai and John grew. But at the same time, Sarai's relationship with the Stantons blossomed. She spent almost all of her time with them, only returning home to train, do her chores, eat her evening meal with John, and sleep. But John did nothing to discourage her from her path.

Lew Stanton quickly found that the simple, menial tasks that he had initially planned for Sarai were not enough. The girl did them all admirably—too admirably. She quickly picked up everything he taught her, even to the point that her expertise exceeded in only months what it took him years to develop.

Finally, he decided to teach her what he knew best. "Miss Sarai, you're too darn smart for all this nonsense I've been

having you do. Now that you're pretty much a grown woman, I want to teach you the best of what I know—welding. It's a good trade, always a need for people who know how to do it well. It's how I got here: I made good money for many years so I could retire on a farm like this. I was the best dang welder this half of the country, and that's only because the best one (my own teacher) moved out west."

Sarai chuckled, "You're funny, Master Lew."

"Hey, Sarai," he said, "Come over here and sit with an old man for a few minutes before we work anymore today." He motioned to a stack of old wooden chairs. Setting two of them out, he waited for her to sit, and then he sat down, pulling a handkerchief from his shirt pocket and wiping his brow. His breathing was heavy and somewhat labored.

"Are you okay?" Sarai asked.

Lew waved his hand. "I'm fine. Somethin' I want to talk to you about. I wouldn't ever want to try to take your daddy's place—I know he's a good man, and I know he takes good care of you—but you're the closest thing I've ever had to a child. Always thought I wanted a son, but, well, Abby never conceived, much as we tried." He sighed, "But these couple o' years I've been able to get to know you, why, I realize I would've been just as happy, if not more so, with a daughter.

"And even though I'm not your daddy, and maybe this isn't my place, I feel awfully close to it, and I want to protect you. Don't ever let anyone tell you differently: you're a beautiful girl. It's just hidden—mainly shows when you smile. And that's a good thing. But there's lots o' bad men out there, and many will try to take advantage o' you. Well, I guess I can't give you much advice about finding a good one for yourself and all, but just know that you can afford to be choosy. Don't settle. You deserve someone good who'll respect you and all the good things about you."

Sarai had looked at him the entire time he spoke, but when he finished, she looked down. "You don't need to worry, Master Lew. I—"

He waited a moment before saying, "What is it, girl?"

"I don't tell anyone about what happened where I came from in Middle East. Only Johann knows. I have bad dreams about it every night."

Lew's face was grave.

Sarai looked up and blinked before turning back to Lew. She smiled sadly, "My father—my real father—he forced me to be—" She again looked away and blinked furiously before looking at Lew once more. "They cut me. They cut my—" a tear ran down her face. She gasped and then tried to smile at him. "It is something they do to girls where I came from." Her face flushed.

Lew's face was twisted in confusion. Such a thought had never entered his mind. "Oh my heavens above," he finally said, when he understood what she was telling him. "That's *horrible!*"

She looked at him but was silent.

"I hope the bastard rots in—" he started. He then shook his head, "I'm sorry."

"It is okay. I said he was my real father, but even that isn't quite right. He is the only father I ever knew, though, until Johann—John—took me away from there."

Lew shook his head and looked at her sympathetically.

She smiled sadly, "I only tell you that to put your mind at peace. I will never—marry."

Lew nodded slowly, "You need to do what's right for you. But if you ever change your mind, why, whoever it is will be the luckiest guy in the world."

Sarai laughed and looked away, wiping the tears from her face.

Lew chuckled, "Sarai, you're the finest woman I've ever met, short of my wife—I guess I have to say that. But I'm honored to have been even a small part of your life."

"Master Lew—"

"No. No more o' that. You just call me Lew." He stood up.

She stood as well.

"Because you and I, we're equals now. You're better than me at most everything, you're more dedicated than I could ever be, and you're the very strongest person I know, hands down."

They embraced.

One evening, Sarai came home well after dark from her work at the Stantons'. John was waiting at the kitchen table, an empty but dirty plate in front of him and a book in his hand.

Sarai stepped quietly into the house, and when she saw the light in the kitchen, she walked slowly to it. "Sorry I'm so late," she said.

John set his book down and smiled, "It's fine. Are you hungry?"

Sarai nodded.

John rose and took a plate from a cupboard, filling it with some food from pots that were still warming on the stove. He set the plate down at her usual place and motioned for her to sit. After she took her place, he returned to his own.

Sarai unceremoniously began wolfing down the food.

"Are you okay, little girl?" John said.

She nodded without looking up, her mouth stuffed full.

John picked up his book and read until she finished eating. When she set her fork down on her plate with a clink and slid her chair back, he said, "Sarai, I need to talk with you about something."

She remained motionless in her chair.

He closed his book and set it aside. "Do you know about your—about our—gift?"

She shook her head.

John was silent for some time. "I guess I'm not surprised." He adjusted himself in his chair. "I've looked into things for a number of years now—things about us. As I understand it, all of our kind were born male. And for those of us that are light, we have a gift. It's the one constant of who we are—perhaps the most important part." He looked at Sarai intently, "We were never meant to be alone, Sarai. So, we can each share ourselves with one other person."

He leaned back and rubbed his chin, his gaze shifting from Sarai and his brow furrowing. "It seemed simple enough when it was just men: they would choose a woman and take her to the barrier, and she would partly cross it and become like him. Then he would no longer be alone: he would have someone who is the same way he is. But with you," his gaze shifted back to her. "You're different. You were born a girl.

"I daresay that before what happened, you would never have been able to share yourself with anyone, because you couldn't approach the barrier. But that's not the case anymore. By chance or fate, or whatever the reason, you and I changed

each other. I no longer can reach the barrier, but you can. I suppose that means that you can share yourself. It can be anyone you want, a man or a woman. But you must know, Sarai, that it is once and only once. And it is forever. I tell you this because you are reaching the age where—well, how shall I say it?"

Sarai remained motionless, but she said softly, "I will never marry, Johann."

John nodded slowly. "It's your choice, of course. But I think I meant something broader than that. One day I may be gone. You may be on your own. It's not good to be alone, Sarai—and by that I don't necessarily mean you must marry. You have a chance that most of us never have. You can choose anyone you want. It can just be a friend." He shrugged, "In fact, I might even go so far as to say that would be the better road. But either way, it's up to you.

"But the one thing that seems to always be true, wherever we go, is that we were never meant to be alone."

Sarai looked at him intently. "What about on the other side of the barrier?"

John was silent for a moment. "Why do you ask about that?"

"Shouldn't I know?"

"I told you never to cross it. You don't need to know."

"It's my choice whether to cross it, Johann. Is it the same on the other side?"

John shrugged. "We were never meant to be alone."

"Okay, Sarai," Lew said. "Good job on this one." He then mumbled so that she could not hear, "Damn near better than I coulda done." He then said to her, "Now go and fix that busted frame."

Sarai lifted the heavy mask. She was covered in sweat. She wore a sleeveless shirt, and her hair was cut short—a sore matter for Abby, who thought she had beautiful long hair. Her raven locks curled about her face, reaching about to her jawline. Her arms had become muscular but were still thin and wiry.

She wheeled the gas tanks and torch over to an old metal frame—designed for she knew not what—that had broken in the middle. "Lew, what's this thing for?"

No response.

"Lew? Hey! What's this for?"

Still nothing.

She walked toward where she had last seen him, going first at a leisurely pace and then at a trot. "Lew?!"

She found him on his back. His face was red, and he was struggling to breathe. His hand was clasping his shirt over his heart.

"Lew!" She kneeled down beside him.

Tears ran from his eyes, "I don't have long," he gasped. "I just—I just—"

"Oh, Lew, no."

He nodded convulsively. "Known for a while." He gasped again. "I want you to—I want you to know. Oh, Sarai! I love you so much!"

She covered her mouth as she started to cry. Then she put her hands over his heart, and she exerted herself as she once did, hoping that this time would be different.

Nothing. Lew still struggled to breathe, and finally, his chest fell and rose no more.

Abby hummed as she prepared lunch. When Sarai stepped into the doorway of the kitchen she turned and smiled, but the smile quickly faded from her face. "Oh, no."

Sarai's face was tear stained. She was silent, but she looked at Abby steadily.

"Oh my. Where is he? Where is he?!" Abby started to run from the kitchen, but she fell on Sarai.

Sarai caught the old woman and held her close.

Abigail Serena Stanton died a few months later. Although she showed no obvious signs of ill health—she was a vigorous woman even in her old age—Lew's death took the spark from her life.

Sarai had spent almost every waking minute with her after Lew died. She even slept many nights on a couch at the Stanton's house, as Abby complained of being afraid in the darkness.

One morning, Sarai made breakfast for the old woman, but when the sun had begun rising in the sky, Abby had not yet come to the kitchen as was her custom early in the morning.

Sarai walked up to Abby's bedroom, knowing well what she would find.

The old woman lay in bed, her face grey and cold. Sarai kneeled next to the bed and held her icy hand.

John drove the truck back to its usual place near the house. He shut off the engine and faced Sarai.

She chewed on the side of her finger and looked out the window.

"Look at me," he said.

She ignored him.

"Hey, look at me, even if you're upset."

She turned toward him, her eyes afire.

He reached up and loosened his tie, still looking at Sarai. He wore a black suit. "I'm very s—"

"Shut up!" she shouted at him. "They're both dead because of *you*!"

"Sarai, there was nothing you could have—"

"Of course there wasn't, because of what *you* did to me! I hate you! You might as well have killed them both!"

His face was immobile. "Sarai, I—"

She held up her finger, "No more! Never again!" She looked out the window once more. "I'm leaving."

"I understand. Where will you go?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Sarai, I know you don't want to listen to me right now, but please do. And please look at me."

She shook her head.

"Little girl, don't look away out of hatred."

She turned back and looked at him.

"Look in my eyes. You know what you see there."

"That's not love! Lew loved me. Abby loved me. They loved me for who I am. All you've done is try to change me into something else!"

John sighed, "I've tried to teach you things you never knew because of what happened to—" he paused and looked away ever so briefly. He then looked back at her, knowing she missed nothing. "You never learned when you were young," he said slowly and deliberately, "from your real mother and father. They would have taught you, and you would have been different."

She looked at him but said nothing.

"You're able to take care of yourself now, Sarai. And you're free to go whenever you want. But you'll always be welcome here. Always."

She looked away. "It would have been better if I had never come here."

"I will never believe that. And I don't think you really do either."

She glared at him and then exited the truck.

The Stantons had left Sarai all of their belongings, including their farm. She gave it all to John, except for a few dollars to take with her on the road.

She went into town and bought a used motorcycle. After some brief instructions from its former owner, she easily learned how to operate it efficiently. Her time with Lew had turned her into a quick study.

Afterwards, she went to the bank and withdrew the money she needed from what the Stanton's had left her. By far, the lion's share went to John. She stepped out of the bank to see Ken and three other men standing a short distance away. She noticed them before they noticed her.

Ken threw several eggs, none of which came close to Sarai.

She stared at him.

"Hey, stupid! I think it'll be different this time, don't you?" He and the others walked toward her.

She shook her head.

Jim was with Ken once again. He took an egg and threw it at her.

With beautiful grace, she drew her arm back along its path, matching its speed to catch it without breaking it. Her face was expressionless. She then threw it back at Jim.

The egg struck his forehead. But unlike when he had hit a young girl years before, this egg exploded in a mist, knocking him backwards onto the sidewalk. He groaned and rubbed a bloody mark on his forehead.

"You're dead!" Ken shouted. The three men ran at her.

At no point did Sarai even think her knife was necessary. The two men flanking Ken fell quickly to her lightning-fast attacks.

Ken looked at his companions as they groaned on the ground. He then faced Sarai, raising his fist. But she was gone.



She appeared behind him, grabbing his hand and twisting his arm with a crack. He fell face down onto the sidewalk.

Ken groaned and then groveled, "I'm—I'm sorry! I'm s—  
owwww!"

"Doesn't feel nice, does it?" she hissed in his ear.

He groaned again as she twisted his arm further.

"You'll never try to touch me again, will you?"

"No! No no no!"

"I didn't think so." She spit on the side of his face and gave his arm a final twist, making him scream.

Leaving Ken to wallow on the concrete, Sarai walked to her motorcycle and mounted it. Placing her helmet on her head, she started the engine and rode through the center of town. And she didn't return for forty years.

\* \* \*

Sarai struggled to control her breathing. She still felt exhausted from her last approach to the barrier: the effort of dragging Will from the firefight had brought on a pain so intense that her mind was still spinning. She looked up from the ground that flew beneath her feet to watch John running before her. She knew that in moments they would be within sight of the house.

# Love

"Sarai."

She nodded.

"The house looks clear. That means they're probably at the road, and they'll work their way back in."

"Johann."

"What?"

"Who was it?"

He clenched his teeth, and his jaw muscles bulged.  
"Harvey."

Sarai nodded slowly. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's my fault. It's my fault I didn't love you like you needed to be loved. I wish I had done things right from the start. Then your m—" he stopped, looking away for a moment.

"What?"

He was silent.

"What?!"

"Now's not the time." He looked down the driveway.

"No, you look at me!"

He kept his gaze away.

She sighed, "Johann, you've always looked at me. Why not now?"

He said nothing.

"You're lying to me."

He shook his head.

"I know you. I know you well. You're not telling me something."

He finally looked at her, "Sarai," he smiled, but it was almost a grimace. "You shouldn't want to know everything. Knowledge," he snorted, "knowledge isn't power. It's *pain*."

"Johann," she continued to look at him even though he looked away. "Don't do this to me. Please. You've been the only thing I've ever been able to count on. I've been able to

live with myself—with my conscience—because I know you have been able to do it too. Even though I was gone for so long, I was able to be strong because I knew there was one thing in the world that is certain, and it's you."

"No. You're strong because that's who you are. You don't know me." He shook his head, "You don't know me, Sarai."

"I can't know you if you won't look at me."

"Maybe I don't want you to know."

"Damn it, Johann, tell me! Tell me what you're hiding!"

He turned and looked at her steadily. Finally he said, "No."

And then they both saw two black-clad men moving in the trees that separated the road and the open area around the house.

John looked at Sarai, "Now you look at me."

She held his gaze steadily.

"Little girl, there are things I won't ever tell you. But look in my eyes and know that I do love you. I always have."

Still holding his gaze, she shook her head, her eyes filling with tears, "You can't love me if you won't share with me."

He slowly raised his hand and touched her cheek, "I don't want you to hurt anymore. Do you remember what I made you do when you were young? How I made you approach the barrier? How much it hurt you?"

She nodded.

"I hated every second of it. And I hate just as much to do this to you—if not more. Because I know that the weight of the lives you take never eases. It will try to crush you until the day you die. But now, you need to come with me. We need to finish this."

She looked at him for a moment before nodding once more.

"Petrovic is one of *them*. Beware of him. I don't know where he is." He scanned the trees. "Looks like most of them are converging on the house."

"Why would they bother?"

"Because he knows the same thing we do—this must end here."

Then they both heard an engine and the sound of wheels rolling slowly over the gravel of the driveway.

"A distraction," Sarai said.

He nodded. "Petrovic's on foot. Somewhere."

"Looks like about fifteen of them."

He nodded. "They'll expect us to try to flank them, one on either side."

"So, what would you do instead?"

"Go around, all the way around. Come up through the middle from behind. Divide them in two. Kill in detail."

She sighed.

"I know. It will only add to the burden. Make heavier the weight. Try not to think about it. We have no choice."

"Johann, you should know I've gotten used to it."

He smiled at her, "You *never* get used to it. And if you do, well." He looked out at the men running through the trees. "You become like them."

They watched the troopers until they had reached the edge of the clearing.

"Are you ready?" John asked, not looking at Sarai.

"Yes."

"You take left. All the way around. As fast as you can, but don't reveal yourself to Petrovic. Go."

And they both disappeared.

Sarai's eyes scanned continuously. She was aware of the black-clad men; they were no threat. Too slow and stupid. But she could almost sense the presence of another—one like her, but dark. When she had looped all the way around, reaching the edge of the driveway but staying under the cover of trees, she watched as the troopers now moved away from her and toward the house.

But she didn't see John. She hesitated, not knowing if she should continue with her part of the plan and just trust him or not. Would he follow through? Had something happened to him? Or had he just left?

And then she heard gunfire to her left.

"Hello," a voice sounded behind her.

Sarai turned to see a light-haired man with a knife in his hand.

"Ah, yes, Sarai. I'm sure you know my name."

She said nothing.

"Well, I regret I haven't much time to talk." He nodded toward the gunfire, "They'll manage to keep your friend busy for a short while."

Then the SUV backed up at a furious pace, and a man quickly exited the vehicle and pointed a machine gun at Sarai.

"My compatriot, Michelson," Petrovic said. "Well, since time is short, I need you to come over here so I can finish my work and go home." His voice lacked any tone of jesting.

She stared at him.

"Please. If you make it easy on me, I promise to make it easy on you."

She did nothing.

Petrovic nodded at Michelson, who pulled the trigger of his weapon.

Sarai extended herself toward the barrier, moving away from the path of the bullets, but at the same time, Petrovic did likewise. As the world around her slowed, she saw the black cloud appear around him, revealing who he was.

Petrovic attacked her an instant later, slashing with his knife.

She quickly took a defensive stance, dodging or blocking his snake-like attacks. She teetered on the edge of where the penalty would begin mounting, and it was barely enough to keep her from falling to Petrovic's relentless strikes. But she still felt the ache inside from the last time, and she feared what would happen if she had to face it again so soon—almost more than she feared Petrovic's knife.

The stream of bullets swung toward them slowly. And then it stopped when blood sprayed from Michelson's neck.

\* \* \*

Will continued firing at Michelson. Through blind luck, he had managed to reach the driveway without being spotted by the troopers. He then saw Sarai and Petrovic disappear when Michelson fired his weapon. Finally, Will ceased his own fire when he saw that he had actually hit Michelson several times.

The wounded man struggled on the ground for several seconds, his hand covering a gushing wound on his neck, before he lay still.

And then Will felt the knife against his throat. Sarai appeared in front of him an instant later.

"Enough of this," Petrovic said from behind Will, his breathing heavy. "You for him."

Sarai showed no hint of dismay.

Petrovic sneered, "Make up your mind or I'll lop his head from his shoulders!"

"And then I'll kill you. Do it. Make me angry."

Petrovic paused.

"*Do it!*" Sarai shouted at him, causing both Will and Petrovic to start.

Petrovic's eyes darted back and forth. He could see the light around Sarai; her aura burned like a great fire.

When gunfire erupted around them, Petrovic shoved Will toward her and disappeared.

Sarai grabbed Will and pulled him to the ground. She then disappeared as well, attacking the troopers that were firing on them.

Petrovic reappeared in the SUV, the engine roaring as he backed up.

The passenger-side door was still open, and Will looked up as the vehicle raced past. He saw Petrovic, who peered back at him and smiled wickedly.

And then Petrovic was gone.

Screams and scattered gunfire sounded, but they slowly dwindled to a single weapon that fired sporadically before finally stopping, bringing a deafening silence to the clearing.

Will rose, the pistol still in his hand, and looked around. Black-clad troopers lay scattered about, all motionless. He saw Michelson's body and walked toward it.

The dead eyes looked up at the sky, a hand limp over a ragged hole in the man's blood-covered neck.

Will started to shake. He dropped the pistol and then turned away. Falling to his knees, he retched.

Sarai walked slowly toward him.

John was standing in the grass, staring blankly at a dead trooper.

On his hands and knees, Will wiped his mouth before retching once more.

Sarai kneeled next to him.

"Oh, Lord, Sarai," he spit several times as the taste of bile filled his mouth again. "What did I do? What the hell did I do?"

She whispered, "You took a life. And now you must feel it, and live with it. And you'll always tell yourself it's what you had to do. Just like I do because of what I did when I was a girl."

He spit once more and then looked at her.

She smiled sadly, "The man who was my— who I thought was my father. Maybe even then I knew he wasn't really my father. I don't know. But," she looked down for a moment. "After Johann saved me, I—" Her face became expressionless. "I killed him. With my own hand." She looked at it.

Will put his legs in front of him and sat next to her. And they were both silent.

John shoveled the last bit of dirt onto the makeshift grave. He and Sarai had loaded the bodies of the troopers into the bed of John's second truck and brought them out to a remote part of the farm. The vehicle had required some coaxing to start, but it ran smoothly after a few minutes. Its overgrown cousin was clearly a lost cause and had been for decades. The truck that Sarai had taken into town would no longer even start.

They dug a hole by hand and threw the bodies into it. It took several trips and nearly a full day of searching through the trees to find them all. In a separate grave they laid Harvey, the boy, and the woman that Petrovic had murdered.

Sarai didn't protest. She knew it would be useless. John thought it better that their families simply not know. But it still bothered her.

"Sarai," John said after throwing his shovel into the bed of the truck.

She looked at him.

"I need to know how you are involved with Garrett Jansen."

"What does it matter?"

"It matters."

"How do you know I'm involved with him at all?"

"Because I know him."

"You—" She stopped suddenly.

"Tell me."

"No. It wouldn't do any good."

"He doesn't kill unless he has a good reason. He's an artist. He's not interested in power, or even money for its own sake. There's no percentage in him coming after you like this— especially when it involves hiring someone else to do it. He wouldn't take any interest in you even if he knew who you were and where you lived. He—" John stopped. "Chloe's murderer. Who was she? Was she involved with Jansen?"

Sarai was silent. She shook her head.

"You need to tell me."

"Why, Johann? You're keeping something from me, but you expect me to tell you what you want to know?"

"That's different."

"Oh, it is?"

"Yes. I have my reasons for that."

"And what's your reason? To protect me? Like you're hoping to protect their families?"

"That's right."

"I don't want to be protected. I want to know what it is you're hiding."

"I already gave you my answer about that."

"Johann," she walked up to him and looked into his eyes.

"Look at me."

He returned her look, holding her gaze.

Thus they stood. Neither knew how long they struggled against each other.

Still looking at him, Sarai whispered, "Tell me, Johann."

"Oh, Sarai, I want to. I want to! But I can't."

"Why? Tell me why you can't."

"You see me. Do you see that I love you?"

She was silent, but she held his gaze.

"And do you see how proud I am of you?"

"Johann—"

"Do you?"

She nodded.

"Can't that be enough?"

She shook her head, "No. Tell me."

He sighed, but still held her gaze. "Sarai, you are so strong. So strong! Just like your mother."

She gasped and moved her leg back slightly, as if she had been struck and thrown off her balance.

He smiled sadly, "I wasn't always like I am now." He extended himself toward the barrier, and his aura shone white about him.

Sarai looked at it, and then her mouth opened.

He looked closely at her, and although he knew he had crossed the line and could no longer hold back from her, he could tell she was now questioning whether she wanted to know.



The expression on her face was changing slowly, as if he was becoming less and less familiar to her. As if he was pulling off a mask to show a stranger underneath.

"I was once one of them," he nodded slowly. "Just like them. I was a killer, and I was good at it. So very good at it." He paused for a moment, then said, "And for whatever reason, I lived for years, and centuries. I don't know how many I killed. If there's any justice in the world, it must have never known I existed."

But this confession was not what Sarai was waiting for. She looked at him as though he had behind his back something disgusting that he was about to show her.

"I once told you that you were the only woman I ever knew to be born like you are: a daughter of light." He shook his head, still holding her gaze. "No, your mother—she was born that way, too."

Still, Sarai said nothing.

"And she was strong. How she resisted me! She fought the entire time. But when I had," he paused, "When I had—finished with her, she did something to me. I'll never know why she did it, but she shared herself with me."

Sarai's face was white.

John nodded, "That's how I became the way I am now. Light instead of darkness. And that's where you came from."

Sarai clenched her jaw and stepped back.

"I'm sorry. Now you know why I didn't want to tell you."

Finally, she looked away.

He stood silently.

Sarai looked back at him and said, "Do you want to know the worst part?"

He was motionless.

"The worst part is that now I have no one." She turned and walked away.

Will was down to cleaning the last few spots of blood from the kitchen. When he started, he was nearly overwhelmed to the point of throwing up once again; perhaps the only thing that saved him was that he had thoroughly emptied his stomach already.

Bullet holes had peppered the kitchen. The refrigerator was pierced by several, and Will had stuffed some plastic

wrap into them. As far as he could tell, the compressor was still running, so the food would stay cold. Not that he was interested in eating any of it.

Having used the last roll of paper towels, Will found a pile of old rags underneath the sink. He ran water over several of them and wiped at some of the dried blood smears. He was rinsing the rags, leaving pink drainage in the sink as he wrung them, when Sarai stormed into the house.

"Oh, hey," Will said.

Sarai made no reply. She ran up the stairs and went into her room.

Will dropped the rags in the sink and then washed his hands. He met Sarai as she was coming down the stairs, her canvas jacket over one arm and her helmet in her other hand.

"Hey, where you going?"

"I'm leaving. Get out of my way," she said, walking past him.

"Well—wait, I—Sarai!"

She made no response.

"Sarai! Wait!"

"What?!" she turned to glare at him.

"What did I do?" he snapped back at her.

Her expression softened, "I'm sorry. But I can't stay here anymore. I'm leaving."

"Without John?"

"Yes. By myself."

"But why?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes!"

She sighed, "You couldn't possibly understand." She walked past him.

"I can't if you don't explain it to me."

She kept walking.

"Sarai!" he said sharply.

She stopped, her back still to him.

"Try me. Please."

She turned back to him and bit her lower lip. "Come with me."

Sarai walked with Will down the trail that they had run almost every morning for some time. When they reached the large tree with low-hanging branches, she sat down with her

back to the mighty trunk and motioned him to do the same.

He looked at her until she returned his gaze, then he looked away.

"You have to look at me," she said softly.

He looked back at her.

"Don't think about yourself when you look at someone. Think about—" she sighed. "When you look at me, think about me and what I'm saying. I do the same for you."

He nodded.

"Now, you need to know everything."

His breath caught in his chest. "Now that it comes to it, I don't know if I'm ready."

"Well. That probably means you *are* ready."

"Naturally," he said, smiling. Then he pursed his lips, "Sorry."

She smiled back at him, "It's okay." She sighed, "You already know a little about me—about us. I don't know when it started. Long time ago. We're in any honest record of ancient history somewhere. Us and them.

"It's by birth, mostly. Exclusively, for them. Children are all male, except for one or two obvious exceptions that I cannot explain. They can approach the barrier and extend themselves toward timelessness. Eternity. Whatever. But no one crosses the barrier except a woman. A man can share himself with a woman: he can take her to the barrier—something she can't do alone—and part of her crosses it, making her like him. Making her able to heal.

"But I was born, and born able to heal. And because I was born a woman, I could never approach the barrier. I could never share myself with another. And then, well, Johann changed me. He took me there—a place I couldn't go on my own. And then I reached across it, and we—I don't know. He became like I was; I became like he was. He can heal; I can kill.

"So, I can now approach the barrier. But it hurts me every time I get too close. It hurts so terribly." She shook her head. "But as a woman who can approach it, I can share myself with anyone—man or woman. It's our peculiar gift, those of us who are light. We can do it once and only once. The dark ones have no such gift." She sighed, "When I met Chloe, and came to know her, I decided that if she would let me, I would

share myself with her. Then I wouldn't have to be alone. I could have a friend who would be like me. And, I had hoped, who would be able to heal. My complement."

Will smiled sadly.

"Now I have no one—not even Johann."

Will sighed, "What happened?"

"It doesn't matter. But I can't stay here anymore."

"I have one question."

She nodded.

"If you can cross the barrier—well, what's on the other side?"

"I don't know."

"What is it and why is it there?"

"You read what Caelius said."

"Yes, but he didn't say anything about the barrier."

"No, but you should be able to figure it out."

Will furrowed his brow. "If angels, the sons of God or whatever, mated with women—then the barrier keeps it from happening again?"

Sarai smiled, "I suppose it does, if you believe that story. Of course," she raised her hand slightly, "I guess the damage is done."

Will looked at her intently. "I feel strange saying this, but I think I actually believe that story."

Sarai shrugged. "Who knows? Anyway, men can approach the barrier but not cross, and women can cross but not approach. It's the one thing we have. Our one comfort: no matter where we go, we are not meant to be alone. So, we can share what we are, but we cannot cross the barrier. Except me."

"You can cross it?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever tried?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because, Will, I don't know if I would be able to come back. Although," she sighed, "that sometimes seems like a good reason to try."

He finally looked away.

"So, now you know," Sarai said.

He nodded.

"Do you believe me?"

"Of course. How could I not?" He looked at her, "So, what now?"

"Now? I leave. And it's your choice if you want to come with me or stay with Johann or go your own way."

"I'll go with you."

"Why?"

"Because I l—"

"Shh," she said. Her face became expressionless.

He sighed. "I know, you don't have to say it again. Control my feelings."

"But I do have to say you don't know me."

"Sure I—"

"No, you don't. You can't know someone in a week or a month or a year. Sometimes you never know them."

"Maybe I know enough about you."

"People betray you. They do it all the time."

"Saraï," he chuckled, "if there's one person in all the world that wouldn't betray me, it's you."

"Oh? How do you know?"

"Sometimes, you just know in here," he pointed to his heart. "You know what I mean. Don't you?"

She was silent.

"Yes, it's foolish. Or at least must sound that way. You're more than twenty-five years older than I am, so I must seem like a little boy doing the stupid things little boys do." He shrugged, "I don't know, maybe it's just—I don't know."

"Tell me."

He looked at her and smiled, "Maybe it's just that you're so far above me, so unique, so—I can't think of any word other than *complex*. There's so much to you: you're like a maze, and there always seems to be more to explore. And the dead ends I run into—they only make me want to know more."

"Which part of you thinks this?"

He shrugged.

"Because the journalist—he can't ever have this story."

"And the other part?"

"Will, he can't ever have this woman."

He nodded. "Is it because of what happened—"

"When I was a girl? No. At least not entirely. But I'm sure that's part of it. You know what Johann can do—I am whole, physically. But I still feel what happened every night when

I dream. I see it and feel it." She paused for a moment. "But I've never wanted *that* kind of relationship. The man that I thought was my father, he was obsessed with such things as I got older. That was the whole meaning of my life, in his eyes: just to be someone's woman." She looked at him more intently, "I don't want to be anyone's woman but my own."

"So that's why you wanted to share yourself with Chloe?"

She nodded, "I would then have had a friend who would be close to me and would share who I am without needing to—hm, *have* me."

"Oh." He paused. "Well."

"What?"

"Maybe it would be easier for me if I didn't find you so—"

"So what?"

"Attractive."

"Physically?" she laughed.

"Yes, physically," he said, his face straight.

"Beautiful I'm not."

"Maybe not in the usual way. Maybe it's more that your outward appearance doesn't get in the way of who you are. But sometimes you are beautiful outwardly—especially when you smile."

Her eyes narrowed slightly at him.

He shrugged, "Just being honest."

She looked at him steadily.

"So," he said, "what would you have me do?"

"You need to decide that. You'd probably live longer if you went your own way, or if you stayed with Johann."

"But maybe I can help you."

She smiled, "Back to that, are we? No, Will, you can't. I'm better by myself."

"Not always."

She shrugged, but she remembered his motorcycle bravery—or foolishness—in attacking Garrett Jansen, saving her from Veronica's knife.

He looked at her intently. "Let me say it, Sarai. Let me say what I feel."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because it wouldn't do you any good."

"It would make me feel better."

"Will," she sighed, "I don't feel the same about you."

"I know."

"Then why?"

"Because maybe you'll change your mind."

"So persistent." She smiled at him, "You're very sweet to an old lady."

"Not so old."

"But not the girl you see anymore."

"But you're everything I've always wanted. Even if you never feel the same. Even if it's just the chance to share the adventure you're on."

"Even if it ends in death?"

"Doesn't everything end that way eventually?"

"Yes. But some deaths are worse than others."

"My life spent at your side, however that is, would never be wasted."

"Will, why really do you think that? Beyond some of the things I'm able to do, there's nothing special about me. I'm not on any grand quest. I'm only trying to survive."

"I find it hard to believe that's all it is. If that's all there is to it, then maybe all of life is just a vain attempt to live another day. It's more than that, and I want to share it, even if it's just as your friend."

"You don't understand, Will. I warned you to control your emotions or they would control you. And now this is controlling you. It won't stop at you wanting to be my friend. You'll want more from me." She smiled sadly. "I won't be able to give you what you'll want from me. That's why I wanted to share myself with Chloe, like I said."

"Then why are you giving me the choice to come with you?"

"Because you're mature enough to choose. You can choose to come with me or you can choose your feelings that I can't share with you. But you can't have both."

He nodded, "I see."

"Will, I didn't want this to happen. I am old enough to know how these things work. I had assumed my appearance and my attempts to keep a distance between us would be enough."

"Maybe that's just it."

"I'm not playing hard to get."

He nodded, "I know, Sarai." He repeated her name softly.

"Don't do this to yourself."

"It's very hard."

"I know. And part of me wishes I could return what you feel. But I can't. And I know that you can't control everything you feel—your emotions come from your character. And if I had to guess, you probably feel the way you do more out of sympathy than anything." She held up her hand, "I don't resent that. I'm not so cold hearted that I would be angry at you for heartfelt sympathy. Especially because it's not the patronizing sort. But you need to make sure that what you feel in here," she reached over and pointed to his heart, "stays within the bounds you must set for it."

He reached up and put his hand on hers.

She started and looked at his hand, then she swallowed.

"I will, Sarai. And maybe I don't know you as well as I think I do, but I don't think you're incapable of feeling the same about me. You may choose not to, and I would understand if you did, but you're still a woman. You're a *she*. Not an *it*."

When he took his hand off hers, she quickly withdrew hers and looked away.

"Sarai—"

She shook her head but did not look at him. "You shouldn't have done that."

"I'm sorry."

She looked at him briefly and looked away once more. "Let's go back. I'm leaving, so if you want to go along, now's your only chance. I only ask that if you do come, you leave your feelings for me behind."

"I don't know if I can do that."

"You decide." She rose to her feet. When he stood also, she looked up at him steadily.

After a moment, he nodded, "I'll try."

"Let's go."

When they arrived at the house, Sarai put on her jacket, which she had left draped on the motorcycle along with her helmet. "Hurry and get your helmet," she said. While he was in the house, she went into the nearby barn and came back with a license plate. She removed the one that was on her motorcycle and replaced it with the new one.



Will returned a minute later, but his face was grim. "Where's John? I at least wanted to say goodbye."

"Who cares."

"I do."

She sighed, "Fine. He'll probably be back soon." She left her helmet on the handle of the motorcycle and walked to the house. Once inside, she entered the kitchen, which Will had nearly returned to spotlessness—except for the holes in the walls. On the table, she saw a folded piece of paper.

Picking it up, she saw her name written on it in blue ink. She hesitated, then unfolded it.

*Dear Sarai,*

*I'm sorry that we had to part as we did, once again. Please don't tear this up until you've read everything I have to say.*

*I want you to know that I will always love you. I'm sorry I never told you that you really are my daughter. Looking back, maybe I should have. I had hoped that the Stantons would be closer to your father and mother than I could have been—I just tried to supplement you with the things you needed to know because of who you are. I suppose in some sense they are your real parents: they are the ones that really loved you. Better than I could.*

*We will not see each other again in this world. But if I can leave you with one word of advice—for whatever it's worth—just know that it's okay to fall in love. Even at your age, and even with everything that's happened to you. It's okay, Sarai. And no, you don't have to if you don't want to. But if you want to, you can let yourself. You are smart enough to know when it's right, and you will choose someone with deliberation and forethought—I have no doubt. But whatever happens, remember that we were never meant to be alone.*

*I want you to be happy, Sarai. I'm sorry for all that has happened, but it has made you the strongest and wisest woman I've ever known. In your sixty or so years, you've*

*become more than I could ever have in thousands. Although I hesitate to claim you as my daughter—I'm not a good father—I am nevertheless proud of you. So very proud.*

*And know that no one—no one—can stand against you.*

*Ever yours,  
Johann*

Sarai stared at the letter and shivered.

\* \* \*

Will set his helmet on the motorcycle and turned to walk to the house, but his helmet fell off the seat. He grumbled under his breath and picked it up, but before he set it on the handle opposite to Sarai's helmet, he noticed something inside. He reached into it and pulled out a picture. The black and white photograph showed a teen girl throwing hay with a pitchfork. Although she didn't look much different from the Sarai he knew, she nevertheless looked younger somehow—maybe less burdened. But she still had the same hint of anger in her eyes. Will sighed as he looked at the picture, and then he folded it carefully and put it in his pocket.

When he had returned to the house, he found Sarai in the kitchen, looking at a piece of paper.

"Hey," Will said.

Sarai folded the paper and set it on the table. "He's gone."

"Where?"

She shrugged and furrowed her brow.

"Seems strange that he would leave like that." He looked around as though John might have been hiding behind or under a piece of furniture. "What's on the paper?" He reached for it.

Sarai quickly snatched it away.

"He write something to you?"

She nodded.

"What?"

She shook her head. Then she turned and looked at him. "No, Johann," she whispered to herself. "No, I can't. I don't know what reason I have to hope, but I can't do this."

"What? Hey, you okay?"

She looked at him steadily, "He's gone back."

"Back where?"

"To the city. To Jansen."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's the only thing that makes any sense. He has no reason in the world to leave here unless he knows something."

"Well," Will chewed on his lip, "maybe he can do something to help. Set things right."

Sarai shook her head. "Not anymore. That's not why he's going."

"Then why?"

She grimaced, "Damn him." She paused, then said, "Come on. We have to go."

"Where?"

She clenched her jaw, "We follow him."

"Back to the city? That's crazy!"

She nodded. "I don't have any choice."

"Why?"

"Because I can't let him do what he's trying to do."

"And that is?" he held his hands up.

"Trade his life for mine." She walked over and stood close, looking up at him.

He looked at her and held her gaze.

She smiled, "You're getting better."

He smiled back, "I'm learning from the best."

"You don't have to—"

"Yes, I do. I'm going with you."

Then she was silent, but she still looked into his eyes.

And then tears came to his eyes, for he saw in hers all the hurt and grief she had suffered, as if a wall that kept him from seeing had been cast down that very instant. "Oh, Sarai."

She smiled sadly, "Come on. Let's go."

He nodded.

It was nearly dark when they set out. Will did not try to deter Sarai, nor seek to convince her that they would be better off sleeping and starting fresh in the morning.

Although Sarai drove the motorcycle and showed no obvious signs of fatigue, Will sensed as they rode into the night that she was tiring. Her usual stalwart motionlessness

was replaced with occasional starts, as though she was struggling to revive herself from the edge of sleep.

Finally, when she nearly went off the road, Will tapped her shoulder insistently. She brought the motorcycle to a halt.

Will removed his helmet, "We need to stop."

She took off her own helmet and shook her head. "No, I'm fine."

"No, you're not. You need rest. Please. Just a couple hours. Look, there's a motel a few miles down the road. I saw a sign for it. Let's stop there and just get some sleep. Then we'll hit the road again."

She said nothing.

"Sarai, please. You need it. Please."

She nodded.

When he had his helmet back on, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then he put his arms around her once more. *Oh, Sarai!* he thought.

Sarai returned the motorcycle to the road. Minutes later, they stopped under an awning outside the office of a ratty motor lodge. Will removed his helmet and walked inside. He rang a bell at the counter several times before a middle-age woman entered the small lobby, a cigarette dangling from her mouth.

Without a word, she put a guest form and pen in front of him.

"Uh," Will said, "can I get two rooms?"

She slapped another form on the counter and took a drag from her cigarette.

He filled out the papers, paid her some of the money he had taken from John's stash on the refrigerator, and took the two keys she handed him.

Outside, Sarai had taken off her helmet and was looking up at the sky.

Will smiled when she looked at him, and he offered her a key. "One for you, one for me."

She laughed.

"What's funny?"

"You. You didn't have to do that."

He shrugged, "Yes I did."

She laughed again. "Still being so sweet to an old lady."

"Hey," he said, smiling at her, "you don't look it and you

don't act it. So to me, you're not old. Crying out loud, you make me feel like I'm a teenager again."

She smirked, "Cute."

When Will had finally settled down in his room, he picked up the old yellow phone and looked at the buttons. He started to dial Sarai's room number. Then he stopped and hung up. And he picked up the phone again and dialed. This time, he let it ring.

Sarai picked up the phone on the other end. "Hello?"

"Oh, hey, it's me. I, um, I—"

She said nothing.

He could hear her soft breathing. "Well, I just, uh, wanted to make sure you were okay. Have everything you need and so forth."

"Yes, thanks."

"Yeah. Good, good. Well, try to get some rest, and—and, call me if you wake up before me, okay?"

"Okay."

He lay back in the bed, but he said nothing more. He didn't want to hang up. He only wanted to hear her breathing.

And Sarai said nothing. She only breathed.

# Daughters

"What's wrong, Sarai?"

"I don't know what to do, Chloe."

Chloe smiled, "Sure you do. What I've always said you should do."

Sarai shook her head, "I'm scared."

"I know. It's okay to be afraid."

"I don't want to lose control."

"Sarai, I wouldn't ever tell you to do that. You can be in control and still let yourself *feel*." Chloe smiled at her again.

Sarai looked at her and smiled back, then her face fell. "Oh, Chloe, I miss you so much!"

Chloe nodded and hugged her.

Sarai held Chloe as tightly as she could. "Don't go again. Please."

And then she awoke. The phone was lying next to her on her bed. Morning light was just beginning to bring color to the dark sky. She picked up the phone and listened, hearing Will's slow and steady breathing in the background.

\* \* \*

"Sarai!" Will shouted.

Black-clad men were aiming their weapons at her, but she only looked at him. She had a desperate expression on her face.

"Sarai! Get out of there!" He tried to run to her, but his legs felt like lead, and he kept stumbling.

And then Petrovic was in front of him, smiling and raising his knife.

Will skidded to a stop. He heard the guns firing at Sarai with loud thumps.

Waking with a start, Will jumped up, ran to the door, and flung it open.

Sarai looked at him with a raised eyebrow, "About time."

"Sarai!" He started to reach for her, but he immediately drew his arms back and put his hand over his mouth. He turned around and paced back into his room.

Sarai furrowed her brow and stepped in after him. "Are you okay?" She could see him breathing heavily.

"Sure. I'll be fine."

"Nightmares?"

He nodded. "I'm fine, though."

"Look at me."

He shook his head.

"Yes, Will. Look at me." She walked up to him and put her hand on his shoulder, gently turning him around.

Tears ran down his face, and he tried to smile at her.

"Tell me."

"I thought—" He then shook his head.

"It's okay. Whatever it is, tell me."

He paused, then said, "I thought that—I'd lost you."

She held his gaze steadily.

"I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't—I—"

"It's okay."

He wiped his face, "No, it's not. I told you I'd try." He inhaled deeply and exhaled. "It's nothing."

But she continued to look into his eyes.

"It's—it's very difficult."

"I know," she said, trapping him with her gaze.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"Because, Will. I want to know."

"Know what?"

"I want to know," she sighed, "when one day the mystery is gone, and you know me—inside and out—what will you think of me then? What will I be to you?"

He swallowed and felt the room spin about him.

"Will you still love me then? Or will I become just what I am—an old lady who's really not that pretty?"

"You would never be that to me."

"But how do I know that, Will? You want me to feel the same way you do. But if I do, if I commit to you, what are you going to do when I become old hat?"

He struggled not to look away from her. "Sarai, I'll use the same discipline you're teaching me now. I—I've never felt

this way before, and although it scares me, I don't want to stop feeling it."

"But is it the feeling, or is it me? Which do you really want? Because the feeling won't last—not the way it is now. It will change. We're not made to hold on to such intense feelings forever."

He finally looked away.

"Look at me," she said. "It's okay to say you don't know. Look at me."

He struggled and finally looked in her eyes once more.

She stepped closer to him, so that she was almost touching him. "If you want to pursue me—if that's what you really want—then you need to answer these questions. Not so much to me, Will, although I want to know the answers too. You need to answer them for yourself. Because when you've been with me for many long years, and what you now find attractive about me is no longer that way, you need to look back and know that you are the one that chose to pursue me."

"So, I'll have no one to blame but mys—"

"No, Will, no. So that you remember that you made the best choice you could have made at the time. And that it'll be the same choice you'll have to make every day of your life, or mine: whether to love me or not."

He clenched his jaw.

"Love's not simple. I wish it was as simple as what you're feeling. I wish it was. And I wish I could share it with you right now, because I can see in your eyes what it's doing to you. I can see how intoxicating it is. But that will wear off."

Will nodded. "Sarai."

"Yes?"

"How do you know all these things?"

She smiled at him, "Because I learn from what I see around me. When I met Chloe, she was in love with someone. Desperately."

He sighed, "All I can say is that I can't imagine ever having anything other than the utmost respect for you. You're better than I am, and—"

"Then I have to ask. If I had insisted last night, and if I had wanted more than just a place to sleep, what would you have done?"



He furrowed his brow.

She waited, still looking up at him.

"I would have said no."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"You wouldn't have taken what you want from me?"

"That's not what I want."

"No?"

He shook his head. "No. At least, that's not what I'm really after."

"What is?"

He raised his hands to put them on her shoulders, but he stopped and returned them to his sides. "What I want is for you to feel the same."

She nodded and then stepped back slightly. "I believe you. But," she lowered her voice to almost a whisper, "you need to earn it."

He pursed his lips and nodded.

"Earn me, Will."

He shook, and he didn't know if his stalwart efforts were enough to hide it from Sarai.

"And don't try to hide yourself from me. I can still see through you." She raised her hand to his face, "Be strong, but don't hide from me." Then she stepped back, "We need to go."

He took a deep breath and nodded, "Okay."

When they had both mounted the motorcycle, Will hesitated to put his arms around Sarai.

She reached behind her and grabbed his arms and pulled them forward. "Don't get weird on me," she said, smiling even though he couldn't see past the visor on her helmet.

But somehow, each knew the other was smiling.

As they rode down the highway, Will would occasionally tighten his arms around Sarai just enough for her to notice, and she would put one of her hands on his forearm. And the miles flew by beneath them.

When the trees that bordered the highway began turning into subdivisions on the outskirts of the city, Sarai got off the highway. She drove into a large parking lot and stepped off, as did Will. They both removed their helmets.

"Will," she said. "Look at me."

He looked steadily at her.

"Here's where you need to control what you feel. I don't know what's going to happen, but you need to remember that I can take care of myself, and you need to trust me."

He nodded.

"I'm serious, Will. If you try to be a hero, you'll get us both killed. Don't let your pride get in the way. If you stay with me, you'll probably find that our roles are going to be reversed more often than not."

"Okay."

She looked at him silently. After a minute, she said, "Are you ready?"

He nodded and put his hand on the knife at his belt.

"I didn't get to train you like I would have wanted, but you know everything you need to know. Control your fear, just like your other emotions. Be strong."

"Like you?"

She smiled, "You listened to Johann too much." Then her face darkened in thought. "Let's go find him."

He clenched his fists and nodded.

They donned their helmets and mounted the motorcycle once more.

\* \* \*

John parked his truck next to a telephone booth near a closed down gas station; it may have been the last booth left in the city, as far as he knew—everyone now had cell phones. Much had changed in the nearly fifty years since he had been beyond the borders of his own rural community.

He stepped out of the truck. Inside the booth were the remainings of a picked-over phone book: many pages had been torn out, and most others had markings of some kind on them. Flipping through the chunks of pages still left, he found that the 'W' section was still largely intact. He looked up the first welding supply company and, once he had deposited thirty-five cents, dialed the number.

"Damnit, Billy, we need to get that brace fixed!" Pat shouted. His usual calm and sarcastic demeanor was replaced with outright anger.

"What you want me to do? Superglue it?"

Pat rubbed his forehead. "Find me a damn welder, that's what you can do."

Billy shrugged, "I've made some calls."

"I swear, if I ever see Sarai again, I'm gonna—" He stopped and shook his head. "How long's it been?"

Billy sighed, "Weeks."

"Damn shame. That girl had talent."

But Billy was silent. His eyes were downcast, his brow furrowed in dark thought.

"Excuse me," sounded a voice.

Pat whipped around, "Oh for the love of Pete, get your ass off my floor and back in the office with all the other customers! Can't you read the damn sign?!"

John's expression remained unchanged despite the verbal blasting. He simply stared at Pat.

Billy looked at him with a curious expression.

"Well?!" Pat said.

"If I overheard you rightly," John said slowly, "I am correct in understanding that Sarai Rahmani worked here?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I had to fire her in absentia for not showing up for nearly a month and for throwing my factory into complete chaos!"

"Pat, calm down," Billy said. He turned to John, "You know Sarai, that's obvious. What are you to her, and what do you want with her?"

"I'm her—a friend. And I'm trying to help her. She's okay, mind you. She's just been unable to return to work." He shrugged, "Circumstances."

"My ass," Pat said. "She in trouble?"

"Yes," John replied, "but not for any wrongdoing, I assure you."

Pat narrowed his eyes.

Billy said, "Well, it's good to hear she's okay. What do you want?"

"I need to know what happened with her."

Pat snorted, "News said she's wanted for murdering her friend's hubby. Supposedly offed him and then split town. A crock, though, if you ask me. That is, unless he was beatin' up on Chloe. If I read that one right, Sarai woulda ripped the throat out of anyone that tried to hurt Chloe. As far as

I know, she might've been protecting her from a bad hubby and helped her hide out somewhere."

John was silent.

Billy looked at Pat briefly and back at John.

Pat said, "Well, that's all we know about it."

John looked into his eyes steadily.

Pat fidgeted and stuffed his hands in his pockets. Finally, he looked away.

John nodded. "I see." He stepped closer to Pat. "You don't have to tell me."

"Ugh," Billy said. "Tell him, Pat."

Pat was silent. He kept his eyes diverted from John's gaze.

"Damn it," Billy said under his breath. "That poor girl. She's about got everyone in this whole damn world after her. Look," he sighed, "we had some visitors a few days after she disappeared. One smelled like a reporter. Another was definitely a cop."

John looked at Billy.

For a moment, Billy was tempted to look away, but he forced himself to hold John's gaze. "You're a lot like her," he said softly.

The other said nothing.

Billy licked his lips, "The cop said if we ever see her again, to call this number." He looked around him at the tables scattered about the factory floor.

Pat reached into his pocket and pulled out a pen and a business card. He handed them to Billy.

Billy took them, glaring at Pat. Finally, he wrote the number down. "Here," he handed it to John. "He also told us to keep our mouths shut or we'd be in for it." He looked over at Pat, his eyes narrowing to slits, then back at John. "A serious type, that cop, but a chump. I killed better in Vietnam."

John accepted the card and nodded.

Pat rubbed his forehead, "Look, I'm sorry. I hope she's going to be okay." He looked up at John briefly and nodded before walking off.

"Hey man," Billy said, "Who are you really?"

"It doesn't matter."

Billy grunted, "If you weren't so damn young, I'd say you were her daddy."

John smirked.

"She's a strong girl, but this is gonna be too much for her. Is she someplace safe?"

John shook his head, "No."

Billy sighed, "Such a good girl."

The other nodded.

"What do you want me to do?"

John smiled, "Make your call."

Officer Gerry Thomas walked into the factory, shoving open the door with the sign that read *Employees Only*. His black shoes were shined perfectly, and his uniform was crisp and neat. He kept his right hand within inches of his sidearm.

"You the man?" Billy said, walking from an alcove, wiping his hands on a rag.

Thomas sneered, "Just tell me where she is."

Billy shrugged, "Don't know, really."

"You called, which means you better know something." He pulled his night stick from his belt.

With a chuckle, Billy shook his head, "You punk ass kids think you can solve all your problems that way?"

"Most of 'em. Where is she? Last chance."

Billy chuckled again, "You know, I've learned one thing over the years about guys who think they're bigger, meaner, and stronger than everyone else."

"Yeah? And what's that, smart ass?" He raised his night stick and brought it swinging down toward Billy's head.

But his arm was ripped behind him with a crack, and he screamed in pain.

"There's always someone stronger," John hissed in his ear. "You wanted to come after my little girl, you scum?" He twisted the officer's arm further.

Thomas screamed, his voice reaching a piercing note.

"She'd probably have had mercy on you, but you're not getting it from me." He twisted further.

"No! No! Stop! I'll tell you—" he screamed, and tears ran from his eyes.

"You want to know what I did to the last pig that hurt her? Hm?" A crack sounded. "I broke his arm with my bare hand."

Billy, despite his years fighting a barbaric war, looked in horror at John. The other's face was twisted into a terrifying visage that seemed to reveal a cruelty that Billy had thought

beyond even the coldest tormenter. "Hey," he said to John, "ease up, man."

Thomas continued to scream. Others from the factory were watching.

"Hey!" Billy shouted at them, "Get your asses back to work!"

They disappeared, although some still peeked, and not one was able to work.

John hissed, "Where's Garrett?"

Thomas shook his head, but he screamed again when John twisted his arm further.

"A little farther and you'll never use this again," John said.

"Okay! Okay! I'll tell you!"

"Then hurry up or I'm gonna twist it off!"

"The Xavier House. He's there, I swear!"

And then Thomas reached under himself and around with his left arm, aiming his pepper spray at John. But when he went to press the button, he found his hand empty.

John threw the pepper spray and then swung his fist into the side of Thomas's head, knocking him unconscious. He then rose and stood up straight.

Billy looked at him, "Looks be damned. You are her daddy, ain't you?"

John looked at him. "You didn't see any of this. And if I were you, I'd tell all the peepers back there that they had better forget it too if they want to live."

Billy nodded. "Hey, wait," he said. "Listen, Sarai's my friend. She's the finest person I've ever met." He clenched his jaw, "You protect her, you got that?"

John nodded, looking down, "I'll do everything I can."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No."

"Come on, man. What can I do?"

John stepped closer to him, "Forget what you saw. You can't help any more than you have."

Billy nodded. "Who are you really?"

John smiled, "Just another friend." He then leaned over and picked up the officer, slinging his limp body over his shoulder. He left the factory without another word.

John drove for several minutes before finding a suitable dumpster in a greasy alley. He tossed the officer into the

dumpster and closed the plastic door. He heard a soft groan from within. But as he was walking away, he paused, his gait ceasing and his hand moving to the knife at his belt. He then turned and walked back toward the dumpster.

"I wonder if you should do that," said a voice behind him.

John nodded and smiled. "That was very convincing. I almost didn't notice you following me."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

John turned to see an Asian man looking back at him. "What do you want?"

"First, I want to convince you not to kill that officer you just threw in the dumpster."

"Why?"

He shrugged, "I wouldn't mind talking with him. Besides, I think you know it wouldn't be right."

"Do I?"

The other nodded. "You revealed yourself in the factory. I am like you." He extended himself toward the barrier, and his aura burned white around him. He then said, "My name is Kenshin Furukami. And you," he squinted slightly, "must be a relation of Sarai Rahmani. Father?"

"What does it matter?"

"It matters because I want to know what you intend to do about Garrett Jansen."

"That's my own business."

"It's mine too."

John chuckled, "You haven't completely hidden your accent, Kenshin Furukami. Why would you come to this country seeking one of *them* when I'm sure they are aplenty in your own?"

Kenshin smirked. He looked at the dumpster for a moment before turning back to John. "What's happened to Sarai?"

John shook his head and snorted, "Nothing." He walked toward his truck.

"Leaving him in my hands?" Kenshin asked, looking over at the dumpster once more.

John slowed but continued toward the truck.

Kenshin took several deliberate paces after him. "You're different from her. Something about you—father or not."

John opened the truck door and sat down behind the wheel.

"I've not met many of our kind. As you know, we are so few. But if I didn't know better, I'd say you were—well, one of *them*."

John froze.

Kenshin walked to the passenger side and opened the door. "You know Garrett, don't you?" After a moment of silence, he said, "May I sit with you? Would at least keep unwelcome ears from hearing."

John slammed his door, "You have five minutes."

Kenshin sat in the passenger seat and sighed, "Such a brief time to say so much." He pulled his knife from his belt and stared at it. "Have you ever seen someone you love after she's been—hurt?"

John was motionless, but his eyes shifted toward Kenshin.

"I met a wonderful woman. Her name is Kimiko." Kenshin smiled, but then his face darkened. "How long have you lived in this country?"

"About fifty years."

"So you weren't around for the war. Not that it would have made much of a difference here. I saw what happened to my own country during and after the war." He sighed, "Not that I'm saying there was a good guy in *that* conflict, of course."

John was silent.

"At least there wasn't a good guy at the time. But we still pay for it. Anyway, Kimiko has a sister. A young sister. Some men from one of the hellhole American military bases—well, you know what happens. They took her when she was walking home from school." He looked at John, then turned his head to look out the windshield once more. "I didn't know Kimiko at the time. I met her and her family when they reported it to the police and rumor spread. It wasn't the first time this sort of thing had happened.

"And, of course, the police could do nothing. So, I talked to Kimiko's family. You know how it is—figured I'd find out who it was and rough them up a little."

"Your first mistake," John whispered.

Kenshin looked at him with a sharp gaze, but then he nodded slowly. "Yes. Anyway, they couldn't tell me much. I never found out who it was. But I started to become friends with Kimiko. We eventually decided to marry. I told her about myself, and she accepted me.



"Then one day when we were walking back together from the train station, we saw several Americans following a schoolgirl. Two were obviously soldiers, but one was not. A light-haired fellow. Cold eyes." Kenshin's lip curled. "I told Kimiko to hurry home, and I followed them.

"I followed them as carefully as I could. Always hiding myself as best I knew how. But the light-haired one—he knew. Somehow, he knew." Kenshin nodded. "So he and the soldiers scattered. Then the light-haired man revealed himself—one of *them*. And I was afraid; Kimiko was on her own. But the little girl was okay." He smiled, but his smile turned into a grimace. "Kimiko wasn't at home when I returned there."

John was silent.

"She returned the next day. They had found her and—hurt her. Well," he blinked and inhaled deeply. "I shared myself with her. Tried as best I could to help her. But it wasn't enough. It was like they killed part of her."

John nodded, "I understand."

"Do you really?"

He looked intently at Kenshin. "Yes. I do."

Kenshin looked back at him for a moment then looked down. "Well, there were—complications. We haven't married. But when I return, I hope to marry her."

"Your time is almost up."

"Indeed it is," Kenshin said. "And here I sit."

"So you came here for vengeance?"

Kenshin smiled, "I told Kimiko that I came to find someone who could help her."

John raised an eyebrow.

"Not very convincing, I know. But part of me wanted it to be true. And when I saw Sarai in the club, I thought maybe I could make it true. Maybe I could keep my word to Kimiko."

"Sarai can't help you. Not in the way you want."

"I gathered as much. Something's not right with her."

John nodded, "It's my fault." He looked at Kenshin, "I wish I could help you myself. I would if I could. But I can't. And now, Kenshin Furukami, I must go."

"I see. Off to find Garrett. He knows the man I'm looking for. I'll follow you if you won't take me with you."

John looked at him gravely. "Yes, he knows who you're looking for. And so do I. His name is Petrovic."

Kenshin started and looked at John with surprise.

"Do not pursue him. This is not a good place to seek revenge. This city is in their grip, and they are too much for you, and for me."

Kenshin shook his head, "I don't have any choice anymore. I can't do anything to help my Kimiko, so I will—" He stopped.

"What? Die trying? Don't be a fool. Let this go. Do you want to make your journey here worthwhile? Then go find Sarai. Find her and convince her to leave with you. Take her and go far away. Don't ever come back here."

"But what he did to—"

"How old are you?"

Kenshin stopped and let out a brief laugh. "About one hundred and seventy five. Why?"

"I'm much older, Kenshin Furukami. Much, much older. I've seen it all. You're fighting a battle you cannot win. I know Garrett. He knows you're here. And if he knows, Petrovic knows. You will not get a fair fight to avenge your woman. You will be set up, and they will kill you." John shook his head. "Go home and live. Take care of your own as best you can."

"And what about Petrovic?"

John shrugged, "What about him? If you kill him, another will take his place."

"So, when will it end? How long will they have their way with everything and everyone they see?"

"I don't know. But have hope."

"What hope is there?"

"Kenshin, I've seen empires rise and fall, and I've seen times so dark I thought even the sun itself would go out. I've seen your kind—our kind—survive all of it. We're too few to just pick fights and expect to win. But our time will come. It's on its way."

"How many of us are there, would you say?"

"Just a few. Me. You. Kimiko. Sarai."

"That's it?"

"Probably."

"Well."

"Trust me—don't try to do anything about Garrett or Petrovic. Find Sarai, leave the city. Live another day."

Kenshin looked at him for a moment before saying, "I'll think about it."

John shrugged, "I guess that's the best I can do, then."

Kenshin exited the truck without another word and disappeared.

John looked back at the dumpster. An arm was reaching out, trying to find some purchase on the side. He shook his head and started the truck, then drove off without another look.

When he reached the Xavier House and parked across the street from it, he pulled from his pocket the sailing pamphlet he often carried with him. After looking intently at the picture, he closed his eyes tightly for several minutes. He then tossed the pamphlet aside and exited the truck. And walking up to the great wooden doors in the front of the building, he knocked twice and waited.

\* \* \*

"Sarai!" Will shouted, his voice muffled by his helmet and made nearly inaudible by the roar of the motorcycle's engine.

Another police cruiser almost spun out as it turned a corner to pursue them.

"I see it!" Sarai shouted.

Her nearly impossible maneuvers had already jarred Will to the bone, and he felt as though he had received several punishing doses of whiplash. He kept his arms tight around her, feeling completely helpless and trusting her entirely to save them both.

"Hang on!" she shouted, giving him almost no warning before she put her leg down and spun the motorcycle, revving the engine once more and speeding in the opposite direction.

The police cruiser, being much less wieldy, tried a similar maneuver but only managed to run into a light pole.

Sarai wove the motorcycle in and out of traffic like a thread in a loom.

Will closed his eyes tightly.

Finally, she made several turns, ending up in an alley, where she brought the motorcycle to a stop. Both riders dismounted, and Sarai scanned the area. She mumbled under her breath as she removed the license plate from her motorcycle and took her last spare from the sleeve. "Not that it'll do much good," she said. When she had replaced it, she looked at Will. "These

damn cameras everywhere are making it impossible to get anywhere."

"I'm not even sure where we're trying to get to," Will said with a sigh. He rubbed his neck. "What should we do?"

"Not sure. Let me think."

Will nodded and paced around.

"Johann came back here," she whispered. "Means he knows about Jansen, but how would he find him?" She furrowed her brow. A moment later, she opened her eyes wide, "He'll try to find someone who knows me. Welding. The factory." She turned to Will, "Let's go."

He nodded as he walked over, "Where?"

She didn't answer, and when the motorcycle roared to life once more, she accelerated mercilessly.

"Yeah, you had to sit there and watch him attack a damn cop!" Pat shouted. "You know what they're gonna do? Even halfway decent cops would come in here and arrest most of our asses. But these brutes? They'll probably just kill us all!"

"Man up," Billy said. "I've been in worse situations."

Pat shook his head.

"Listen, we need to just—Sarai!"

Pat's head snapped to the side, and he saw Sarai striding toward them across the factory floor. Will was beside her. "Sarai, you're fired, damn you!" He walked over and gave her a hug. "We were worried sick about you!"

Sarai nodded and smiled, "Thanks, Pat. I'm sorry for—" she looked around. "What kind of slackers do you have working for you?"

Pat chuckled, "You always carried three-quarters of the weight around here." He looked at Will, "You toting this fellow around with you now, Sarai?"

Sarai nodded, "Yep."

Billy smiled.

"Hey, Billy."

"Hey, babe." He winked at her.

Pat scratched his head, "We had a visitor. Billy and I were just discussing him."

"Johann—John?" Sarai said.

"Never got a name. Reminded us of you, though. How'd you know?"

But Sarai didn't respond. Her brow was furrowed in thought.

"What happened?" Will asked.

"Oh," Pat said, "he basically planted us neck deep in it. Beat the snot out of a cop."

Will snorted.

"Where did he go?" Sarai asked.

"He got the name Xavier House out of the cop," Billy said. "I assume that's where he went."

Sarai raised her hand to her mouth and chewed on the side of her finger.

"Hey, listen," Billy said. "I don't know what's going on, but I think you're in over your head this time, babe."

Sarai smiled at him, "Sometimes it's forced on you, Billy."

He chuckled softly. "Well, what do you need us to do?"

She shook her head and put her hand on his shoulder, "Nothing. Just look after each other."

Billy nodded, his face becoming grave. "Well, you take care of yourself. And you," he turned to Will, "you watch out for her, or you'll answer to me."

Will nodded sheepishly.

"Come on, Will," Sarai said. She nodded to Pat and Billy for the last time.

When the two were mounting the motorcycle once more, Kenshin appeared and walked toward them.

"Kenshin!" Sarai said.

He nodded, "We cannot talk here."

"You've seen Johann, haven't you?"

"Your—yes. I have."

Sarai paused a moment in thought, then said, "Do you remember where we met the first time?"

Police sirens were crescendoing around them.

Kenshin nodded.

"Two hours."

"Very well. I will see you there." He turned and trotted away, disappearing around the corner of a building across the street from the factory.

"Where is it we're going?" Will asked.

"You shouldn't sleep in so much. Get on," she said as she mounted the motorcycle, hiding her face with her helmet once more.

Will paused, looking at her for a moment. Something about Sarai had changed, as if she was reverting to her distant and inaccessible self. The glimmer of warmth she had shown him had turned back to frost, and he felt like a tagalong—and not even remotely like a friend. He was just a burden; maybe a child being looked after for his own good. He looked down in confusion before putting his helmet on and sitting behind her.

They disappeared from sight.

\* \* \*

The motorcycle sped away, and soon, the roar of its engine became indistinguishable from the low hum of city traffic.

Then, from the shadows of a loading bay adjacent to the factory, Petrovic stepped into the light. He dialed a number on his cell phone and then raised it to his ear.

\* \* \*

"Yes, sir?" said the butler, who was wearing a neat, perfectly tailored black suit.

"I'm here to see Garrett."

"I'm terribly sorry, sir. He is unavailable at the moment."

"Okay," John chuckled, lightly scratching his forehead. "You can let me in to see him, or I'll rip this door off its hinges and make you eat it before I go in to see him anyway."

The man looked at John for several moments, then opened the door wide. "Please come in, sir."

"Thank you." John walked past him, looking around at the finely decorated interior. The walls were paneled with dark wood.

"I will inform him of your arrival mister—"

"Tell him Johann is here."

"Very well, sir."

John looked around at the furnishings, the stunning artwork, and the bookshelf lined with old tomes in perfect condition. But his eye was drawn mostly to a portrait that hung on a far wall. It was lit cunningly, so that the image of the woman it portrayed glowed as if the light came from within her. He walked up to it and examined it carefully.

"Beautiful, isn't she, Johann?"

John turned slowly.

Garrett nodded curtly to him. "It's been so long."

"Let's get down to it."

Garrett raised his hand slightly. "Petrovic told me a little about your run-in."

"That little pig come squealing back to mama, then?"

"I warned him to stay away from you. I had no intention of involving you or even seeking you. You are no concern of mine." He started to turn away, but he stopped and looked over his shoulder. "At least you weren't until now."

John snorted.

"Petrovic is a bottom feeder, and he occasionally does work that I have no taste for."

"How nice for you."

Garrett shrugged, "I don't enjoy it any more than you apparently do. I would prefer to be left alone to my art." He motioned to the portrait, "Do you know who that is?"

"I have some guesses."

"Indeed. That's the most beautiful, wonderful woman that ever graced the face of this planet. Did Sarai tell you her name?"

John was silent.

"Veronica. She was perfection embodied."

"Not so perfect. You bastard, she murdered Sarai's friend. And I may not know everything about what happened, but I know you're in the middle of it."

Garrett paused ever so slightly. "Since when has violence ever bothered you?"

He fell silent.

"Johann," he said as he walked over to a wet bar built into an exquisite wood cabinet, "may I get you something?"

John made no response.

Garrett sighed as he poured some dark brown liquid into a glass and sipped it. "Like I said, I really have no beef with you. We've both become civilized men. Look around! So, maybe I chose the more refined city life—we're still the same. You've seen my art. I've heard a little about your quiet life. We both just want to be left alone. Neither of us quite fits in with our own kind, do we, Johann?"

Still, he was silent.

"Unfortunately for you, I do have a problem with Sarai. I'll tell you what: I want you to walk out that door right now

and return to your farm. Stay out of my way. Stay out of my business. I'll forget you were ever here."

Johann snorted, "Of course you know I won't do that."

"It's blood for blood," Garrett hissed. "She murdered my daughter, Veronica. Her life is mine. Petrovic couldn't manage it, so I will when she comes looking for you."

"She won't follow me."

"No?"

"No."

Garrett snorted and shook his head, "So naive for being so old. Or perhaps just blinded. She fled to you, and now she'll follow you."

"Blood for blood. Mine for hers. It's a fair trade."

Garrett shook his head, "Only the blood of the murderer will do."

"Don't give me that crap. Your daughter started it by murdering Sarai's friend. And Sarai just defended herself!"

Garrett looked at Johann and shook his head. "So damned simplistic. Is it really that black and white?" He paused and looked down at the floor, squinting as though he was looking into the past. "I was quite content with my wife, Gail, and my art." He chuckled softly, "And then she got pregnant. But I had neither the desire nor the time for a child—I told her to end it. Stubborn woman. She had to go through with it. I suppose after a while I became used to the idea of having a child. Besides, Gail wanted it, so she could take care of it." He paused, then said, "Do you know what happened when Veronica was born?"

"I expected a son, of course," Garrett said with a nostalgic smile. "Wouldn't you have too? But it wasn't a boy." He looked intently at John. "It was a girl. A *girl*, Johann." He sighed. "Her mother was so vibrant—so alive—until the moment they pulled Veronica from her. And when they did, Veronica took the life from her. It was—all I can say is beautiful. Now that I look back, anyway. Gail's eyes just went blank, and Veronica's eyes lit up like fire, and I saw her aura all around her."

John's eyes narrowed.

"But that wasn't enough. She needed more. Every so often, she had to have more life. It was how she lived. It is who she was."

"That's sick."



"Oh it is, is it?! You stand there and judge me and my daughter for something neither of us could control?"

"How many people died so she could live?"

"And what right have *you* to ask that?!" Garrett's raging face then calmed, and his voice softened. "Besides, it makes no difference. Veronica had as much a right to live as anyone else. So if she took their lives so she could keep living, she was just doing what she needed to survive. That's the way this world works, in case you've never looked around in however many thousand years you've been alive, Johann."

"And Sarai did what she needed to survive."

Garrett bared his teeth. "And now I'm doing what I need to survive, you moralistic scum! Veronica took my wife from me, and *no one* was going to take my daughter. She was all I had left of my wife. I gave up decades of my life to keep her alive. I paid everyone I had to, including that worthless bottom feeder Constantine, to protect my Veronica and to keep her healthy."

"All so she could play black widow?"

Garrett chuckled and lowered his head. "Is that what you think it was? She had no interest in men. She did what she had to so she could get their wives. Sometimes their daughters. You want to know why? Because she wanted to find one of *your kind*. One just like Sarai. One who gives life and is overflowing with it."

"Sarai isn't that way."

"Oh, I know. And Brian Cass found out too. But Veronica couldn't pass up the chance. And neither could I. To think of it: Sarai could have been all she would ever need. Veronica could stop spending her whole life just trying to stay alive another day! It could have all ended. All the lives that she had to take would not have been in vain. And who knows? She might truly have been perfect: everything that she was, and everything that we are. A woman who could cross the barrier."

John looked at Garrett with disgust.

"This is the way our daughters are, Johann. It is perfectly natural," Garrett said.

"Your daughter."

Garrett snorted. "You just think you're so different from me because your aura looks different."

"I am different."

"Oh? And all the things you've done over the years—they are not signed in blood with your name?"

John shook his head. "Not anymore."

"I see. So all the lives *you* took—they don't matter. You killed for what, centuries? You got where you are on the blood of countless lives. But my Veronica? She's a monster because she did what she was created to do?"

"It's not about me, it's about Sarai! She did nothing to deserve death."

Garrett smiled, "And she's never taken a life? Or, should I say, more than two?"

John was silent.

"No, I cannot accept your offer. Only Sarai's life will do. Only her blood will pay for what she has done: wasted all the lives that fed Veronica."

"You *owe* me."

Garrett laughed and shook his head.

"You don't care about rules," John said.

Garrett shrugged, "If the rule works, I use it. Isn't that how it is for you?"

"No. Not anymore."

"I see. So, what happened to you?"

"What?" For a moment, the color drained from John's face. He felt that his final bluff—that Sarai had not changed him—was on the verge of being called.

"With that one woman. What was her name? And that backward emir that wanted her dead or alive—preferably alive as part of his harem. She rattle your skull? It wasn't *that* many years ago. What, about sixty now?"

"Fifty-nine."

"What did she do to you? Hm? Did you fall in love with her after you," he snorted, "raped her?"

John said nothing.

"Well, you proved yourself my superior in that little contest. I didn't manage to find where she was until you had already done your work. But no, it wasn't enough for you to be better than me. You had to spite me, and that emir. So, what? Did killing her give you a change of heart?"

Still, John was silent.

Garrett's brow furrowed, then he took a small step toward him. "No. You didn't kill her, did you? You let her live and—"

He nearly gasped. "Sarai is your daughter. Ah!" He nodded, "It makes sense now. Not just a benefactor. Her father." He sipped his drink and set the glass aside. "I see. Such a strange series of coincidences, don't you think?" He looked away for a moment as if trying to piece together a puzzle in his mind.

John's eyes narrowed.

Garrett then said, "My daughter was taken from me, so I will allow you *no* comfort in yours. Her life is mine, and you will feel what I had to feel, seeing almost everything that I lived for taken from me." He breathed deeply. "Look at that portrait, Johann."

John's eyes reluctantly turned to it.

"Look at how beautiful she was. And your daughter? A nothing. Not even pleasing to look at. Just the leavings of, well, of *you*. No, I do not accept your trade. I do give you one last chance, though: leave now, and live. But if you get in my way, I swear I'll kill you. This time will be different." He clenched and unclenched his right hand.

John laughed. "No. You're the one who has one last chance." He knew that his bluff still stood—Garrett was only offering to let him walk away under the false assumption that John was still by far the stronger and more skilled a killer. But part of him knew that in offering a trade, he had already tipped his hand. He was not in a position of strength.

"Very well." Garrett turned to the wet bar and opened a drawer in it. He looked in it and saw the framed picture of his pregnant wife, Gail. The glass was cracked. He paused for a moment. As he reached slowly toward the drawer, his hand shook. His fingers slowly traced Gail's outline in the picture. And then Garrett stiffened, and he moved his hand to a walkie-talkie that sat in the drawer next to the picture. He clicked the button on it twice.

Several doors into the room opened, and a number of men walked in, encircling John. All appeared to be young—each in his twenties at most—but their eyes betrayed their ages. Several of them visibly carried knives.

John's bluff had been called. He now waited.

Garrett turned and looked at him once more. "We'll see what happens. I know you're good, but not this good. And you and I aren't *that* far apart. It'll be different this time."

Still John was motionless.

Then Garrett's eyes strayed momentarily to the scar on his hand.

And John attacked. But Garrett responded with greater speed and strength, holding John's knife hand at bay.

A look of fear quickly departed from Garrett's face. "Well," he said, holding the other's shaking arm. "The years have finally taken their toll." He struck, knocking John back onto the floor.

And then attacks came at John from all directions; he quickly rose and struggled to block as many as he could. His knife was finally knocked out of his hand and he was pinned. Black auras were all around him.

Garrett stepped closer and looked down at him as he struggled. "Was it worth it? Was she worth it?"

John bared his teeth but said nothing.

"If Sarai had just given in to Veronica, well, you'd have lived longer, and Veronica—she'd be perfect. But now, Sarai's life will just go to waste. Poured out on the ground. And your daughter will be dead, just like mine." Garrett started to turn, but he paused. "And I know about that other one—the Asian. What's his name?"

John said nothing. He no longer even struggled against the overwhelming combined strength that held him down on the floor.

"No matter. I know he's been around, following me. He's sly, but not too smart. Lacks the years, I suppose," Garrett said. "Well, anyhow, he's probably with Sarai now. And no doubt they'll try to kill the big bad man that's made her life so miserable. Forget how miserable they made *me* by taking my daughter from me." He then bent closer to John. "You—and she—should have stayed away from me.

"There are very few things I need. And fewer things I want. All I wanted was my art and my daughter. You took my daughter. And now, I've had to mortgage everything I own—even all my art—to pay for this very assistance," he looked at the men around him who were holding John down. "Everyone I know—everyone who knew Veronica—who could help sweep you from my life." Garrett bared his teeth. "Your daughter will *pay* for what she did to mine. And she's going to feel it, Johann. She's going to feel all the pain she has caused me. So you can think about that until I decide when

to kill you too. I'm going to cut her until she starts crying like the little girl she is."

John's face was blank.

Garrett spit in his face. "Maybe I'll make you watch. You can watch her suffer like I had to watch my Veronica suffer." He stood up straight and spoke to the men holding John. "Make him—compliant. But don't kill him."

Punishing blows rained down, and John quickly fell into blackness.

# Conscience

The emir of the small Middle Eastern province looked at Garrett and Johann. He sat in an ornate chair, garbed in silk and linen, with fine jewels. Two tall, muscular men stood on either side of him, their arms folded. "I'm surprised, with the reward I offer, you are the only two to present yourselves for this task," he said in Arabic.

Johann was silent.

Garrett looked sidelong at Johann.

The emir laughed, "So, neither of you has anything to say for himself? How about you?" He looked at Garrett.

"I only do what I do out of need."

"And what is it you need?" the emir asked.

"Freedom. Freedom from the burdens of pursuing money when I should be pursuing something more—refined."

"And what is that?"

"Art."

The emir snickered. "Art?"

"The whole world burns," Garrett said. "Nothing matters but the beauty we capture. It is all that lasts." He paused and then spoke in an unfamiliar language, "Not that you would know anything about it, you swine."

The emir's eyes narrowed, then he shifted his gaze.

"Johann! Speak up!"

Johann still said nothing, but his eyes bored into the emir.

The emir looked away and then nodded slowly, "He says the most who need not say anything. It's you." He pointed to Johann.

"If I may, my lord," Garrett said.

"What?"

"A competition? You have nothing to lose."

The emir looked back and forth between them. "Normally, I'd tell Johann to kill you. He has been in my employ in the

past. But I need someone in my permanent service. Perhaps you would consider it if you win this—competition. I would keep you as my retainer, and you would have time for whatever your pleasure.” He looked back and forth. “You both know what I want. You will find the woman and bring her back to me to be my wife. If she refuses, kill her.”

Johann then spoke. “You want a competition? Then you’ll pay for it.”

“No, indeed. This competition is for my entertainment. The price remains the same.”

Johann snorted. In a flash, he disappeared and reappeared behind Garrett, his knife at the other’s throat. His aura flared black.

Garrett gasped, and the emir started.

Johann bared his teeth. “Pathetic,” he whispered in Garrett’s ear. He then withdrew and disappeared from the emir’s court.

“Well,” the emir said, laughing, “what are you waiting for? Go find her!”

When Garrett had emerged from the emir’s palace, he found Johann standing and waiting for him.

“You get in my way, and I’ll kill you,” Johann said.

“I dare you to try that again,” Garrett responded, but his voice belied his insolence.

Johann disappeared, but Garrett moved as well. Their auras flared like liquid darkness.

Garrett slashed his knife several times, but each attack missed Johann by a wide margin.

Johann circled but did little more. He taunted Garrett with smiles and motions intended to draw attacks. Finally, the two clashed, each deflecting the other’s knife hand. But Johann was the more cunning of the two. Drawing Garrett forward with a feigned stumble, Johann reversed directions almost instantly, driving himself forward into Garrett, shoving the other’s knife hand aside.

Garrett then saw Johann’s face inches from his own, and the bitter edge of a knife was pushing against the skin of his neck, drawing blood.

In the next instant, Johann knocked Garrett face first to the dusty ground and twisted his right arm behind him. Garrett’s knife went flying. “Art?” Johann said.

Garrett was silent, except that he groaned when Johann increased the force on his twisted arm.

"I'm an artist too." Johann then slowly slid his blade between the bones of Garrett's hand.

Garrett clenched his teeth, his breath coming in sharp hisses, but he held his voice.

"You're my canvas," he said as he watched the blood run down the other's arm. "And you'll never forget me." He then twisted the blade.

Garrett screamed.

"Remember that. I'll cut you in worse places if I ever see you again. The tightfisted emir thinks he can waste my time with his petty rewards for a competition with *you*?" He laughed. "So he wants this woman but doesn't want to pay to get her. Maybe I'll have my way with her and give her to him—already used. He'd probably kill her just for that. Or maybe I'll just kill her myself right in front of him." He leaned close to Garrett's ear, his blade still through the other's hand. "Either way," Johann hissed, "next time I see *you*, I'll kill you." He ripped his knife free then disappeared in a black flash.

\* \* \*

Three men had already fallen instantly to Johann's blade. His black aura flared about him, and he strode purposefully through the village. Most of its inhabitants stayed out of his way.

And then he saw her.

She looked back at him in anger before disappearing around the corner of a ramshackle house. A man grabbed her arm and pulled her, "Come on, Shamara!"

Johann didn't change his pace. As he rounded the corner, Shamara struck at him with a knife. He grabbed her hand and twisted until she screamed and dropped the blade, but she swung her other fist. He easily blocked her blow.

She turned and ran once more.

He continued to stride purposefully after her.

Two more men attacked him with knives, but they fell almost simultaneously with slit throats. Finally, he saw her run into a larger structure. Following, he walked through the doorway.



In her hands was a scimitar, and she held it in front of her, the same look of anger on her face.

Johann then put his blade in his belt and stepped toward her.

Shamara swung the long blade. It looked to her as if it had passed through him without doing any harm. She screamed and swung it again and again.

Johann's movements were so fast, the woman's eyes could not see them. But she could see his aura.

She continued to swing the blade until finally Johann knocked it away. Then she held up her fists, baring her teeth.

Johann stepped forward and casually blocked the flurry of punches she threw at him. And then he struck back, his fist crashing into the side of her face and knocking her to the ground.

She rose to her feet once more.

Johann shook his head, "So strong." He struck her again.

Shamara stood up once more. Blood ran down her cheek and out of her mouth. Her breath hissed through clenched teeth. She swung her fist.

Johann grabbed it in mid-flight and struck her across her face once more. He then kicked her, and she rolled onto her back. Reaching down, he tore her clothes from her.

All the while, she struggled against him, swinging her fists and kicking.

He then fell on her, exerting himself to hold her still.

She screamed and still struggled, but to no avail. He was near the barrier, bringing him overwhelming strength—and pulling her toward it too. His aura was like a dark cloud that surrounded them both.

When he was finished with her, he grabbed his knife.

But then her own aura blazed white around her. Her eyes had been closed tightly the entire time he had raped her, but now she opened them and looked intently into his.

Johann felt himself trapped. Shamara was reaching across the barrier, and her aura shone like a great fire. It burned him like flame, but he could not pull himself away from her. And her eyes held him captive.

The white fire seemed to be entering him, consuming him from the inside out.

And the whole time, Shamara's gaze held him fixed. Tears ran down her face, and anger mixed with shame in her eyes. She held her hand across the barrier until her aura had extinguished the blackness around her attacker.

For what seemed like a breathless eternity, Johann was sure he was dead. He felt the last shred of his life burn away in Shamara's fiery aura, and blackness closed his vision down toward a distant point. Just as he reached the edge of death and began slipping into that dark abyss, he was jerked back.

Shamara's face had softened ever so slightly, and she released him from her grip after pulling him back from death.

Johann's jaw quivered. He dropped his knife and rose slowly to his feet, his eyes filled with surprise but still looking into Shamara's. He then looked down at his hands and around the room. His gaze returned to the woman.

She cried as she tried to cover herself with her torn clothes, but she still looked up at Johann. Her aura continued to burn white around her.

Johann stepped backward until he was against the wall, then he slid down slowly until he was sitting on the ground. He looked at his hands once more, as if they were no longer his own.

When Shamara had covered herself, her clothes in disarray but still enough to hide her skin, she stood and looked at him. "Now, you will have me with you forever," she whispered.

He looked up at her. The room spun around him. He could not understand what had happened: everything was backwards. She was his to kill; his to have any way he wanted. And now, she stood over him. He shivered.

She turned to leave.

"Wait," he whispered.

She stopped at the doorway but did not turn.

"What did you do to me?"

Shamara whipped around, "I defended myself! It's all I had left!" She pulled her tattered clothes tighter around her. "I shared myself with— with— with *you!*" She turned once more.

"Wait!"

"What?! Did you not get enough the first time?!" She shivered.

He shook his head, "Why didn't you let me—why didn't you kill me?"

Shamara was silent.

Johann furrowed his brow, then said, "Look. The emir—he—"

"I know! He wants me to be his wife. Never! Especially not now."

Johann slowly rose to his feet. He walked over to where he had dropped his knife, and he picked it up. "Come here."

She shook her head and held up her fists once more, her clothes hanging loosely off her.

He held up his left hand. "I won't hurt you anymore. Just come here."

She slowly stepped toward him, her eyes wide with suspicion.

When she was near him, he reached behind her head and gently gathered her hair into his fist. He raised his knife.

Shamara shrank away.

"Hold still," he said. "I won't hurt you." He put the knife behind her and cut her black hair from her head. He then wiped around her mouth with it, smearing her blood on her face and in the locks of her hair. Knotting it, he then stuffed it into his belt. "Now, you are dead. Take my name. Rahmani. Leave here. Do not come back."

Shamara shook as she slowly raised her hand to her head, feeling her now short hair. She then looked at him, "The emir will find me."

"No, he won't."

She still looked at him with anger and suspicion.

"What is your name?"

"Shamara."

He nodded. "A good name for you. Fitting for someone so strong."

She said nothing.

"Now go—Shamara." He set his knife on the ground and turned his back to her, closing his eyes.

Shamara looked down at the knife and then back at Johann. Her eyes moved back and forth, and her hand slowly reached down toward it. She grasped the handle and started to raise it, and then she stabbed it into the dirty floor. Straightening and turning, she ran from the room.

Johann stood silently, knowing what she had done. He then turned and picked up the knife. As he walked through the

village, every face fled from him, and he went unchallenged. The sun was burning brightly in the sky, bringing with it the oppressive midday heat. He covered his face with a dirty white linen.

For some time he wandered in no particular direction. He found himself going in circles at times, and other times in certain seemingly purposeful directions.

Hours later, several horsemen rode into the village. At their head was Garrett, who dismounted and grabbed a lone woman by her neck. "Where is Shamara Quraishi? Answer!"

No one helped the woman. The village had already been cowed.

Garrett drew his knife and pointed it at her eye.

The woman cried but said nothing.

And then Johann appeared. "I told you not to get in my way."

Garrett looked at him, his eyes narrowing to slits. He let the woman fall to the ground beside him, then raised two fingers of his wounded hand, which was now bandaged.

The two riders who entered the village with him dismounted and drew their knives. Their black auras flared about them. Then all three attacked Johann.

Johann's strength, speed, and facility with a knife exceeded theirs, but his aura surprised them all—including himself. It burned a bright white and was no longer the black cloud that he had known for more than two thousand years. He gasped when he saw it as he extended himself toward the barrier, but his instincts were well honed to the point that he was able to set the distraction aside and concentrate on his defense: it was the same single-mindedness that had kept him alive for so long.

One of the riders fell quickly to Johann's blade, having attacked with foolish abandon. He flung himself at Johann without concern for his lack of balance. And he went down with a slit throat.

Garrett and the other rider were more cautious. They slowly circled Johann until Garrett was in front of him and the other behind. The rider attacked, but Johann easily blocked his strike and flipped him over his back, nearly throwing the rider's body into Garrett.

Garrett's blade slashed, but Johann avoided its deadly arcs. The other rider quickly returned to his feet and resumed his own offensive.

But their attack was no longer coordinated, and Johann redirected a slash of the rider's knife, causing Garrett to nearly stumble in avoiding the blade of his own comrade.

Then Johann struck. He approached the barrier as closely as he could, and the rider's movements slowed to sluggishness. Johann sped forward, driving his knife into the rider's chest. Withdrawing quickly, he then faced Garrett.

Garrett's eyes darted back and forth. He then attacked once more, his knife slashing.

Johann avoided the blade, waiting for his opportunity. And when Garrett began to tire, his strikes losing their crispness, Johann grabbed his arm in mid-strike and twisted it, sending the blade flying.

Once more, Garrett was on the ground, his right arm twisted behind him.

"And here we are again. You had to test me."

"What did you expect me to do? Let this opportunity pass?" Garrett hissed.

Johann prodded the bandaged hand with his knife.

Garrett groaned through clenched teeth. "If you're going to kill me, then kill me."

But Johann just looked down at him.

When the killing strike didn't come, Garrett chuckled nervously. "You are the best warrior I've ever met, no doubt. No one else has ever challenged me. But this is not who I am. It's only what I do for now. The emir's money would have paid my way to—somewhere far away from here."

Johann was silent.

"So," Garrett tried to look up at him. "What happened to you? I wouldn't mind knowing before I die."

"Normally, I *would* kill you," Johann said. "But not today. Here." He dropped the bloody locks of Shamara's hair on Garrett's face.

Garrett spat and shook his head. When he realized what Johann had done, he fell silent.

Johann released him and stepped back. "Go get your reward from that pig emir."

Garrett rose, the locks in his hand. He then looked up at Johann. "What happened?" His eyes had narrowed. "You are one of *them* now?"

"I am the same man I've always been." He gripped his knife more tightly. "Leave before I change my mind about you."

Garrett smiled grimly.

"Garrett."

The other looked back, his foot already in the stirrup of his horse.

"You owe me," Johann said.

Garrett's eyes narrowed, but he nodded curtly before mounting his horse and riding off.

Johann stood silently for a minute. The woman that Garrett had accosted was still on the ground, shaking. He walked over to her and helped her to her feet.

She looked up at him and then shrank away, her face twisting in horror.

"Shh, no, listen," he said. "Listen!"

She became motionless, but her eyes were still full of fear.

"Shamara. Shamara Quraishi. Where is she?"

The woman was silent. No one else showed his face on the street. All doors to houses and buildings in the village were closed.

"Tell me. I won't hurt you." Finally, after she seemed to have frozen in fear, Johann shook her. "Tell me!"

"I don't know! She left. She left!"

"Which way?!"

"North," she said, still shaking.

He released her, "Go on. Go home."

She took two steps backward from him and then turned, running frantically and screaming unintelligibly.

The other two horses stood by, neighing and shaking their heads. Johann walked up to one, then mounted it and rode north.

For the next three years, Johann rode from village to village, traveling thousands of miles. Many villagers knew him too well already, and in those places, information was scarce. In other places, he received contradictory reports: some said Shamara went south, others west, and some said she had died months ago.

All the while, Johann slowly grew more panicked as what had happened became more real to him. In some sense Shamara had indeed delivered a killing strike: the man he

had been for thousands of years—the man he had been for longer than he could remember—was slowly slipping away from him. And he was afraid of what would be left when that man was finally gone.

His queries of the people he met—villagers and nomads, rich and poor—became more frantic. He didn't even know what finding Shamara would do for him; he felt driven as if by something beyond himself. He didn't know what he would say or do when he found her, whether to ask her what had happened to him or to ask her forgiveness—or both.

The worst part of his journey was the voice. It grew inside him. First, after Shamara had changed him, it was silent; he just felt its presence. Then it began speaking, not in words, but in emotions. When he had beaten a villager for not answering his questions about Shamara, it lashed him, and it was all that kept him from slaughtering the poor soul—something he would have done without hesitation before Shamara.

The emotions he felt were mostly short and sharp at first, like brief flashes of light to eyes too accustomed to the darkness. But on top of this was a growing dull ache: a sense of everything he had done, and everything he was. It tormented him day and night, stealing his sleep, making his food dull and tasteless, and driving him ever harder to find a hoped-for cure. A cure he hoped lay with Shamara.

Nearly three years after his quest began, he was reduced to traveling on foot, occasionally begging for food and money to get him to his next destination. He had returned to several villages and cities a number times, never feeling himself any closer to Shamara. His face was covered in a scraggly beard, and he was gaunt and clothed in tatters.

And then he found her. His previous two stops had been in villages where he was unknown, and news of a wandering woman reached his ears: she was fleeing from a hunter. Some offhand words even indicated she had a child with her—a very young girl—but he could not be sure.

Shamara was staying at an inn. It was broad daylight, but the innkeeper said she was in her room. He seemed loath to allow Johann to see her, but he was quickly cowed by the look in Johann's eye, and by his knife.

Johann stood outside her door, and then he knocked softly.  
No response.

He opened it slowly and looked inside. The lone window was covered with a dark fabric, and the brown room was nearly black.

Shamara lay on the bed.

Johann approached and kneeled on the dirty floor beside it.

She was asleep. Her breathing was shallow.

"Shamara," he whispered. "Shamara, please wake up."

She opened her eyes slowly, but she showed no surprise when she saw him. "Make it quick," she whispered.

"No. I am not here to hurt you." He shook his head slowly. "What is wrong with you?"

"I am old," she whispered, closing her eyes as she struggled to speak. Her face still looked young, but her eyes seemed ancient. "Tired," she said.

"Shamara," Johann sighed, "I'm so sorry! I'm so, so sorry! Please—" he reached under her blankets and grabbed her hand, "please forgive me. Oh, please say you forgive me! Please!"

She opened her eyes once more. "You—you hurt me."

"I know I did. I'm sorry. I truly am. Look," he drew his knife and put it in her hand, placing the blade against his chest. "Kill me, if that's what it takes. But forgive me, I beg you."

She shook her head and struggled to pull her hand away from the knife. "Do you—" she coughed weakly, "want forgiveness?"

He nodded fervently. "I'll do anything."

"I left my little girl behind to save her from you. Do you want forgiveness? Care for her. Your little girl." She closed her eyes and groaned, then she was still.

"Where? Where is she? Shamara? Shamara?! Where?!"

But Shamara was dead, leaving Johann alone with his conscience, which now demanded eleven years of his life in wandering and vain searching for a daughter that he would never recognize.

But the years taught him discipline. Bridled by his growing conscience, he increased in subtlety, mastering the art of persuasion to get his way and learn what he needed to know. Yet he was still in many ways the same man he had always been, and ever was he tempted to return to his former path. His daughter—his forgiveness—was all that drove him.



It was only by chance—or perhaps fate—that one day, alone, tired, and defeated, Johann sat beside the road in a distant village known for a particularly horrific practice. And he heard a girl crying out desperately nearby. When he had broken down the door of the building from which the screams sounded, having chosen to help her for a reason he could not have explained, he saw a young girl, bloodied and in pain, being mutilated by monsters. Her aura shone white in a vain attempt to defend her from the knife that was cutting her.

So Johann first looked at his daughter, Sarai.

# Unbounded

Sarai drove as many back alleys and side roads as she could, doing her best to avoid the eyes that watched so many city roads. She was sure she and Will had been spotted frequently by police and others, but she hoped the changed license plate would buy her just a little more time. In a roundabout manner, they made their way toward an alley near a motorcycle bar—the place Sarai first met Kenshin Furukami.

Occasionally, she would stop in a small alley or back road that gave some protection from unfriendly eyes, whether cameras or police or others.

“Why do we keep stopping?” Will asked finally.

“Try to confuse anyone who might be tracking us by camera.”

Will nodded. When Sarai had been silent for several minutes, he spoke once more. “What’s wrong, Sarai?”

She glared at him, “Do I need to spell it out for you?”

He blinked and looked away.

But Sarai said nothing more. She just looked back and forth, watching both ends of the alley.

“May I ask something?”

“Quickly.”

“Would you have let Petrovic kill me?”

“Yes.”

Will waited, but Sarai said nothing more. “So, that’s it?”

“What else do you want?”

Will snorted, “I’d like to know why.”

“How old am I?”

“Fifty-eight.”

“Yes. And in those years, I’ve learned something: you don’t make deals like that. Me for you. This for that. Do you know what he would have done, had I just given up?”

Will shook his head, “No, as a matter of fact, I—”

"Wake up! He would have killed both of us. Damnit, Will, you have to stop thinking that way!"

"Sarai, when did I become your enemy?!" After the snap of his voice, Will was unsure if the look on Sarai's face meant she was about to bare her teeth at him or break down crying.

She then stepped close to him and grabbed the front of his jacket, looking up at him.

Will tried to push her hand away, but she blocked his arm and flung it aside.

"What do you want me to do? Hm? Be your woman just because you want me to? Do whatever you say, sacrifice myself to your every whim?"

Will shook his head, "Of course not."

She let go of his jacket and stepped back, "You and I," she shook her head, "we'll never work."

Will looked away quickly, biting his lip.

"Let's go."

"You know," Will said, "you're not being fair to me."

Sarai mounted the motorcycle, "Life's not fair." She put her helmet on her head and waited.

Will put his helmet on before he turned back to Sarai and then slowly mounted the motorcycle once more. He put his arms around her, and his helmet hid his tears.

She then revved the engine and accelerated from the alley.

The next hour was similar to the previous one: starts and stops, long pauses and short, but neither rider said anything.

Will looked at Sarai from time to time during their stops, and a feeling grew steadily in him. It was like what he felt in his dream: he was losing her, and she knew it as much as he did. Part of him longed to yell at her, to tell her to call off this foolish errand, to leave with him and never come back to this evil city. Once, he almost did: but before he could speak, Sarai quickly donned her helmet and started the motorcycle's engine, ending his opportunity. Perhaps she knew what he was about to do and intentionally stopped him.

And finally they arrived at their destination. Will dismounted and removed his helmet. He made his decision: he would tell her. Tell her everything.

Sarai took off her helmet and looked at him sympathetically, as if she knew what he was thinking. She shook her head, and then whispered to him, "Now it gets difficult." She stepped

close to him and put her hand over his heart. "Control what you feel."

Will struggled to keep from breaking down in front of her. "What does it matter now?"

"It matters," she nodded. "I do care. About you, Will. About you." She then turned to look down the alley.

Kenshin turned the corner and walked quickly toward them. When he arrived, he was breathing heavily. "Been a bit more of a challenge than I had expected," he said. "They've been following me relentlessly."

"Cops?" Sarai asked.

Kenshin shook his head. "No. *Them*. They're everywhere, Sarai. I can only imagine John is dead."

Sarai shook her head. "No, not dead."

Kenshin sighed, "There's nothing we can do now, Sarai. It's become far too dangerous."

She smiled sadly, "Go home, Kenshin. Take care of your own."

"What about you?"

"I have to do this."

"Do what? Die?"

"No. Save Johann."

"But why?"

"Because he did the same for me once. It's all I can or ever will be able to do for him."

Will said, "Sarai, what good will it do him?"

She turned to him, "It will do *me* some good."

"How?"

"Will," she sighed, "I won't be able to live with myself if I don't try."

He shook his head.

"Yes, Will. And you never know," she smiled. "You never know."

"Oh, Sarai, I I—"

She put her fingers over his lips. "Shh. Not yet."

Kenshin looked at Sarai. "Please, what can I do?"

Sarai shook her head and smiled, "Nothing, Kenshin. Nothing. Just go home, where you're really needed. I'm not giving up my life, and neither should you. But it's not time for you to be this desperate. Not yet."

He nodded slowly.

"So, go. Please."

He reached his hand out, and Sarai took it. Kenshin then shook hands with Will, and then looked at them both before turning to leave the way he came.

But the far side of the alley was darkened by black vehicles, and out came a flood of men. Not one had a gun, but a few had knives—some in their hands, some at their belts. Some, no doubt, had them hidden.

In their midst, Garrett Jansen stepped out of a black SUV.

Sarai turned to Will and Kenshin. "Will, take Kenshin and go."

"No!" Will shouted.

"Hush!" she responded sharply. "Go!" She gave Kenshin her helmet. Then she slowly turned to look at Garrett.

"Will, do what she said!" Kenshin shouted at him.

Will finally did so, clenching his teeth. He mounted the motorcycle, Kenshin hopping on behind him, and he started it and accelerated toward the other end of the alley.

Will turned the motorcycle and sped down the road. When he saw several police cars coming toward him, lights flashing, he turned into another alley.

No sooner had he rounded the corner than he saw a line of black vehicles blocking the road some thirty feet ahead. He ditched the motorcycle, but when he came to a stop, he realized Kenshin was gone. And then he saw him once more.

Kenshin faced Petrovic, and then they clashed with a snap of air. But the deck had been stacked from the start. Others quickly joined the fray.

Will's eyes could not follow the fight: it was nothing but a blur to him. And it lasted only seconds. Then everyone seemed to come to a halt simultaneously, and in the midst of a circle of men, Kenshin was on his knees.

Kenshin looked at Will, his eyes full of tears. He shivered as he slowly fell forward, his bloody hands covering his heart. He collapsed on the pavement and was still.

Will stood on his feet, staring at Kenshin.

The men that surrounded Kenshin then turned and quickly loaded back into their vehicles—all but Petrovic, who stood with a smile on his face and a radio in his hand.

The black vehicles drove past Will. At first he thought they would simply run him over, but they seemed to avoid him intentionally.

"Hello again," Petrovic said. He clicked a button on the radio and set it on the ground. "This is so they can hear you scream."

Will swallowed.

"Not so much fun when you can't just ambush someone, is it?"

Will said nothing; he only tried to hear Sarai's voice in his head. *Control your fear, just like your other emotions.*

Petrovic slowly walked toward him. "So, what're you gonna do? Come on, admit it. You want to cry for your mama. Do it. Because yes, this is going to hurt." He took his knife, which was covered with Kenshin's blood, and waved it. "Come on, make a noise for me."

Will felt like every part of him was frozen. But that cold was quenched by the heat of his blood when Petrovic disappeared momentarily from in front of him and then reappeared again. Will instinctively reached to his shoulder, which now had a gash in it. But he was silent.

"Aw, come on. That not hurt much? How's this?" Petrovic said. He disappeared and reappeared once more.

Will stumbled and cried out through clenched teeth. A narrow slit in the thigh of his pants was flowing with blood. Petrovic's knife had slid into his muscle.

"Better," Petrovic said. "Cry for me. Come on! Say it. Call for mama." He struck again.

Will's left hand burned, and he looked at his palm. The blade had gone cleanly through the center of his hand. He groaned.

"You're a tough one."

Will cried out when he felt his ear being cut. He reached up and felt the wound. The whole side of his head burned with a hideous pain.

"Good boy." Petrovic then picked up the radio and turned it off. "They've heard enough."

But in that instant, Will saw himself cutting his own arm, feeling the pain that he had hoped would bring him closer to Sarai. And then he saw her, in all her strength and clarity, shouting at him: *What the hell's the matter with you?! Stop standing there!* And so, Will reached to his belt and pulled his knife free. He shivered with the pain of his wounds, but he stood firm.

Petrovic laughed. "Now that's funny! What're you gonna do with that?" He snickered a moment longer and then held up his own knife, crouching slightly. "Do you know what it's like to die?" he said, smiling at Will as he slowly circled. "He did," he tilted his head slightly toward Kenshin. "Nothing heroic about it. You'll want desperately to live—right until the end. You might even beg a little."

Will struggled to recall what Sarai had shown him, but his mind was clouded by fear. Then he felt her flick him again on his head. *You must learn to be faster up here. And yet to act without hesitating.*

Petrovic changed the position of his knife in his hand.

*Stop trying to anticipate. It's not rational, so you can't analyze it. Just know when I'm about to attack.* Will inhaled and let his breath out in a last shaky exhalation. And as Petrovic planted his feet firmly on the pavement, Will stepped forward with all the strength and speed he could muster, bringing his knife up and pushing the bitter tip forward, driven by his final hope.

Will found himself face to face with Petrovic, the other's knife hand past him, deflected by Will's free hand. Petrovic's face was twisted in surprise, and his eyes flared. Will almost laughed when he looked down to see his knife buried in Petrovic's chest, right over his heart.

As Will's own heart soared in ecstasy, Petrovic pulled his knife hand back and drove the blade into Will's gut.

Will quickly grabbed Petrovic's arm, preventing him from slicing his gut open completely.

Petrovic fell backward and gasped before lying still.

A moment later, Will crumpled to the ground as well. Blood poured from his abdomen, and he covered a deep gash with his hands. He tried to rise, but the pain was excruciating. Somehow he knew, however, that he had to stand one last time:

*Steady. Look at me. Listen to me. You will only ever have one chance. And it may still not be enough. But you never know—you never know who might be counting on you, even if defeat is your own destiny.*

Will struggled to remove his jacket, but he was opposed by agony and waves of nausea. When he finally freed it from his

arms, he tied it around his waist, covering the wound as best he could. And then he rose and walked. He commanded his legs to obey him, even though the pain was threatening to send him into blissful unconsciousness. Spots swam before his eyes, and he felt that at any moment he could lose his innards through his wound. But with his hands covering it firmly, he fought to stay awake, and he walked.

*See the pain for what it is.*

Still he walked, ignoring the whole world around him. Blackness was on the edges of his sight, and it slowly crept toward the center. *Oh, Sarai!*

And just when his agony had sapped the last of his strength and his hope was spent, he passed between two black vehicles at the end of an alley and flung himself with a painful shout, passing several men with knives in their hands.

With what vision he had left, he saw in the alley two fiery white shapes surrounded by black clouds.

\* \* \*

Sarai watched Will and Kenshin speed away from the alley, and then she turned to face Garrett.

Garrett raised a finger, and two of his comrades dragged a limp man forward and threw him at Garrett's feet.

It was John. He was bruised and bloodied, almost beyond recognition. He barely breathed.

Garrett bared his teeth and glared at Sarai. "This," he said, motioning to John, "is *your* fault."

Sarai shook her head, "You took Chloe from me. And now you've taken Johann too. I did nothing to you. Don't you *dare* lay it at my feet!"

"Oh, it's so simple, isn't it?" He spat, "You're just like your father! Kill anyone who gets in your way!"

"What about Veronica?! She would have killed me!"

"And how many would still be alive now if you had just let her? Like your father here," he motioned to John's ruined body. "He's probably dead already, and if not, I imagine he has so much brain damage he'll never recover."

Sarai was silent.

Garrett shrugged, "The men I hired overdid it—not that I blame them. But I had no choice."



"Vengeance?" Sarai said, as though the word was poison on her tongue.

"Not for me," he shook his head. "Do you think I don't have a conscience? No, I don't seek vengeance for myself. It's for all those who gave their lives so Veronica could live."

"You *stole* their lives!"

"What difference does it make? Veronica needed them. They became part of her. And when you murdered her, you murdered all of them too. Their blood is on your hands."

Sarai opened her mouth, but no words came out.

"You are the one with no conscience. No concern for the lives of others. My daughter had no choice—she was who she was made to be. And you took her from me. You took the last of my wife from me. You know, don't you? You know that blood is on your hands. But I will give you one chance to save those two," he nodded toward the end of the alley where Kenshin and Will had sped away, "so your own death can have some meaning, even though my Veronica's death was senseless."

Sarai's eyes narrowed.

"Use your knife. I'll accept your life in exchange for theirs."

She curled her lip.

"Look around you, fool. You can't escape. I spent every last dime I had to make sure." He motioned to the men around him. "And you better decide quickly. If you want to make this trade, it must be now."

Sarai still said nothing. Something tugged at her mind. Deals were only offered by the side at a disadvantage. She knew this quite well: *I've learned something: you don't make deals like that. Me for you. This for that.* And another voice slowly grew in her mind, drowning out her own.

*And know that no one—no one—can stand against you.*

Sarai shook her head. *No, Johann. I'm not strong enough.*

Garrett sighed, "Perhaps it's time we listened in on how things are going for your friends." He pressed a button on his radio and turned a dial to increase the volume.

From the radio, Sarai heard a voice say, "Aw, come on. That not hurt much? How's this?" Then she heard Will cry out in pain. But what had happened to Kenshin? She glared at Garrett.

Garrett shrugged. "Hurry up and decide. If Petrovic shuts his radio off, that's it for your friend. It sounds like one of them is dead already.

And behind Sarai, two black vehicles squealed to a stop, blocking the other end of the alley. More men with knives exited the vehicles and stood ready.

"Last chance," Garrett said.

Sarai heard Will cry out twice more, and then the radio turned to static. Her eyes filled with tears, and she looked at her knife.

"More blood on your hands," Garrett said. "Now you can either choose to end your own life the way you want, or let me do it for you. And if I have to do it, believe me I'll make you feel it. I know where you're from." He pulled his knife from his belt. "I know what they do to girls there. I wonder what it would do to you to feel that again?"

Sarai's face turned white. She shouted in her mind for silence: all the voices trying to encourage her were in vain. All was lost. She was nearly the last of her kind, and she had only one choice left: to die by her own hand or to die at the hands of wicked men that would subject her to the same mutilation that had haunted her all her life. Sure, she could fight, but how long would that last? Until the penalty was so great that she would die anyway, even were she victorious against an army of darkness? She had been a fool. She had overestimated her own strength. So had Will. So had Johann, who now lay at death's door.

Finally, Sarai started to raise the knife. *If Will could, I guess I can.*

Garrett bared his teeth, "Get it over with or I'll do it myself!"

Just as Sarai's resolve began to crumble, she heard a shout from behind her.

It was Will. It was Will! Somehow, he had done it.

The dying embers of her hope flared to life, and her head snapped back toward Garrett. And then she understood—everything Johann had shown her, everything she knew about who she was, about what had happened to her, and about her abilities—she understood.

Sarai's aura flared around her.

Garrett knew Sarai was giving in; it was almost over. His vengeance was within his reach, even without any risk to himself.

Then the spell he had almost woven around her was shattered when a shout sounded behind her. Will Owen fell in the alley, and Sarai looked back at him.

*Damn you, Petrovic!* Garrett thought. Then he almost gasped when Sarai looked at him once more. His mouth opened, but no sound came forth. Her aura grew around her until it was so bright he could barely look at her.

All around Garrett and Sarai, the world slowed, finally coming to a halt. His dark aura flickered like a candle struggling to stay alight in the wind.

Then Garrett sneered, "I know what you've done. And I know what that means: you can't come back. You're finished."

Sarai's face was expressionless. She walked toward him.

Garrett raised his knife. "I can still kill you! You brought me here, but you can still die!"

When she was just paces away, she stopped and looked at him steadily.

Garrett adjusted the knife in his hand. And then he hesitated, looking as closely at her as he could through the brilliance of her aura. He chuckled. "You can't do it, can you? Can't live with more blood on your hands?"

Sarai shook her head, but she continued to look at him steadily.

He saw the strain in her eyes, even though her face was expressionless: she was making a great effort of some kind. He knew he was in danger, but he committed to his final gambit. "Veronica was right. You're no different from her. No," he furrowed his brow. "No. You *are* different. She took lives to live. You take them out of vengeance. You are the bloodthirsty one. How many has it been? How many have you killed in anger? Answer me!"

Sarai pursed her lips. "In some ways, I *am* like Veronica."

Garrett shook his head, "No. She was beautiful and alive. But you—you know what you are. You've looked in the mirror. You're nobody. So kill me. It won't do your friends any good." His eyes moved to Will briefly then back to Sarai. "They're already dead. Kill me and live with more blood on your hands."

Sarai looked at him steadily for a moment then cast away her knife. As it flew through the air, it slowed, coming to a stop just above the ground. It didn't land, nor make a sound.

Garrett struck. He raised his knife high and brought it swinging down toward her. In the instant that he thought his knife would slide into her, finally giving him the blood he wanted, he felt his arm come to a dead stop, jarring him to the core.

Sarai held his wrist firm, the tip of his blade just inches away from her chest.

Garrett gasped. The knife fell from his hand.

Sarai looked intently into his eyes.

He tried to speak, or to move, but his body would not obey him. Sarai's aura was spreading onto him, moving up his arm and consuming the dark cloud around him. With every inch it moved, he felt the life burn from his body. He then saw himself alight in white fire, and finally, utter darkness fell over him. Garrett saw no more.

\* \* \*

Will lay on the ground, the blackness closing in on him, but he concentrated on the blazing white fire in front of him. Around him, all the world slowed, finally coming to a stop. *Oh! I'm dead!*

And then he saw Sarai. She was the one he had been looking at: he had seen her aura. Being on the edge of death, he saw her for what she was: Light. Such beautiful light.

She approached him slowly.

Will struggled to see around him. He wanted to warn her about the black shadows that surrounded them. But they no longer moved, being frozen in timelessness.

And Sarai shook her head with a sad smile. "It's okay," she said. "Look at me."

He looked into her eyes. "Oh—Sarai. I'm—I'm—"

"I know, you're hurt."

He was on his back, and he struggled to breathe.

"I'm here. It's okay now."

"S—Sarai. I—I—wanted to—wanted to tell you—" His eyes closed and he groaned.

"Shh," she said, kneeling next to him. "Listen to me now, Will. Don't worry, I know you need help. I know where you are. Trust me." She smiled at him.

*Oh!* he thought. *Oh, Sarai—you are so beautiful!*

"Look in my eyes."

He did as she asked.

And then she reached toward his wound. She moved her blood-covered hands away from it and then slowly slid her own hand into it.

He gasped in pain, and tears ran from his eyes, but he still looked into hers.

She held her hand inside him, and white light from her aura flowed into his wound.

"Shh," she whispered when he groaned. Her face was only inches from his, and they shared the same breath.

Although Sarai's hand hurt him, it made him feel closer to her than he had ever felt. Part of him wanted the moment to never end.

And the moment went on. Sarai's aura surrounded him, and the world faded in its light. Will began to see images, people and places, that he didn't recognize. He saw a woman holding a baby girl, humming softly to her. The woman seemed young, but her eyes were old and tired. Then Will saw a distant village where a black presence hovered in and out of his awareness—its name was Khalid.

And then he was in a dark room, and he heard Sarai's pleas for help. Her pleas for mercy. Her pleas to stop cutting her. She was on a table, being held down and mutilated. He saw her aura, and he saw the tears in her eyes. He saw her grimacing in pain.

*Oh, Sarai!*

Light filled the room, and the darkness went away. Will witnessed Sarai killing the man she thought was her father. He saw her in her new home in America, struggling to find a place among people who were so different from her.

Lew and Serena Stanton faded in and out of the light. Will saw Sarai standing over their graves, weeping bitterly. He saw her as a mature woman, leaving Johann and going out on her own.

Images flew through the light. Experiences of people and places, some good and some bad, that peppered Sarai's life. And then Will saw Chloe.

The chaos in Sarai's heart calmed. The images slowed, and he saw Chloe and Sarai gazing at each other. The two women shared a pure and uncomplicated relationship, as if they were sisters, but without the strains of family. Sarai needed Chloe as much as Chloe needed Sarai, and each brought a simple joy to the other.

And then his heart plummeted when he saw Sarai holding Chloe's lifeless body in her arms. She cried as she rocked back and forth, and the pain was deeper than anything he had seen her experience. It was worse than the pain of the wounds she received as a child. It even eclipsed the loss of Lew and Serena Stanton.

Finally, Will saw a rush of images, and in many of them he saw himself. He saw himself through Sarai's eyes—the way he sometimes surprised her, sometimes made her feel joy, and sometimes even hurt her.

And then he saw her facing Garrett and making her last decision: to cross the barrier. She neared it and closed her eyes as she crossed, and when she did, she was made complete. Sarai was still the same as when he met her, but she was also as she was meant to be: able to kill, but able to heal.

Will felt the grievous decision that Sarai then faced. She, like Johann and Kenshin, was a being caught between two worlds, but her kind was never meant to be alone. The barrier was a strange thing: it separated two worlds, and it was a place where time lost its meaning. Sarai then made her decision, and she chose as best she could. She could not choose Will—he couldn't follow her to where she was going.

Light from Sarai's aura still poured into his wound.

Then, with a smile, she slowly pulled her hand out of him.

When she was done, Will noticed that the darkness had left his vision. He reached to his wound, but all he could feel was smeared blood. The flesh had closed, leaving nothing but a faint scar.

Sarai took his hands and pulled him to his feet. She smiled at him, "You've earned it."

"Sarai, I love you!" he said. "I love you so much!"

She nodded, "I know, Will. I know."

He smiled back at her and then laughed softly.

"Now you need to listen to me. I don't have long."

His face darkened. "What do you mean?" But he already knew.

"Please, just listen. I am here with you, but I cannot stay. It's all I can do to keep you here with me." She looked around her. All the world was frozen still.

"You did this?" Will said, looking around in amazement.

"I crossed the barrier. And you and I are on different sides of it now. This is what Johann always knew I would have to do. This is what he meant in his letter."

Tears came to Will's eyes.

Sarai's face was sympathetic. "It was the only way to save you, and to save Johann. And it was my only choice. I need to finish here and then I must go."

Will's lip quivered. "You—you can't stay? You can't come back?"

She shook her head, "I wish I could, Will. But it would kill me."

"I don't want to live without you." He saw in her eyes the growing strain, as if she was holding herself up under a relentless weight.

"I know. I wish I could stay with you." She reached her hand out to his face then quickly pulled it back. "But there's someone who needs me even more than you do." She then smiled. "You did well. You make me proud."

"Don't go. Please."

She nodded, "I have to. Be strong, Will. Look at me. Be strong. Okay?"

Tears streamed from his eyes, but he nodded.

She smiled again at him.

He reached for her, but she shook her head.

"I have to go now. Remember me." And then she stepped back. Her aura blazed around her, and she closed her eyes and smiled.

Will gasped. Her face shined with a beauty so radiant that it stole his breath. Brighter and brighter her aura became, and then she disappeared with a final flash.

And Will saw white fires spring up around each of the dark men, and even around John.

# Barrier

All had been black since the blows began raining down in the Xavier House. Then a light peeked through the darkness, and he became aware once more. He saw Sarai leaning over him.

Her face was almost too bright for him to look at. She smiled sadly at him.

"Sarai?" John said, groaning as if he was rising too quickly after a deep sleep.

She nodded.

"What are you doing here? You—oh, Sarai. I'm sorry. Why did you do this?"

"For you."

"I don't deserve it."

Sarai shrugged, "Maybe, maybe not."

He chuckled.

She then took his hands and helped him to his feet, and she looked up at him steadily.

The world all around them was still. John turned slowly, looking at it. Among all the shadowy auras stood Will, who was bloody but otherwise seemingly in good health. But he was motionless.

"He's fine," Sarai said. "His training served him well."

John smiled. "Who?"

"Petrovic."

He then laughed heartily. "How fitting."

Sarai nodded. "Johann."

"I know. You can't stay. I wish I could trade places with you."

"I know."

"And I'm sorry for—"

"You don't need to apologize. I know you've done so much for me. Thank you."



John embraced her. "I love you, Sarai."

She hugged him back, closing her eyes tightly. "I love you too, Johann."

A moment later, he let her go and stepped back.

"Please look out for him," Sarai said, nodding to Will. "At least tell him what he needs to know now."

John looked at him and then back at Sarai. "I see. I will do that."

"There are so few of us. It was the best I could do."

"I don't question your choice. It was a good one, and the best you could have made, I'm sure."

She nodded.

He smiled once more, "Well, Sarai. Off you go!" He laughed, but his eyes filled with tears. "Maybe again sometime," he said, nodding.

She smiled. "I hope so."

And then she was gone, and all the dark men burned in the white fire of her aura.

When the world had returned to its usual pace, John looked around. The alley was empty, except for Will, who stood silently. Even the sounds of the city seemed to have paused. Perhaps all the world had fallen into a mournful silence.

\* \* \*

Will looked down at his wound—the wound Sarai had healed. Other than the blood that was quickly drying on him, he couldn't tell anything had even happened. But he felt like he had been hollowed out inside. Looking around the alley, he saw only John. All the other men, including Garrett, were dead.

"Oh, Sarai. No," he said softly.

John walked slowly toward him.

"John," Will said. "Where is she? Where's Sarai?"

Pursing his lips, John said, "She's gone."

He looked around frantically. "But—she, she—I—"

"Will."

Will looked at John with a hysterical gaze.

"She's gone."

Finally, with tears filling his eyes once more, Will regained control of himself. "I see."

"I'm sorry, Will."

"Is she—is she dead?"

"No. At least not in the sense you mean. She crossed the barrier, which means she was too close to it for too long. To return—well, it'd probably have killed her. The pain would have been too much for her to bear."

"Garrett?"

"Dead. All of them are dead."

"How?"

John looked down at the pavement. "The barrier is there to keep us from going yonder and to keep—well, whatever is on the other side—" he smiled, "from coming here. Angels, I guess. It's our ability to approach the barrier that makes us different from—" he smiled again, this time looking at Will.

"Different from me?"

John shrugged. "Anyway, Sarai was able to approach the barrier and cross it. No one else could. And that makes her stronger and faster than anyone on this side. But," he paused, frowning his brow. "I think it's more than that. When she crossed, she became deadly to *them*. As for the barrier itself—hm. On that line, two worlds mix, and I don't quite know what that means."

"So where is she now?"

"I don't know. I just don't know."

Will looked at his abdomen. "How did she do this?"

John wiped some of the blood from his own face. "Well, I'm not sure. I guess on the other side of the barrier, she is complete: able to heal, able to kill. She is what she was meant to be *and* what she became."

Will sighed, struggling to keep from breaking down. "Will she ever come back? Will I ever see her again?"

John looked at him sympathetically, "I wish I knew. I loved—love—her too."

Will nodded, "You *are* her father, aren't you?"

John chuckled, "Yeah. I kept that one to myself. She knew though, too. At the end, she knew."

Will shook his head, "I just—I don't know how to go on now."

The other nodded, "It's difficult, I know. To lose someone you love."

"She said I earned it. To tell her what I feel. But she never said she felt the same. I wish I knew if she felt the same."

"What do you think she felt?"

"I don't think I ever had the chance to make her love me."

John nodded slowly, "That takes courage to admit. And it's going to hurt. But in time you may think differently about her. About what she felt for you."

Will looked at John, feeling like a lost child. "What do I do now?"

John pursed his lips. "Now, you come with me. We go back to the farm. I'll tell you the way things are for you now, and then you can decide where to go from there. You can sell the farm and take the money or stay there. It's a good place. Good people, for the most part."

Will started to nod and then stopped short. "Sell it?"

John chuckled, "Yeah. Come on." He patted Will on the back, and the two walked down the alley. "I bought a small part of that farm, but Sarai inherited most of it from some good folks we knew many years ago. And now, it's all yours."

"But what about you?"

"Me? Well. I'm not sure how many years I have left. We seem to live a long time—although no one I've ever known has lived anywhere near as long as I have—but we seldom seem to live long after we have a child. I guess maybe there's only meant to ever be a few of us in the world." John then smiled, "I guess that doesn't answer your question. Well, anyway, there's one thing I've never done. That's where I'll—retire." He chuckled.

"Hey," Will turned and put his hand on John's shoulder. "What about Kenshin?"

John sighed. "Kenshin didn't make it?"

Will shook his head.

"Well. Nothing we can do about that now."

"Shouldn't we try to bury him or something?"

"No."

"I think we should. Can't leave him lying in the street."

John smiled sadly and nodded at Will. "Okay. Well, keys are bound to be in one of these black beasts. Let's take one."

The two walked past the bodies that littered the alley and climbed into a black SUV. Indeed, the keys were still in the ignition. They drove to where Kenshin had been slain.

It was a dirty alley, and a dead end at that. They found Kenshin where he had fallen. Will rolled him onto his back.

Kenshin's eyes stared blankly at the sky. Will closed them and, with John's help, loaded him into the back of the SUV. He then covered Kenshin's face with his jacket.

"Let's go," John said. "We'll go get my truck, then head home." But when Will paused, he said, "What is it?"

Will sighed, "I don't want to leave her motorcycle behind."

"Why?"

Will looked at him, "Because it's all I have left of her, that's why."

John nodded. "Forgive me. Maybe my age has given me a different perspective on such things."

Will was silent.

"Go ahead. Know how to get to the Xavier House?"

"Yes."

"I'll meet you there then."

Will snorted, "That place'll be crawling with cops, and who knows what else."

"No. It won't."

Will looked at him.

"You have to understand something. The way the world is, ever since we came—my kind." As he said the last two words, though, he had a twinkle in his eye that even Will noticed. But he continued, "Those like Sarai, they just try to live in peace. Maybe even help others live in peace. But the dark ones? They control. They take power over others. So when they're gone, those under them lose direction. Or maybe they just lose that pull toward darkness. I know it's hard to understand, but it's like the way it was—is—with Sarai. You felt her influence from the moment you met her. Didn't you?"

Will looked at him for a moment then nodded.

"And it probably made you do some really foolish things you wouldn't have otherwise done. But looking back at them, you probably see you're better for it. And so is she."

Will nodded again.

"Maybe our auras are more than just something that is seen with the eyes—at least the eyes of those that can see. Maybe they are felt in other ways. Maybe they affect people subtly. Those who are not like us can't see everything. They can't see what we are, or what we do. But they can feel it."

Will shook his head and chuckled, "Well, maybe we can sit down and discuss it better, and I'll write a story on it."

John laughed, "Yes to the first part, no to the second. You'd not be believed, anyways. After all, there's nothing beyond what you can see with your eyes, right?" He smiled—a little too knowingly.

Will shrugged, "Well, I'll meet you there. I still think it's a bad idea."

John smiled, "We'll see."

Will found his helmet next to the motorcycle, just where he had left it before he faced Petrovic, who still lay in the alley. He tried his best not to look the man's body, but he did feel once again where he had been wounded. Sarai had healed him everywhere, but he could still feel an echo of the pain—the way Petrovic's knife had cut deeply into him. Maybe it was like what Sarai felt: a thought that both comforted and scared him.

John drove off.

Will looked around the alley, expecting, or maybe just hoping, to see Sarai. He wanted her to stand near him, to look into his eyes—no matter how uncomfortable her gaze made him—and tell him where they would go next. Tell him where the adventure would now lead. Tell him that maybe one day she would love him too.

He put the helmet on his head, but he sat down in the alley, alone, and sobbed.

All was surprisingly quiet around the Xavier House. A few cars passed by randomly, but the police were nowhere to be seen.

Will finally arrived and found John leaning with his back against his old truck.

"Glad you made it," John said. "Thought I was gonna have to come looking for you."

Will nodded, but he didn't remove his helmet.

"Hey, believe it or not, I've seen a grown man cry. Even done it myself once or twice."

Will looked down and took it off.

"Come on," John said. "We'll load the bike in the back here with Kenshin, then we'll go."

Will positioned the motorcycle at the truck's tailgate and popped the front wheel off the ground and onto the bed.

John then gave it a quick heave from behind, lifting it. But

when he exerted himself, Will could have sworn he saw a flash of light near or around him.

As they eased the motorcycle down onto its side, Will said, "What was that?"

"Hm?" John responded.

"That light."

John shrugged and smiled.

But Will was in no mood to pursue the matter.

They loaded Kenshin's body into the bed also, covering it as best they could.

Hours later, they had left the city and were driving the lonely highway that split the rolling, tree-covered foothills on either side.

Will was silent from the moment they sat down in the truck. He mostly looked out the window, occasionally wiping his cheek or closing his eyes tightly.

John let him alone for the most part. But at one point, when the light of day was failing and the cars that passed periodically had turned on their headlights, he spoke. "Sarai was different from how she was intended to be, and I don't quite know how that will affect you."

Will looked at him.

John reached down onto the floor of the truck and felt around until he found an old receipt. He placed it halfway between them on the dashboard. "This will sound foolish, but I need you to do something."

Will was silent.

"Grab that paper before I do. It's a race, if you will. Do it."

"Look, I don't want to—"

"I'm serious, Will. Do it."

Will shrugged, "All right. When?"

John waited until a car was passing in the opposite direction, the headlights shining brightly at them. "Now. As fast as you can."

Will reached for the receipt, but it was gone.

And John set it on the dashboard again. "Faster."

Will tried once more, but the paper disappeared again before he could even get past raising his hand from his lap.

"Faster," John repeated, placing the paper on the dashboard once more.

The same result.

"What is this?" Will finally asked.

"Hm." John said nothing more.

Will didn't press the matter. He only turned his head to look out the window into the gathering darkness.

With a start, Will woke up. At first, he thought he had dozed for just a minute or two—the sky was just barely light. Then, feeling the ache in his neck, he realized he had slept clean through to morning.

John still drove, his eyes as bright as they were when Will had fallen asleep the previous evening.

"Oh," Will groaned. "You okay? Did you drive all night?"

John looked over at him and smiled, "Yeah. I'd like to get home. We'll be there soon. How do you feel?"

Will sighed, "Like crap."

Nodding, John said, "I know. It's hard to wake up sometimes. I never quite figured out what's worse, mornings or evenings. At least in the evening you can look forward to forgetting. The morning just reminds you. But," he breathed deeply, "morning is also hopeful. Something about the light. And it helps not to be alone."

"Is it lonely where Sarai is?"

John looked over at him and shook his head. "No. I don't believe that it is."

When they had returned to the farm, John stayed several days with Will, signing over to him the house and land and giving him some parting instructions. They buried Kenshin in a distant corner of the property.

Finally, John threw his two bags into the back of his old truck.

"Sarai would have wanted me to tell you a little more about yourself than I have."

Will put on a confused face.

John chuckled, "I know. This doesn't mean anything to you now, but it will later. I never really figured it out, and I didn't have the ability to the extent that Sarai did when she was a little girl. So, I think it best for you to figure it out as you go. You'll probably need it one day—maybe for something special. Just remember to keep it hidden." He nodded for a moment, looking off to the side as if he were looking into the

past. "It's like someone once told me: now you will have her with you forever."

Will chuckled, "You sure she fixed you?"

John laughed, "Yes, she fixed me." He tapped the side of his head.

"So, where will you go?"

John inhaled deeply. "To the coast." He laughed, "Yes, to the coast."

"Are you sure about leaving me all this? I mean, it's gotta be worth a fortune, and—"

"Yes, I'm sure. It's yours, and yours to do with as you will. If you change your mind and decide to sell it, feel free."

Will nodded. "I guess I don't know what else to do with myself now. I can't go back to my old life."

"No, I wouldn't expect that you could. Sometimes you see things that change you permanently, for the better or the worse."

"I wonder which it'll be."

"You'll have to decide that." He then extended his hand to Will. "I wish you the best. We may meet again, and we may not. Only time will tell."

Will shook his hand, nodding.

"Have hope, Will Owen. Have hope." He smiled and got into the truck. Without another word, he drove off.

Will turned and looked at the farmhouse. He then reached into his pocket and pulled out the picture of Sarai. It had been stained with his blood, but he could still see her clearly. He sighed and walked into the empty house.

Will woke with a gasp in the dead of night, his hand reaching for his belly where he had been stabbed. He rubbed it for a moment then rose and stumbled to the bathroom. After filling his hands with water and drinking it, he grabbed a towel, dried his hands and face, and then stood still.

He found himself at the kitchen table some time later. In front of him on the table was a prepaid cell phone, still in its package. He opened the package, pressed several buttons to set up the phone, then dialed a number. It rang four times and then connected. He expected to hear a voicemail message.



"Yeah?" sounded a groggy voice.

"Alana. It's me. Will."

"Will!" Whatever sleepiness was in her voice had instantly fled from her. "Oh my goodness, Will—where have you been?!"

"Hi Alana."

"Well? Are you okay? What's going on?"

"I'm okay. I—"

"Yes?"

"I don't know what to say."

Alana sighed, "I'd pretty much given up on you even being alive. Our story is a mess. Half the players are dead—I don't know where to go with it. Are you coming back? Where are you?"

"I'm not coming back."

"What about the story?"

"It's yours."

"What happened, Will?"

"Sarai—" He said no more.

After a minute of silence, Alana said, "Did something happen to her?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. Then she said, "Where are you? I'll come there."

Will chuckled softly, "It's okay."

She sighed again. "Why'd you call?"

"I need you to do something for me."

"Anything."

"Veronica Jansen. She's the murderer."

"V—murderer? You mean she killed those people at that apartment?"

"Yes. She's the center of everything—of that murder, and of your story. But she's dead. You'll have to pick up what threads you can find, and there won't be many of them."

"What about Sarai?"

Will shook his head, even though Alana couldn't see him. "She just got caught up in it. It wasn't her fault."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Don't let Sarai take the blame."

"Okay."

"Thanks, Alana. Take care of yourself."

"Wait, Will. Won't you tell me where you are?"

"No. It's not important right now. You'll have your hands full. When you've looked into this and finished the story, then you can come find me. And I'll try to explain it to you as best I can."

She was silent.

"Goodbye, Alana." He pressed the "End" button on the phone before she could say anything else. Turning it off, he tossed it into the trash.

Will cared for the animals as Sarai had taught him to do. He even tried to tend John's garden, but the plants seemed to be quickly falling to disease, pests, and his overall lack of knowledge.

One day, as more plants yellowed with a disease he knew nothing about, he screamed in frustration and kicked one of them, breaking its main stalk. And then he sat down next to it and cried. For some reason, the broken plant made him think of Sarai. He reached over to it and tried to make it stand upright, but it fell over again.

Closing his eyes tightly, he instinctively reached to the plant once more, holding it up and wrapping his fingers around the wounded stalk. Shaking, he concentrated and willed the plant to stand up straight.

And when he opened his eyes, he saw that it had obeyed him. Its stalk was whole and unblemished, and its leaves were bright green, fluttering in the light breeze. And all around him he saw light—his own aura.

Will smiled and then laughed. All that John said was now clear to him.

*This doesn't mean anything to you now, but it will later. I never really figured it out, and I didn't have the ability to the extent that Sarai did when she was a little girl. So, I think it best for you to figure it out as you go. You'll probably need it one day—maybe for something special. Just remember to keep it hidden.*

*It's like someone once told me: now you will have her with you forever.*

"Oh, Sarai. I wish you could show me what to do with it." And Will sat next to the plant he had healed, his laughter fighting with his tears.

\* \* \*

John's eyes were closed, and he felt the cool, salty breeze on his face. He inhaled deeply and then laughed.

"Well, sir, I hope she works out for you like she did for me. I really appreciate it!" said a grey-haired man.

John looked at him and shook his hand. "Thanks. I'll take good care of her."

The other nodded and smiled, then walked off the dock.

John reached down and grabbed his two bags and tossed them aboard the thirty-foot sailboat. It rose and fell slowly with the easy waves, almost as if it was rearing to leave the marina. He untied the moorings and used a small outboard motor on the stern of the boat to guide it from the dock and into open water. He then turned it off and raised it.

"Okay, sweetie," he said. "Let's see if I can make you do everything I read about."

Minutes later, the sails of the ship *Unbounded* were spread in the wind, and she cut through the Atlantic Ocean like a blade. John stood at the helm, guiding it with an expertise that belied his lack of experience. Perhaps in thousands of years of life he had gained an ability to see and to learn new things by just reading or thinking about them—an ability that eludes those who only live for decades, or even centuries.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small map of the world. Unfolding it, and letting the wheel of the helm go untended for a moment, he looked at it closely. His course was taking him toward Europe. But Japan lay, well, in another direction. Either way, the path to it lay to the south: he could choose whether to turn left or right later—when he had gone far enough for it to make a difference.

John folded the map and put it back in his pocket. He put his hands on the stainless wheel of the helm once more and tapped it with his finger. East. His current course was east. Kenshin's home—and Kimiko—was by way of the south.

He smiled and began turning the wheel. A moment later, the *Unbounded* was sailing with the falling sun to starboard.

John set the autopilot and walked forward. He stood at the very tip of the boat, holding the steel guardrails that met just above the bow. The wind tousled his hair as the sun fell in the west. Closing his eyes, John breathed in the salty air and laughed once more.

# Timeless

The world was dark and cold, and so full of fear. She could still feel the knife; it was hard and bitter. But she was quickly forgetting. Everything was slipping away, and she couldn't hold on even to herself. She had forgotten the name of the one she had hoped would save her—what was her name? Even her own name had fallen into darkness.

Then light peeked through the curtain of black. It was just a tiny, distant spot. A beacon of life. She reached for it, and it got brighter. Slowly, it approached. She gasped in hope as it came closer, and then it began to surround her. With the light came a sharp pain, but she could feel her heart beating again, and life flowed in her veins once more. She opened her eyes. Over her was another woman, her short, raven hair framing her face. She was the source of the light.

"Hi, Chloe," Sarai said, her eyes overflowing with tears.

"S—Sarai?"

Sarai nodded and smiled as the tears ran down her cheeks. She pulled her fingers out of the knife wound in Chloe's chest.

Chloe gasped, and her hand instinctively moved to feel her wound—but it was gone. Then her eyes went wide, and she looked back and forth.

But Sarai shook her head, "Don't be afraid. It's okay now. I'm here, and you're safe."

"But—but she stabbed me, and—oh, Sarai, it hurt, and I was so scared, and—"

"I know, Chloe. I know." Then she laughed and shook her head, "No more pain now." She put her arms around the woman, and they embraced tightly.

"Oh, Sarai!"

"My dear Chloe. I'll never leave you again." She kissed Chloe's forehead and then helped her to her feet.

"Sarai—what happened to your hair?"

Sarai laughed and pulled from her jacket pocket her raven locks, still knotted in the middle. She placed the bundle of hair in Chloe's hand. "I'll grow it back for you," she said, smiling.

Chloe laughed, then looked around. They stood in her bedroom, but all was quiet, and the world seemed strangely lifeless, as if everything had come to a standstill. "What happened?"

"Long, long story," Sarai said.

Chloe looked closely at her, and her face fell. She could see that Sarai was struggling bitterly. "What's wrong?"

"Remember when I told you once about the barrier?"

Chloe nodded.

"I crossed it. Only a woman can cross it. It's a place where time is—well, it's different. Here, right on the edge, it's timeless. At least in some sense. I can't explain it. But now, I have to go. I can't stay in this world anymore."

"Then I'm going with you."

Sarai smiled sadly. "Do you want to?"

Chloe laughed, "Of course!"

Sarai looked steadily at her, and her face grew dark.

"What? What is it?"

"Chloe," Sarai whispered, smiling sadly. "Your—Kevin. He's—he's dead."

Chloe's face twisted and she sobbed.

"I'm sorry. I wish I could have done more. So much more." Tears filled her eyes. "But I couldn't. I had to choose, and I've done as much as I can."

Chloe cried and nodded. She then looked at Sarai, "I don't blame you, Sarai. I've never blamed you. I love you with all my heart. And where you go, I will go too."

"If you go with me—well, I don't know if we'll ever be able to come back."

"It doesn't matter, as long as you stay with me."

Sarai nodded. "Always, Chloe. Always."

Chloe smiled and then cried again.

"Chloe."

She looked at Sarai.

"I'm fifty-eight. Fifty-nine in a couple weeks."

Chloe laughed through her tears. "I always knew you were almost twice my age."

Sarai smiled. "Now you know everything about me."

Chloe laughed again.

"Come on." Sarai took Chloe's hand in her own. "Follow me where I go."

Chloe nodded. She closed her eyes, and then she became aware of the barrier.

"Cross it," Sarai whispered.

And Chloe crossed the barrier, then opened her eyes. The world that she left seemed so dim and drab compared with what was on the other side. She saw Sarai's aura and felt its warmth, as if it were life itself.

Sarai then smiled at Chloe, and they embraced once more.





## About the Author

J.R. Clark is a freelance writer and editor residing in the eastern United States. After obtaining a doctorate in electrical engineering, he worked briefly as an engineer before pursuing a full-time writing career. His interests include woodworking, drawing, farming, and cooking, as well as playing guitar and rescuing dogs. He and his wife live with three dogs of their own.

