

I'm very hard to kill. Knowledge that gives me confidence in situations like this.  
I've been shot before. I survived. So I know what I can withstand.

And what I can't.

I'm bleeding out. Simple as that.

My life isn't the cliché flashing before my eyes; this is a slower death; past deeds crawl to recollection...love lost...promises... Like the one I made to my father—to all of our fathers, whether they could hear me or not—to outlive His wrath, to spite his judgments with our continued prosperity... Broken promises if I give in to this attempt on my life. Damned or not, I'd sooner live. I have maybe fifteen minutes left before I go cold and numb, and right *now* to do something about it, the ever present eternity.

First things first: I have to stop the bleeding, or at least slow it down, and I have to change clothes. I can't afford drawing attention to myself.

I cross an invisible, yet tangible line and enter into the Turkish Quarter where most of the capital's hustle and bustle takes place. At this late hour the usual din of haggling merchants and street musicians has given way to laughter and the occasional drunken ballad. There's a men's specialty shop adjacent to the alley on my right which

should work for the clothing. They should stock something I can use for the bleeding, too.

I duck into the alley and walk far enough back so that I'm invisible from the sidewalk among the shadows. The top of the building is about sixteen feet overhead, and I hope there'll be access on top which isn't barred up like the front display. I squat down and explode upward, clear the edge of the roofline just enough to grab on, and then pull myself up.

Superhuman, I'm not. More like: *genetic freak*—human<sup>1.5</sup>. Still, what would normally be an easy maneuver has me dizzy and gasping. The endorphins have worn off completely. I sit still and grit my teeth. The burning in my wound subsides.

Thank our fathers there's a skylight near the center of the roof. I crawl over to it on my stomach and remove the metal flashing and tar along one side to expose the plastic lip. I get a fingernail under, and then another, and now a decent grip with most of my left hand. I jerk it hard and the trashcan-lid-sized bubble pops free.

I lower myself in and strip off blood-drenched clothes on the way to the cash register. The machine sits on top of a glass display case doubling as a countertop. Inside the case are wallets, drinking flasks, cigar cutters, tie clips, handkerchiefs, and decorative lighters. The cans of lighter fluid beneath the cigar display are an added bonus.

I remove a handkerchief and a lighter from the case, palm the lighter, and lay the handkerchief flat on top of the glass. I douse it with lighter fluid from one of the cans until it puddles. With the cotton completely saturated, I roll it up so it forms a narrow, flammable cylinder and search for something I can use to snake the fluid-soaked rag through the hole in my neck. The pencil lying beside the register will have to do. I insert

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the tip of the handkerchief into the front of my trapezius with the sharpened tip of the pencil, like I'm crocheting myself. The fluid stings. I guide the handkerchief-wrapped pencil deeper into the wound.

Sweat slicks my forehead, even though I'm nude and the temperature is probably no more than sixty-five degrees. My eyes tear up involuntarily, and I can taste stomach acid at the back of my throat. My bowels quiver, threatening to let loose as my body tries to shut down everything except what might help me escape from this demon of agony which has me pinned down.

It's everything I can do to stay conscious. I press the handkerchief deeper still. The inflamed flesh parts away from the probe as it burrows deeper, a sound like maggots writhing in spoiled meat. The tip pokes through on the other side of my neck just when I think I can no longer stand the pain. I unsheathe the pencil from the handkerchief and pull it free from the wound, leaving the fabric in place. Leaning away, with my left ear on my left shoulder, and shielding my vulnerable cheek with my left hand, I light the handkerchief.

It erupts into a wedge of orange heat, *whooshing* like the lost breath from a sucker-punch as it licks at the edges of its own fummy aura. I smell the hairs melt from the back of the hand protecting my face, and then the flame contracts nearer to the surface of the makeshift fuse.

Vapor spent, the rag doesn't burn quickly. The tiny flame inches closer to the opening of the bullet hole like the sail of a miniature ghost ship, propelled by an imperceptible wind.

The edges of the wound start to bubble from the heat. I squeeze my eyes shut so tight against the pain, that for an instant, I'm afraid I've crushed my eyeballs—that the tears which stream from the corners of my lids are juices leaking from wasted orbs.

I'm relieved only for a second, and now horrified as I watch with eyes still intact the flame sputtering out, the blackened stump of the handkerchief extinguished no more than a millimeter inside the wound.

Fire requires oxygen (which I must not be getting) *in addition to* fuel—as does the brain to remember Boy Scout facts like this. *Hypovolaemic shock*, it's called, resulting from blood loss. I've seen it before, just never on the receiving end.

Am I already this gone?

When I lost her all those years ago—lost them—I consoled myself, told myself I had forever to create another warrior in my image. The lies we believe to carry on.

I'll have to pull out the handkerchief and start over, and I have to be quick about it. My pulse is dangerously elevated now. I'm losing blood even faster from the rear of the wound as my heart struggles to maintain circulation to the rest of my body—and the more blood I lose, the harder its job.

I'm starting to shiver. My limbs feel heavy. *Don't be a pussy!* I taunt myself. *Remember your father, Jequon, watching you from his chains.* I turn up the music in my head to stay awake, to refocus—to stay alive one heartbeat at a time.

With my singed hand, I reach over my right shoulder and tug free the still protruding handkerchief out the backside. The pain is so intense I'm no longer able to feel it the same way. It merges with me; there is no more separation. I *am* the anguish. I am...

Where am I?

A shiny metal canister materializes in front of me as a hand steadies a flickering blue-tipped Zippo beneath it. Minutes pass? Hours? ...Father? Is that you?

The hand holding the flask brings it closer to my face and then behind me where I can't see it. I hear sizzle and hiss and then the hand returns with the flask. Reheats it. Raises it again and presses the metal to the right-front side of my neck. It feels good, like an ice pack. I smell roasted meat and it reminds me of when I was a boy and we hunted mammoths.

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The girl sighs in the throes of a pleasurable dream, waking me from mine. I'm kneeling, and I cradle her head in my palm as she lies limp across my thigh. Her hair spills down my shin, the silken locks mere inches from the cold grime of the alley. I have no recollection of finding her, no memory of saving myself, getting dressed, or exiting the store.

The pain of the bullet wound is now replaced with an almost pleasant tingling and a persistent itch near the surface of the skin—a sure sign of healing. I'm not fully recovered, but for that, I'd have had to drain her of all precious life—cursing her to the animated decay that is Vampire, a crime forbidden by the Codes. The revulsion toward such an act must be ingrained in my subconscious.

I kiss her on the forehead, and ease the sleeping beauty down onto some cardboard, tuck her in with a brand-new overcoat I must've grabbed from inside the store.

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It's a chilly night, and being a pint short won't help her circulate warmth. When she wakes, she'll be a Veingel. Not the filthy animal her blood—still moist on my lips—spared me from becoming tonight.

The urge to watch over her...to hold her...to be with her when she wakes up, *more* alive and *more* sensual than she's ever felt in her life...

Instincts I have to fight off to remember why I'm here: Lucian. Ezekiel, and all the others; a chain of murders stretching back to when our enemy still huddled together in caves and passed the time copying the white lies of their God onto papyrus scrolls; His latest mercenaries.

Instead I slip a copy of the Codes beneath her bra and keep moving.

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