

The Flood didn't get all of us. After the waters receded, His Chosen People also failed to wipe us out—though they tried in Canaan—slaughtering entire cities just to get to a handful of our kind who lived among the region's populace.

Eventually, the Israelites were distracted by other tribes returning their murderous favors. So He entrusted the task to a more devout sect of fanatics: The Sons Of Jared (SOJ for short), a small clan who could trace their bloodline all the way back to their revered prophet, Enoch, and to their namesake, Enoch's father—the seventh from Adam according to legend. From such progeny sprang Methuselah, and later, Noah—so fair-skinned and light-haired they feared he was one of us. Ah! the irony—amusing, were it not for their deadly persistence. For centuries, culling away only our weakest...*helping to*

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sustain the natural order, some of our leaders argued (a view I never shared). Now that the SOJ are becoming a more serious threat, I hope my more proactive stance might gain support from the Council out of necessity.

#

The last time I visited Sarajevo was in 1984, when the capital of the former Yugoslavia hosted the Olympic Winter Games. In my absence, civil war and ethnic cleansing ripped apart the region, threatening to crumble its most beautiful city. She's recovered, though not without scars. As I move deeper into The Quarter, the streets and walkways are patched increasingly with red-painted cement in the shape of flower pedals. *Sarajevo Roses*. A solemn reminder of the mortar rounds which rained down from the surrounding mountains during the war.

Men like Uri are another type of scar upon the city. Organized crime is always the first business to prosper in the wake of socialism—an inevitable progression of the black markets that operate beneath the radar of any communist government. Here in particular, the Russian Mafia sprouted up like poison mushrooms on the dung of oxen, still thriving today even after newly elected officials have sworn to crack down and to restore the rule of law.

I rub the quickly fading circle of scar tissue embossed on my neck. It would be easy to assume Uri sold me out. But aside from his own self interest, it's just as likely

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he's an ignorant pawn. There's too much I don't know to jump to conclusions. For instance:

Did the SOJ intercept his call and place snipers at all my likely points of entry into the city?

Or, was the attack just an extension of their standard operating procedure? bait me with an opportunity to investigate their first target, and then hope to get lucky, when Jequon, the ol' half-angel of vengeance arrives on the scene?

Uri could have discovered Lucian's body after they were long gone. They might not even know he stumbled upon their latest *damning* (an SOJ euphemism, not mine)—or, they might have made a deal with him weeks before they showed up at Lucian's apartment, buying right-of-passage from Uri and a blind eye toward their duffels bulky with sharpened wood stakes, heavy mallets, and holy-water.

Or maybe, just *maybe*, Uri got lucky and interrupted their ceremony—and luckier still for me—managed to take out a few of them on my behalf. I'm not known for luck (you might say *Providence* isn't on my side), but this latter possibility intrigues me on many levels—it must—because rushing in here like I did, taking none of the usual precautions, was stupid, stupid, dumb; an act of desperation, which I've seen kill otherwise cunning warriors more often than any other mistake except for bedding the wrong woman.

And yet, my gut tells me it was the right decision.

I *do* think Uri is holding something back, but I don't think he's in league with the SOJ. Sure, they could pay him same as me. And one could argue that cash in hand is

worth two full briefcases en route. But if that was the SOJ's plan, did they really think I'd fall for it so easily? I don't think so. They're more sophisticated than that.

And there's the matter of what Uri knows, that he shouldn't know, that no one could have possibly convinced him of in the midst of a business deal: Lucian's actual name. *What* he was...even his age, though his face must've claimed no more than thirty years (give-or-take, depending on his preference, and how many feedings he was forced to skip over the years during plagues).

What's more, Uri knew how to reach me. Knowledge no human should have. Only Lucian could have given him this information. It's not something he would have written down in an address book where prying eyes could find it. Lucian must've *told* Uri of my existence, along with the only circumstance in which he dare call. The punishment for such an infraction is two-hundred years in a lightless pit. So the fact Lucian would take such a risk earns Uri a grudging credibility.

After all, here is a man who seems to know who I am, what I am, and the unique role I serve in protecting my people. And if he knows all that, then he realizes beyond even a shred of doubt, that I am not to be fucked with.

Which can only mean Uri has something else for me. Something more than Lucian's body, too sensitive to speak of over an unsecured line.

#

Thousands of the city's youth are out, most of them twenty-something girls with glitter adorning their necks in place of the lace and locket of another era. The war

decimated their available dating pool, and it shows in their hungry eyes and revealing dress. A seductive waif I pass sways into me as if the streets were much more crowded than they actually are; testing me with a hardened nipple, inviting me with the muscular curve of her thighs. She is not the only one. Not so long ago, nights like this were heaven.

Looping trance music greets me a block from where Uri waits, like the chanting of Gregorian monks gone electronica. I hug the walls and dart under awnings as I move in. If this a trap, I'm getting close enough to show up on the SOJ's radar.

Up ahead I see the foil-covered windows of what must be Lucian's apartment. It sits on the second floor of a brown brick building; below it, on street level, an all-night café advertising espresso and blintzes; and in the basement turned speaker-box, some kind of dance club I would suspect Uri's in charge of. Not what I would call an *unusual* location for a 3rd Generation's bachelor pad. Convenient as hell.

I slip into the last remaining alley before the rendezvous and scan the approach. The air here is an interesting mix of raw dough, mixed drinks, and concrete. I'm looking at church towers, unlit windows with a view of the street, and anywhere else another sniper could be hiding. Nothing stands out, which leaves three possibilities of any likelihood: A) the SOJ put all their eggs in one basket at the train station, thinking there wasn't a devil's chance in the church choir that *two* world-class shooters could miss me; B) they don't have the manpower in place to take another potshot from the perimeter; or C) I'm wrong about Uri, and they plan to ambush me inside Lucian's apartment.

I'm leaning toward 'A' or 'B,' but I could live with 'C.' The more numerous the enemy, the better the odds one of them will talk.

I saunter up to the door adjacent the café and walk in. A poorly lit stairwell leads up to the second floor. I hunch forward to avoid the angled ceiling frosted with cobwebs on my way up. The wooden treads groan like banshees with every step. Fortunately the music is even louder in here, and should mask my progress.

At the top of the steps there's a cramped landing bracketed by two numbered doors, Lucian's on the left, neighbor's on the right. Still no sign of an ambush, but I'm ready if there is. Close-quarters combat is my world. I get down on one knee three feet in front of the entrance to his apartment and listen. My hearing is an order of magnitude more sensitive than a full-on human's, but any breaths or heartbeats I might otherwise detect are drowned out by the revelry below in the club.

I duck even lower. If someone shoots through the door, they'll aim for my chest first.

"Uri, it's Jequon." I don't want to surprise him.

"Do you have the money?"

"Yes," I say. I'm surprised how relaxed he sounds.

"Good. Come in, slowly, with both hands on the briefcase where I can see them."

He knows what I'm carrying, so he must have me on camera.

"That's not the way it works," I say. "I'm paying *you*. You get the door."

I hear him stand up from a metal folding chair, and then the unmistakable *schlack-klack* of a pump-action shotgun as he chambers a round.

"Don't worry," he calls through the door, "according to Lucian, you'd kill me before I even raise the barrel and shoot. The gun is my escort back downstairs. Hand me the money as I pass. You'll want to spend some time alone with your friend, yes?"

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“You’re not leaving, Uri. I have some questions for you.”

The door creaks open about six inches and a plume of clove-scented cigarette smoke and vodka fumes billows out into the hall. It masks but does not cloak the warm coppery scent of blood—a lot of blood. The tip of the 12-gauge pokes through the crack first, and Uri uses it to lever the door open the rest of the way while he remains obscured in the darkness of the room.

“I’ll be in my club. Come ask your questions when you are finished.”

He staggers through the doorway without making eye contact. He is drunk.

I stand back up, briefcase in hand, and he reaches for it. I hand it to him. A deal’s a deal. But if Uri thinks he’s going anywhere before I’ve had a chance to look at the body, he’ll just have to sober up and get to know my friend, *Reality*.

“Sit tight,” I say, and grip him hard on the shoulder—not enough to hurt, but enough to let him know I’m not asking. “First I make sure I’m getting my money’s worth.”

Uri nods, then drops the briefcase as if he’s too tired to hold it.

I look suggestively at the shotgun. “Safety on?”

Uri nods again. I confirm, visually, that it is indeed on safety.

“Good. Now pick up the briefcase and hold it.”

He does.

“Now turn around and face the neighbor’s door.” I wait for him to turn. “If I hear your feet move even a millimeter, I will kill you. If you set down that briefcase, I will kill you. If I hear you click off the safety, I will kill you. Understood?”

“Yes,” he says.

I'm actually not as fast as Lucian led him to believe, but I *am* quick enough to take him out before he could click off the safety, drop the briefcase, turn, and raise the barrel to fire.

I step inside and open up the door all the way behind me. Flip on a light.

The apartment is one room plus a bathroom, sparsely furnished with a chair, a dresser, and an unmade bed that looks like it doubled as an autopsy slab.

Lucian hangs from the far wall like a dying Christ; naked, suspended by ash stakes protruding through his crossed ankles, wrists, and chest. His face is mangled. His eyes gouged out. His throat meat-cleaved clean to the vertebrae. *Any* of these wounds would have been fatal—not just the symbolic, stake-through-the-heart cliché.

I move closer. Close enough that I can smell the faint vapor of perfume on his skin, a remnant of the beautiful young thing they must've distracted him with. But something isn't quite right with the body. Something's missing...or rather, *different*. I lean in to examine Lucian's forehead, where the SOJ burn a unique brand at the completion of their formal ritual.

Unbelievable! It's the wrong—

“Jequon. Long time no see.”

The words cut short my thought. In fact, they make it hard to think at all, because I hear them in the sacred tongue of my people.

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