

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019

---

2013

## Toward The Red Shore

Gary Bomhoff  
*University of Central Florida*



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019 by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### STARS Citation

Bomhoff, Gary, "Toward The Red Shore" (2013). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019*. 2995.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/2995>



TOWARD THE RED SHORE

by

GARY CHRISTOPHER BOMHOFF

B.A. University of Central Florida, 2006

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the department of English  
in the college of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term  
2013

## ABSTRACT

A fictional novel utilizing third person limited narration from the perspective of the primary character, Ilya Kollide, who narrates the story as though it were happening in his head as it occurred, with frequent embellishments. He has come to live near an old mansion on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, named Neimasaurus, to find an antiquated, dusty world of faded aristocracy. Temporarily orphaned at the age sixteen by the recent death of his parents, he has traveled four thousand miles to live with his last living relative, an uncle named Demetri, whom he has never met. The year is 1990, only this is not a world where the rule of the Tsar was supplanted by the Soviet Union. Instead, it is a logical exploration of what Russia might resemble, had communism never taken root. While the fantastical may or may not occur, depending upon how the reader chooses to interpret the point of view of the narrator, the setting in and of itself is not meant to be fantastical. Ilya discovers that all the servants who work there are deaf, as is his uncle and his own now deceased parents, whom he carries around in an urn after mixing their ashes together.

While working at the great estate of the Neimasaurus family, Ilya discovers a surprising numbers of stories and people who both parallel his own experiences and serve as allegorical warnings toward his future mistakes in life. He becomes obsessed with the idea that he is to blame for his parents' death and sets out on a quest to bring redemption to the wounded inhabitants of the estate, only to discover that not everyone wants to be helped. In fact, they want him dead. They see him as an allegory, just as he sees them. To the young man Shoji Yamano,

Ilya represents everything he was, and can no longer be. As such a reflection, he resolves to shatter Ilya like a mirror. The novel charts Ilya's personal growth from a neurotic wreck, incapable of normal interaction with people, to a young man capable of not just self-sacrifice, but an understanding of what it actually means to literally sacrifice himself for the well-being of someone he barely knows. He learns to value time spent with others rather than dwelling within a narcissistic and lonely fantasy world.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

FINDING MEANING WITHIN TOWARD THE RED SHORE .....	1
THE BOOK OF JUDGES; 21-22: .....	17
CHAPTER 1: THREADS OF THE SPIDER'S WEB.....	18
CHAPTER 2: AMARANTH'S DESCENT INTO STILLNESS .....	50
CHAPTER 3: THE BLEEDING SWAMP.....	75
CHAPTER 4: THE THING IN THE WALL .....	107
CHAPTER 5: TALON, FANG, AND FLAME.....	120
CHAPTER 6: THROUGH SECRET CORRIDORS .....	147
CHAPTER 7: A LITTLE PIECE OF HELL .....	171
CHAPTER 8: OUT OF THE FIRE AND BACK INTO THE FRYING PAN .....	187
CHAPTER 9: THE SAGA OF CAT AND HUNTER .....	203
CHAPTER 10: PLIGHT OF THE SIBERIAN SNOW LEOPARD .....	219
CHAPTER 11: THE ECHO OF A GECKO.....	241
CHAPTER 12: THE MASQUERADE OF VICIOUS ANIMALS .....	259
CHAPTER 13: THE MANY CHOICES OF ONE WITH NO OPTIONS.....	282

CHAPTER 14: THE TAIL END OF THE GAME .....	310
CHAPTER 15: THROUGH MOONLIGHT CORRIDORS .....	337
CHAPTER 16: THE LIVING, THE DEAD, AND EVERYTHING ELSE.....	368
CHAPTER 17: AN EVEN LOWER CIRCLE OF HELL .....	391
CHAPTER 18: NEMESIS .....	415
CHAPTER 19: SWIMMING WITH SNAKES.....	432
CHAPTER 20: AN EXPECTED BRUSH WITH DEATH.....	451
CHAPTER 21: THE GRIM REALITY OF ANAPHYLACTIC SHOCK.....	473
CHAPTER 22: THREADS OF THE PAST .....	494
CHAPTER 23: WAR BEGINS .....	517
CHAPTER 24: A MAUSOLEUM AT NIGHT.....	533
CHAPTER 25: THE PHOENIX UNCHAINED .....	560
CHAPTER 26: INFERNO.....	577
CHAPTER 27: AT THE SOUND OF SCREAMS.....	597
CHAPTER 28: THE DEAD LADY OF NEIMASAURUS .....	619
CHAPTER 29: HELL TO PAY.....	632
CHAPTER 30: THE WEeping CHURCH.....	647

CHAPTER 31: GREEN FIRE AND BROKEN GLASS .....	673
CHAPTER 32: THE END OF SUMMER.....	685
APPENDIX: READING LIST .....	706

## **FINDING MEANING WITHIN TOWARD THE RED SHORE**

Begun in 2007, the novel “Toward the Red Shore,” had a genesis longer than most theses, but this time wasn’t spent in constant writing. If there’s one thing I’m an expert in, it is wasting vast quantities of time, much as an alcoholic consumes their favorite beverage. After the first chapter was written in February of 2007, a second and third chapter would be written in the first half of 2011, utilizing large sections of text from short stories submitted in workshops that could be adapted to the narrative of the story and ended up serving as springboards for plenty of ideas within the finished novel. The remaining twenty eight chapters were then written between October 2012 and February of 2013. Why the long gaps you might ask? Writer’s block. I had always scoffed at people who mentioned this, and treated it as just a figment of people’s imagination, a sort of excuse to avoid work. I had no time for them, because I was too busy wasting my own supply of it. Then I had a four year case of writer’s block.

It’s impossible to point to any specific cause, but a general sense of writing fatigue from moving directly from the bachelor’s degree into the master’s program. It destroyed my ability to see reading or writing as something fun, interesting, or creative. As you can see from the length of this manuscript, I was apparently saving up my words. Nor was this my first thesis either; originally I had an entirely different director and project. That thesis had nothing to do with what you’re about to read. That one was a wonderfully complicated, hard-hitting, witty, funny, original, psycho-sexual, deeply philosophical examination of the human condition. In case you can’t tell from my subtle description, it wasn’t just a literary novel, it was a painfully literary



novel. I really had no interest in writing at all, but since writing wasn't interesting or fun anymore, I didn't see the problem, other than the fact that after fifty pages in, I couldn't write another word. I was quickly dumped by that first director, after a semester of dithering.

In my quest for a new director, it came down to Pat Rushin, a man who I'd had so many classes with that I lost count. He would direct my thesis, but not the garbage I was trying to foist off on him. No, he remembered "Dragonwing," the original, rather stupider name of "Toward the Red Shore." He said that was the strongest piece of writing he'd seen from me and asked if I could turn that little story into a nice little novella. The hidden meaning being that this other project I thought I had to write but couldn't, because it was an awful piece of shit, wasn't good enough in very polite terms.

"Of course!" I said, barely remembering what I had written all those years ago. I neglected to mention that I was currently incapable of writing anything more than my name, otherwise Pat might have reconsidered his offer. Being a liar, because I'm a writer, it's what we do best, four semesters passed without anything being accomplished whatsoever. I despaired of ever writing again, and got sick of lying, but kept doing it, because the alternative was to quit. Then, one day, without any reason, I started writing again. I dumped over a hundred and fifty pages on Pat's head right after thanksgiving in 2012. Things didn't go smoothly from that point, because.... I think Pat had simply assumed that I would never work on this thesis. It was just a sort of empty song and dance where I would sign up at the beginning of the semester promising anything and delivering absolutely nothing. And then.... A hundred and fifty pages of a first

draft. I was probably more surprised than him that it actually happened. Little did I realize, that those hundred and fifty pages were what would constitute the average length of a normal thesis collection of short stories. I was just getting started, all over again. A few months after that, a sum total of around four hundred more pages descended on him as I attempted to drown him in a massive flood of comma splices, improperly capitalized nicknames, tense shifts, and... see Pat Rushin for a full list of what I can do, if you're interested, but I'm willing to bet you'll still find plenty in the finished product. Besides wasting time and lying, one of my other virtues is dyslexia.

In the end, my little novella turned into a two hundred thousand word novel that I had to cut a bunch of stuff out of because I didn't have it in me to force Pat to read another one hundred thousand words, of a thesis that should've wrapped up about four hundred pages ago. No, I didn't look up what was actually supposed to be in a thesis until I had already exceeded the recommended length. I considered it, for a few days, though... Could I get away with a nine hundred page thesis? Probably not. To recap, I'm a time wasting, lying, dyslexic, completely *unprepared* writer. I decided he didn't need more of my beloved main character Ilya Kollide ranting about new allergies and how the world probably hated him more any other living being ever, while being intellectually outwitted by a block of wood and getting morality lectures from carrion eating birds. On the upside, it was in the type of scenes like I've just mentioned, that I found one of my themes. It was a simple one: teenage boys are completely narcissistic dickheads who think they're the center of the universe and so totally clever and witty that they are simply a gold mine of humor. Now that I'm at the ripe old age of thirty two, I can look back at the sad,

pathetic clown boy who thought he was cool, when I was sixteen. Not that I was unique, you can find a narcissistic pathetic clown in every teenage boy, if you look hard enough. Making fun of the teenage condition while pointing out the flaws, takes the sting out of it for readers. If this doesn't sound suitably highbrow to you, how about this: Ilya Kollide is a complex character who goes through a trying time in his life in which he triumphs, and in the process, fundamentally changes for the better as he comes of age. So what if plenty of the trappings of genre fiction are present in the presentation of Ilya and the development of his character. I knew the key to fashioning this story into a thesis was within him.

He would be a complicated character who experienced plenty of change, maybe even a little too much. But with Ilya Kollide, I knew I would have humor, personal growth, and complicated relationships, because he can complicate anything. Literally, his decision on whether or not he wants to get a drink can take a whole paragraph, just see chapter nineteen. He may be complicated but short, to the point, and focused? Absolutely not. He's not that kind of person, and neither is his book. To quote Henry James: "Victorian novels are loose baggy monsters," and so is this story. I'm relying upon him to make this novel literary, in the same way that Christopher John Francis Boone completely makes "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time," by Mark Haddon. The story in the book is very slight; as a matter of fact, I remember almost nothing about it except for the character. That said, it in no way holds it back from being a fantastic book.

Even though I wrote my first chapter of this thesis about six months before reading it, I found the similarities between Ilya Kollide and Christopher a little too close for comfort, and set about making slightly different flaws for my hero. That's right, I said hero, because that's what he is. He may be a hypochondriac germaphobe, that's a fear of germs, not Germans, a whiner, firm believer in discretion being the better part of valor, and emotionally stunted with a vastly overactive imagination, but that doesn't disqualify him. He's a cat-lover and a bit clumsy and forgetful too, with a tendency to let his mind wander when people start saying boring things to him. He's also slightly sexually repressed, because he finds it unhygienic. I'll stop there, because he has too many wonderful hang ups.

Because of the long time between my course work and the actual writing of this thesis, the reading list is not as relevant as it once was, nor are there more appropriate books to place on the list. The number one thing that I take from other novels is atmosphere, and the way they make me feel. The oppressive feeling of Henry James in "The Turn of the Screw," or "The Beast in the Jungle," and "The Aspern Papers," is what I take from his work. I'm sure he wrote something happy and upbeat, but I certainly never found it. I also single out Henry James to mention, and this isn't the last time I'll mention him, because this story began as a parody of Victorian and gothic literature, and James's style in particular, though most of these things were expunged, and the idea of a parody of Victorian literature was replaced, instead, by an homage to gothic fiction, while keeping the humor based upon dialogue and situations, not on over the top descriptions and Jamesian sentences that never end, much like this sentence has continued on and on with a total of twelve commas, which is not the sort of thing one wants to read for two

hundred thousand words, in the twenty-first century, is it? To see some good examples by James himself, see “The Beast in the Jungle,” a story that made me reconsider whether or not I wanted to be an English major as an undergraduate. In the final product, traditional gothic literature like “Dracula,” by Bram Stoker, and “Frankenstein,” by Mary Shelly, became more relevant, with their well-known tropes. Even the ideas of “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” by Robert Louis Stevenson, makes a brief appearance in the novel.

Consider yourself warned, at this point in the essay there will be spoilers, as I move beyond inspiration and the writing of “Toward the Red Shore,” into a vaguely, sort of more scholarly discussion. That word used to terrify me as an undergraduate. Scholarly, the secret professorial code for something that will bore the shit out of an undergraduate, even if it delivers necessary information. I’m trying to make this essay not seem too scholarly. Back to the gothic literature; the concept of feeding upon the blood is taken from Dracula, in this case to replace the loss of Alexei’s own blood, as it breaks down and becomes something different entirely.

Ironically, he consumes human blood not because he is inhuman, but to try and stay human. The parallel with Shelly is equally apparent to the reader: the concept of playing God, and creating a new and better form of life that does not age is remarkably similar to the actions of Dr. Frankenstein, except the mad scientist of this novel, Alexei Neimasaurus, carries out his experiments in order to correct a mistake, not from any sense of greed for eternal life or desire to push forward scientific knowledge. That sounded... kind of scholarly, didn’t it? The similarity to Frankenstein ended up being the most truncated plot arc of the novel, with the only elements of it

left, an old laboratory flooded with blood, and a large pile of bones from a chimpanzee Alexei had experimented on, which went mad and was responsible for a good portion of the killing attributed to him.

The inspiration for that was the lovely story that made headlines about a woman named Charla Nash, who was mauled by a friend's pet chimpanzee, who tore off her face, nose, lips, and ears, then gouged out her eyes. The chimp tore off her hands for good measure, too. I took away something from this news story, beside the idea that keeping chimpanzees as pets is a slightly bad idea. I took away the idea that chimpanzees are fucking scary as hell, and enormously underused in the horror genre. Sadly, they remain underused since I made the decision to minimize the elements of gruesome horror in the story. You don't get to read about Alexei's pet chimpanzee that he experimented on, who proceeded to stalk the house at night abducting and eating people, until he was walled in with his master, where he eventually turned on Alexei, after beginning to starve. He attacked and ate parts of Alexei's body, until the man escaped from him, falling down the spiral staircase and breaking most of the bones in his body in the eight flight fall.

It took decades for Alexei to heal, and his missing body to slowly grow back, while the killer chimpanzee awaited him upstairs, too large to go down the narrow steps, and too stupid to realize it could pound through the walls. When Ilya found his way into the secret wing, he wasn't going to find the bones of the chimpanzee, the creature was going to still be alive in an emaciated form. It would stalk and try to eat Ilya in the dark, until he tricked it down the wooden

stairs rotten with age, where the creature would lie crippled until the end of the story. The horror writer in me loved this story, but I knew if I included Ilya's discovery of the creature, I would have to include the flashback scenes where Alexei and the myth of the blood-beast began. I was concerned that I had pushed the gore envelope as far as I could with the eternally dying dog and Alexei's cadaverous and rotting appearance. I was worried if I included this, the story would be dragged into the horror genre, where I didn't want it to go. Though, if I had included this, the parallel to Frankenstein and his creation would have been a lovely piece of parallelism.

The third parallel, of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, borrows the central conceit of two distinct, yet attached beings in one space. Alexei and others refer to his blood-consuming alter ego as the blood-beast. It speaks with its own voice and gains more and more control, the more inhuman he becomes. This was also greatly truncated, but the concept was preserved for Ilya's first encounters with Alexei's dying body in the doorway to the laboratory. These classic gothic horror tropes ended up being truncated in the past, when the decision was made to remove the backstory. They still exist, but are largely confined to the story's past, in the late nineteenth century, when the stories that inspired them were originally written. Instead, the story is preoccupied with Ilya's obsession with fixing these things, in order to avoid fixing his own psyche. Just how much of this is Ilya's invention is left up to the reader, until the final chapter, when it is revealed by and large that the events of the novel actually happened, though with frequent embellishment and exaggeration on the part of Ilya. The idea of Ilya as an unreliable narrator brings me back to Henry James and "The Turn of the Screw." The obvious parallel of the governess arriving at a remote country estate, who may or may not experience supernatural

activity, including the visitation of ghosts, is a good parallel to the story of Ilya Kollide. The Governess's suspected madness, which lends a suspenseful and paranoid quality to the work, is instead turned on its head in "Toward the Red Shore," because the reader knows from the very beginning that he isn't trustworthy. Rather than suspense or paranoia, his lies invoke pity and humor.

Originally, according to my proposal for this story, which I thought about including, so people could have a good laugh reading it over, I said that everything would have a largely metaphorical meaning and essentially be Ilya's interpretation of events. Ilya prefers to embellish, not outright lie. The reason for this, is that while this is an academic thesis, it's also a novel meant to be read for enjoyment of the reader. Ultimately, a two hundred thousand word book which reveals at the end that everything you've read didn't actually happen, and by default didn't really matter, would certainly piss me off. It was safe to assume that other readers would be slightly miffed as well. It would be like watching the T.V. show "Lost" for six years trying to figure out the enormously clever answer to what was going on, only to discover that they're all dead at the end and nothing had any meaning, or even happened. I might as well have had Ilya wake up in his apartment in Petrograd with his parents, after having an unpleasant dream about some weird swamp mansion. It would have undermined all of the growth I had planned for him. I presented enough information of what I had originally planned to hopefully mollify those readers who were questioning how coincidental some of the events in the story were and getting my point across, before actually writing a happily ever after ending.



Can an HEA be literary? It seems unlikely, given the grim, sarcastic, sad, cynically funny, collection of works of literary fiction I've had to read. Anybody want to give famed humorist Toni Morrison a try? Just so we're clear on this: I love all of her books and never in a million years would have read them if I hadn't been forced to for a class. They are dense, difficult, and full of complicated ideas, which don't reveal themselves easily. I still have fond memories of reading "Child of God," by Cormac McCarthy in a literary theory course. The fond memories are of burning the book in the fire pit out back of my house and seeing it reduced to a dancing flurry of red ash that faded into nothingness. Sadly my memories of it didn't go away so quickly. I like a good necrophilia yarn about a cave-dwelling serial-killing anti-social rapist of long dead women as much as the next person, so long as I don't have to read it. It was at around the same time that Seung-Hui Cho, a creative writing major, went on his shooting spree at Virginia tech, that I had the book assigned to me to read. No wonder he flipped out, if he had to read things like that. Who doesn't go a little mad reading a book without quotation marks? Just to be clear on this: I didn't like the book at all. I have no desire to be a writer like that. I don't want to be the butt of a joke that I learned in my year teaching composition at UCF. When a new book by a respected author comes out, and a teacher, upon being asked if they read it yet, answers: "Read it? I haven't even taught it yet!" I found it hilarious and perhaps slightly true, but I prefer to be read, rather than to be taught.

That's not to say that there was nothing learned by reading these books, even "Child of God." Because I hate something, doesn't mean that I'm resistant to learning from it. I even put "Child of God" on my reading list. What I learned was that a lot of characters in Cormac

McCarthy novels tend to be fairly simple, or at least debatable in their complexity. But what they have is a massive amount of authenticity and genuineness to them. The truth of human beings is that, frequently, they aren't complex. Most real people aren't interesting enough to be the main character of a novel. A book in which Gary Bomhoff himself appears as the narrator, would be subject to "Read it? I haven't even taught it yet!" Which is to say it would become a little pretentious and ever so slightly alienating, like that first p.o.s. thesis that crashed and burned. I can still admit that McCarthy certainly helped me to develop characters. The flashback sequence in chapter two, written in the voice of Amaranth Neimasaurus, is practically an ode to McCarthy's stripped down style.

If I'm frank, I suppose this far along in the essay you know I am, though perhaps blunt is a better word, most of the literature that deeply informs this story is quite old. Dante Alighieri's "Divine Comedy" is directly referenced multiple times, and certainly an inspiration for the secret wing. The Weeping Church and the island it sits upon are inspired by the final circle of hell; a frozen lake in which Satan dwells, chewing on the souls of the damned. Even the gothic horror allusions have their root in much older myth, "Frankenstein" is even subtitled "A Modern Prometheus," showing that Shelly was not afraid to wear her literary inspiration on her sleeve. As for Dracula, one need look no further than the story of Lamia. In case you aren't familiar with the story, Lamia is the mistress of Zeus. When Hera becomes jealous of her, she kills all of Lamia's children and transforms her into a serpentine monster with an insatiable hunger to devour other children. Zeus then gave her the ability to remove her own eyes to hide her

wickedness from herself. This is actually much closer to what happens in “Toward the Red Shore,” in chapter 15:

The body of a young man, naked, except for a mask resembling an ocelot, lay on the bed. Blood came from the eye sockets of the mask and his throat had been slashed. He was dead. Half pushed off the bed, was a partially dressed woman, her feathered dress still pulled up for her liaison with an Ocelot, the mask still in place, and her throat slit. Beside her was a scalpel, next to a bony long fingered hand in some sort of surgical glove, with the fingers pulled tight against the unnatural length. On the tips of the fingers, coming through the bloody white material, were thick and pointed yellow nails. The hand belonged to a figure in a hooded black cloak crouched over the sparrow's slit neck, a long black tongue coming out of the hood, and lapping at her neck noisily. Nothing else could be seen of the creature's face from Ilya's vantage point, except that the way the blood-beast lay on the ground was almost serpentine, and the figure had to be at least six and half feet tall when standing. The pipe dropped from Ilya's fingers and the tongue shot back into the hood and the hand grabbed the scalpel from the ground.

“Don't look at me!” the beast screamed, in a hollow and rasping metallic tone.

The scalpel slashed downward into the eye sockets of the sparrow mask and the woman's body jerked slightly.

This is one of the more horrific interludes of the story, but offers a perfect example of the Lamia myth brought home, even if the setting and language used is much more at home with Gothic Horror than mythical legends. The most notable difference being that my beast takes the eyes of others, rather than taking out his own. The reason for this was that he did cut out his own eyes, but they simply grew back. Over and over again, another moment from an omitted flashback. This is a very Dante moment of the story as well, when the nature of Alexei's suffering is revealed, marking a clear comparison to Canto XIII of the “Inferno,” where the dogs run down and feast on the flesh of a man, only for it to regrow every day, and the process to repeat itself.

This story from the “Inferno” involved some borrowing on the part of Dante Alighieri, who did not hide his love of pagan literature, despite the strong religious themes of the work. The particular story he borrowed from for this canto, was the punishment of Prometheus, in yet another Greek myth, the inspiration for “Frankenstein.” The story involves Zeus punishing Prometheus by chaining him to a rock high atop a mountain where an eagle will eat his liver every day, for the organ will regenerate during the night when the eagle sleeps. Prometheus is saved after twelve generations by Hercules, who discovers Prometheus's punishment as he

travels by the mountain. I have called Ilya a hero before, and in this case, he does in fact play the role of Hercules in the parallel of the myth in “Toward the Red Shore,” as he discovers the starving, dying, regenerating body of Alexei in the secret wing.

This was intentional because in addition to everything else that this thesis does, it became a hero’s journey about halfway through the writing of it. I was not aware of this. You would think I might know what was going on in my own novel, but it just sort of snuck in. However, Ilya is no Joseph Campbell hero archetype a la “The Hero with a Thousand Faces.” This is a post-modern ADHD, whiny, hypochondriac, lazy, lying, borderline autistic coward of a hero. The principle difference between Ilya Kollide’s heroic journey is that it is largely internalized, and occurs entirely in one location in which he slowly becomes aware of more and more things that were hidden in plain sight. His road of trials is within his mind and how he begins to see the world more and more, noticing what others do not. Eventually, a neurotic impulse to fix the lives of others while ignoring the shambles of his own becomes a quest to do good at great personal danger to himself, making of him a hero in the monomyth mold.

For those of you keeping track, I’ve given out three theses for my thesis now: coming of age, the hero’s journey, and a parody of the narcissistic universe in which teenagers reside within their own minds and the minds of their peers and how drawing attention to this while using humor lessens the blow of understanding. The humor may come as a surprise to anyone familiar with my writing, since it has never reared its head until now. The first chapter was the first stab at putting humor into my work. There was something very intimidating about trying to be funny

after functioning largely as a dramatic writer for so long. The reading list doesn't exactly scream funny, does it? Toni Morrison, Nathaniel Hawthorne, T.S. Eliot, Cormac McCarthy, and Henry James... What a bunch of jokers! The reason for the humor, besides helping the story flow and not seem so boring despite the page count, is because I am a big believer in Aristotle's "Poetics." While I had elements of tragedy present, there wasn't really any catharsis, which left one other important genre in Aristotle's estimation: comedy. Everything comes back to Greek sources in this thesis, doesn't it? I'm starting to feel like the father in "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," when he insists that the root of all words is Greek. Well, damn it, the root of all great western literature is Greek! There, I said it.

Not that I wrote a comedy, but after reading the "Poetics," an internal decision is made on every story I write. Is it going to be comedy or tragedy? The suggestion of using comedy to reveal a painful truth, while lessening the blow with humor, finds a home in this story. The saga of Ilya Kollide without jokes is about a young man who loses his parents, moves away from all of his friends, hates his new life, considers suicide, is repeatedly sexually harassed by the son of his new employer, and then loses his hand and becomes paralyzed for a year or two. It's a rather depressing procession of events. Oh, they kill his little cat, too. They even take away his toys. The painful truth that's illuminated is that on the whole, more bad than good happens to most people. When it happens, don't be afraid to make a joke about it, otherwise you won't get through it, and even if you do, there won't be anything to smile about, will there? I feel like I've gone on far too long in this essay and it's become far too scholarly, so I'm going to wrap things up before it becomes... *Academic*, and that's even worse than scholarly. Enjoy my epic hero's

journey gothic horror comedy mystery adventure queer coming of age tale set in an alternate future Siberia in which communism never existed, and mythology was never actually mythical to begin with. If “Frankenstein” was a modern Prometheus, then perhaps one should look upon this story as a modern “Frankenstein.”

## **THE BOOK OF JUDGES; 21-22:**

*And the children of Benjamin did take wives of the daughters of Shiloh, and they returned unto their inheritance and repaired the cities and dwelt in them. And the Children of Israel departed thence at that time, every man to his tribe and to his family, and they went out from thence every man to his inheritance. In those days there was no king in Israel. Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.*

*There came hence unto Canaan a boy. And this boy's name was Emernon, son of Shelesh. He was shunned for his abominable appearance, for he was plague stricken. The Men of Israel left him to die, refused him shelter or food. Yet Emernon would not die, and so the men of Israel smited him and he bled but still did not die. And so it was that Emernon became a curse on the people of Israel for he never stopped bleeding. For there was no King to bring order to the land and to right wrongs. There was much sickness and foulness in Israel until they drove Emernon away.*



## CHAPTER 1: THREADS OF THE SPIDER’S WEB

The Boy occupied his hours on the ancient steam-powered train furnished in brass and green velvet by talking to his parents about all of the things he had been afraid or too embarrassed to tell them before. Now, as he had decided to change for the better, he would become a success. The woman from “human services” had told him this was an excellent opportunity to grow as an adult and become a model young man. Then she labeled him, by pinning a small nametag over his right breast that said: *Ilya Kollide, Altai Krai, Barnaul-East stop*. He would’ve forgotten where he was going without it.

He was considering making the badge permanent after he arrived at Barnaul-East. For instance, he might write, *Ilya Kollide, Altai Krai, Neimasaurus—A Model Young Man*. The eighty-four-hour train ride from Petrograd to visit his uncle Demetri Svetko, his new caretaker, passed at a crawl for Ilya. He soon tired of the one-sided discourse with his parents. He filled his hours walking to and from the dining car and avoiding eye contact with the other passengers. Unless they seemed friendly, then he would chat with them. Eventually they figured out that he was damaged in some way, of a peculiar nature in the head that made it uncomfortable for these normal undamaged people to discuss things with him. They made him feel as though he dirtied them with his slightly morose presence and the spectre of death in his hands. Instead, he began to write in his diary about the way he wanted the world to be.

The estate was spread out like a spider web, only it was slowly sinking. The various wings of the decaying edifice reached across the swampy earth like threads attached to various

isthmuses of land here or there, in an attempt to anchor itself more permanently. It was situated south of the Altai Mountains, fifty or so miles from the city of Barnaul. The bogs surrounding the estate boiled in the summer and froze in the winter, unleashing plagues of mosquitoes in the spring. Though all attempts to avoid the inevitability of time had naturally failed, the money hadn't run out yet. The family that owned the estate, pretentiously dubbed Neimasaurus Hall centuries ago, were still adding onto it and paying to have water pumped out of the basement, though two subterranean levels had already been sealed off a century ago.

The old lord and lady were rarely seen there and only occasionally visited, finding the atmosphere of the place both oppressive and hopeless. Absent though they were, a frequent fixture at the moribund manor was the Young Lord: a handsome man who kept to himself and a few close friends that the servants gave a wide berth to. As for the other inhabitants of the estate, they were all servants: two butlers, two cooks, eight maids, one gamekeeper, five groundskeepers, one chauffer, and two security guards, as well as their immediate families. They lived in a complex of cottages and cabins in the woods behind the estate in a situation not unlike peasants, as they were the original inhabitants of said cabins when they were built over a century ago.

It was on a slightly chilly Wednesday afternoon in mid-August that the Boy arrived at the estate. The chauffer picked him up at the nearby train station and dropped him off out back to meet his only surviving relative, Demetri, who worked as a security guard at Neimasaurus. The Boy wore a small badge which said: *Ilya Kollide, Altai Krai—Traveling*. He was preoccupied

with a fairly drab looking silver urn in a half open suitcase made of chipped alligator skin. In his diary, he wrote of his feelings and emotions of arrival at this bleak place. The book had originally been given to him as a pamphlet entitled, *The Code of Conduct for a Model Young Man*. He was filling in the margins with useful information.

Out back was a small muddy field behind the gated expanse of the estate. It had once been pasture land before the water had partially reclaimed it. Further back was the forest, with the little cottages burning bright yellow lights in the overhanging gloom of pines. The Boy was sixteen years old, of average height for his age and fairly clever, damaged only by the recent death of his parents in a robbery by two Tatar boys his own age. They had panicked and committed a double homicide. The Boy worried that he would become racist because of the ethnicity of his parents' attackers. He thought to himself always that he would never blame the two Tatar boys for what they did because of their skin color, but by their actions.

The Boy, who was named Ilya as the badge indicated, was blessed with one exotic feature in an otherwise handsome-yet-half-formed teenage body: his eyes were the shade of the flickering lights of a jack-o-lantern. They always seemed faintly luminescent against pale skin in dim light. The Boy referred to them as being Halloween colored. This was an unnatural genetic mutation causing him to not see very well, a fact he had never mentioned to his parents, having no desire to wear glasses. They were not cool, and he had a hard enough time fitting in without looking like a member of the intelligentsia. The technical name of the disorder was ceritikonus.

He had read about it extensively, though his parents who were both deaf and could barely read, knew very little about it. Ilya only translated what he felt his parents should know, when they had conversations with the hearing world. He would never be mentioning anything to his parents again. Unless he got them out of his suitcase and talked to them. They had been cremated and he'd poured their ashes into the same urn, so they would be together. Occasionally, he had delusions of suicide where he would be cremated and his uncle would pour his ashes into his parent's urn so they would never be apart. He knew that he should not tell his uncle this, or he might be tempted to carry through on his delusions. Symmetry was an extremely powerful force to Ilya Kollide. The Uncle, Demetri, helped him with his luggage into the cottage after an uncomfortable greeting involving Ilya taking out the urn and signing *here's Mom and Dad too*.

Demetri looked vaguely pole-axed and replied with his hands: *why don't you keep them in your room?* His signing was efficient and to the point. The fingers didn't have an ounce of grace in them, just uncomfortable efficiency. Ilya's uncle was just as deaf as his sister, Ilya's mother. Ilya knew that all of the staff were deaf for some reason. It seemed to Ilya that it would be an odd world. One that was so silent, his own thoughts would awaken him in the middle of night. It would be so quiet that perhaps he would forget what sounds sounded like.

*Okay*, he signed, slowly and dreamily as he usually did, drawing out the end of the sign with a twist of his wrist so the word seemed to slowly fade away, to slip from his hand down to the ground quietly like a gum wrapper he would drop in a theater, hoping no one would notice. He would put his parents by the foot of his bed so that he could sign to them before falling asleep

each night, telling them how his day was. Maybe even whisper a word or two in the dark to them. They could probably hear now that they were dead. Demetri's cottage was a wood and iron affair that smelled faintly of fish oil and sweat. The sheets were beige colored on Ilya's bed and he suspected they had once been white. It didn't seem like a place he could be happy in.

*You work in house and outside. Depend on what people want. Master of house was kind enough to hire you for odd jobs, until full time position open, Demetri signed. You go to kitchen through back gate. Meet Tabitha. She show you estate. She maid, she work everywhere.*

Ilya shrugged and smiled slightly, in a way that he had frequently been made fun of in the past. He put his suitcase and his parents down. Demetri's dismissal of him seemed abrupt. He'd barely gotten to look around the small cell of a room that would imprison him every night for the next two years. Once out of the cottage, he headed for the back gate of the estate through the dark forest and peat bogs. His uncle had only touched him once since he arrived. Ilya found this odd, for his father had always hugged him when they met after a long parting, and his mother had hugged him every day when he got home from school. But what was equally important to him was the smell of fish oil in the cabin. Was there power all the time, or did his uncle frequently rely upon oil lamps? Ilya wondered how long the cabins had been equipped with running water and power.

The forest was black and unfriendly, smelling of decomposed things and despair, in addition to swarms of flies hovering around brackish thawed water in nearby bogs. Eventually, he was out back in the muddy field, and he saw Neimasaurus in its full glory well lit by the

noontime sun. It reminded Ilya of a cathedral, a castle, and the book *Jane Eyre*, which he had been forced to read for his English lessons. He excelled at it, as he did in all lessons that he chose to pay attention to, which were precious few. He thought that he would probably become the mad one in the attic for his family. Demetri was clearly the emotionally-remote and aloof father-figure who would probably beat him if he put one foot out of line. Eventually the beatings would get so bad that his mind would snap like a dry twig. Then he would be imprisoned in the attic of the cottage and spend every waking moment trying to burn said twig. In the distance and toward the west, workers on scaffolding repaired the brick work of the estate. He shuddered at the heights at which they were working, nearly overcome by what he imagined was a sense of vertigo.

The boy felt uneasy as he pushed open the rusty brass gate, which was adorned with a twisting dragon engraved along the bars that were turning green as the metal oxidized. He felt that if this house was a web, he was going to meet a spider, or maybe just get stuck inside it and never leave. Neither prospect filled him with dread, but both made him feel uneasy. The Boy decided this was a good thing because he hadn't felt much of anything since his parents died. He didn't think he had died inside, but maybe he had been sleeping and now he was starting to wake up. The red brick path was covered in bluish-green moss and lichen, which was one of his favorite words as a child and one of his favorite things to find in the woods when his parents were poor and couldn't afford to buy him real toys. Not that he minded or anything like that. Toys had never impressed him much compared to his daydreams and imagination. Later, when his parents had money, he'd wanted books instead. But Ilya had always wished his parents could

hear how the word “lichen” was pronounced, so simple and sweet and likable. Not like moss, which was really quite ugly sounding.

There were two women in maid’s uniforms by the kitchen door smoking cigarettes. This caused Ilya to immediately pull the collar of his shirt up over his mouth and nose. He was afraid of cancer and smoke usually gave him a headache after a minute or two. He had read extensively about smoking, since his father had his pipe religiously every Sunday for at least an hour, leaving the house and Ilya’s very soul imprinted with the smell for the rest of the week. The two maids laughed at him and stubbed out their cigarettes on the brick. He didn’t mind being laughed at. He was used to it. This didn’t make him sad. It just didn’t seem important, what strangers thought of him. Besides, when they had lung cancer, Ilya would sigh and sadly shake his head at their funerals, signing to their friends: *I knew this would happen, but it’s still so sad, isn’t it?*

*Hello*, they signed at him in fast, rapid movements, like the chirping of a bird trying to get out just one more musical note. Not a small, pretty songbird, but more the rapid shrieking of an eagle.

*Hi*, he signed back, suddenly feeling nervous as he got up close to the women. One of them was quite beautiful, rather like one would imagine a nymph to be, were nymphs to have long red hair, lightly tanned skin, and eyes the color of honey. Everything about her seemed sweet to Ilya. From her strawberry tasting hair, to her graham cracker-colored skin, and eyes which he imagined to be butter toffee. He looked down suddenly realizing his thoughts were going on a little too long and growing just a little too bizarre. Almonds would complete her.

The redhead signed, *I'm Tabitha. Are you the boy I'm supposed to show around?*

He nodded gravely, as though this were a profound thing. *I'm Ilya Kollide.*

*This is Yaisha. She's coming with us until we get to the east wing. We're cleaning the Oriental Hall today.* She motioned for him to follow.

Yaisha set him off on a dream about chocolate and licorice, and so he walked through the kitchen in a fudge-frosted haze, seeing just enough reality to not bump into anything in his metaphysical wanderings. Yaisha was pretty ordinary for someone of Turkic or Mongol ethnicity, probably Altai. He had read about the Altai before coming here. They were nomadic hunter-gatherers until the Russian government had forced their settlement in the nearby Altai republic, which was really just the junky part of the Altai Krai that the Russian settlers didn't want. Ilya did not feel sorry for them, because if he were to feel sorry for every ethnic minority that had been mistreated in the history of Russia, he would never be happy again. Still, perhaps he should apologize to Yaisha on behalf of the Russian people. But if she wasn't Altai, but some other ethnic group, he would look foolish. Ilya suddenly realized that his parents had been murdered by Tatar boys, which meant that karma had been served.

Across on the other side of Neimasaurus, workers in the west wing had uncovered a statue of a phoenix which had been hidden in a sealed away room that they'd uncovered when they smashed through the wall to install electricity. The statue was almost the size of a man and was covered in black soot. Beneath it was a tarnished silver plaque with the name *Ilya* embossed upon it.



At the very instant that Ilya had entered the house, the workers noticed the buzzing that came from the room. It sounded like cicadas, and seemed to come from the walls and all around them. The workers looked around in wonder at the raging cacophony of noise that swelled into a crescendo of mating calls and died into nothing without a single cicada being seen. They would later swear that the statue's eyes had opened. But they had no proof the eyes had not always been open.

When Ilya came back to reality from his daydreaming or whatever it had been, in the dimly lit and narrow servant's staircase, the women were apparently in the middle of a conversation; *I saw a light on under the door when I was passing by last night*, Yaisha signed in an authoritative sort of way, jamming the signs right at the person, to cut down on ambiguities, with the speed of a beaver building a dam.

*It's been a week since they locked it up, right? And no one has seen the person the Young Lord brought there?* Tabitha's signs were slower and almost sensual in the way the words glided off her hands and hovered between her and Yaisha like air kisses.

*Eight days and counting. No one has entered or left it.*

*Left what?* Ilya signed, waving his hand like a fluttering cardinal trying to attract a mate. The women's eyes followed his signs impatiently, willing him to go faster. He didn't. He did consider, but discard the notion.

*The room in the west wing. The Young Lord's friend, the Japanese one, brought someone home in the middle of the night with a cloak over their head so that no one could see whoever it*

was, Tabitha signed, leaving him slightly dizzy as her hand moved so fast it almost became a blur.

*No one has seen the unidentified person since then, and no food has been delivered to the room either,* Yaisha added.

*Maybe it's a vampire,* he signed, his expression saying that was clearly the logical answer.

*It's true the figure has only been seen at night, but they would have to bring him blood.* Yaisha said, actually considering what he said, which surprised Ilya.

*You're not being serious are you?* Tabitha signed, looking between the two of them.

*Don't forget about the pentagram in the basement,* Yaisha signed, waving her hands superiorly, as though Tabitha had forgotten something very important. *One time I walked in on the Young Lord down in the basement sitting in his big bloody pentagram or pentacle, whatever it was, with a black candle burning in each point of the star, and him sitting there cross-legged throwing down small animal bones over and over again. I got the hell out of there real quick. And I'm a Tengriist!*

Ilya could tell from Tabitha's expression that she had read this story over and over again, mainly because she kept checking her pocket watch while Yaisha signed. *You're not a pagan, stop saying that.*

*Well I don't go to church, do I?*

*Maybe they sacrificed him, and that's why nobody saw him leave, and no food was delivered,* Ilya signed.

Yaisha seemed disturbed and contemplative. Tabitha was dismissive of his theory. He wished it were the other way around. They crossed a vast labyrinth of corridors, rooms, doors, chandeliers, alcoves, and small winding servant staircases on their way to the east wing. Ilya made no attempt to keep track of where they were. He decided it wasn't in his nature to pay attention to such things. It didn't help that he kept watching Tabitha walk, becoming transfixed by her candy-coated sinews and peppermint bones. Stop being weird, he would think to himself periodically, but then return to adjective laden thoughts and inventions interspersed with sweet-flavored nouns.

Yaisha left them shortly before arriving in the Oriental hall, disappearing down a dark hallway toward what Tabitha signed was the auxiliary ballroom. From the open door, Ilya could see that the room was being used to store giant mountains of moldering books. It seemed like the perfect metaphor of madness to Ilya; great big piles of knowledge completely disorganized and un-retrievable. His feet carried his body away from the dark corridor into the Oriental Hall, as personal desire was overwhelmed by the need to obey and blindly follow Tabitha. He had to follow someone.

The Oriental hall looked as though somebody had taken gold and lacquered bamboo and sculpted a hallway from them, filling liberally with red silk lanterns and an assortment of gongs, vases, and terra-cotta with jade tea sets sprinkled liberally about on delicate antique cherry wood

end tables. The dust seemed to hover lightly about the hall, seemingly comprised of moths, anxious and full of energy waiting to take flight in the light that shone in delicate pools of multi-colored hues from the stained glass windows. At the end of the hallway two other maids, with the aid of poles bearing hooks on the end, opened a pair of heavily embroidered black taffeta drapes with a snap. The activity sent the dust up, like a serpent rearing to strike and then coming undone in the dying current of air that bore it and slithering into nothing. Nothing but a fine dusting of gray particulate matter on nearby relics.

Tabitha and Ilya scrubbed the floor while the other two maids cleaned the windows. Scrubbing a stone floor with a brush and a bucket of soapy water the color of dirt was akin to self-flagellation to him. Soon, he was imagining his soul being flayed over and over again by barbed lengths of chain ending in hooks until his essence hung in tatters. The thought of what his soul would look like occupied him utterly and he failed to notice that he was cleaning the same length of stone, which admittedly was awfully clean looking, over and over again. When he noticed what he was doing, he kept cleaning the same spot because it was insane and stupid. Just like the job he was supposed to be doing. Soon he would carry his bucket and sponge with him into the auxiliary ballroom and clean all the words away from the books leaving spotless empty pages, before jumping to his death from the window screaming “I’m just like a blank page!”

His mother had scrubbed the floor at home. He’d helped as a child, probably being of more hindrance than help, just like he was today. It was a floor he’d walked on in socks with his big toes sticking through from a growth-spurt. He’d walked on it with bare blackened feet, and

high-top sneakers. He'd crawled on that floor too, only he couldn't remember that, or when he'd fallen and gashed his head open on a kitchen counter. He still had a scar, hidden by his hair. He had no history or attachment with this floor. Eventually, his compulsive cleaning of memories was interrupted by a cloying green cloud of smooth noxiousness.

Cancer alarm claxons went off in his head, and he thought *Menthol!* In a panic, he lifted his shirt up over his mouth, though it was useless he told himself, the smoke had gotten inside already. He looked up into the face of the poison spitting beast; a woman in her sixties, with graying hair, an anemic waistline, bat-like skin, and calcium deprived bones leading to a hunched figure that still towered six feet or more into the air. Her sunken pinkish-grey lips parted, revealing pointed yellowing teeth that expelled green fumes. Ilya choked, and the woman's thin grey eyes narrowed.

*I think you've cleaned that spot enough,* she signed, bringing her silver and brass cigarette holder up to her lips with a thin bird-like wrist, varicose veins visible and pulsing like faint blue neon. A Chinese dragon curved down along the length to the end where its mouth clutched a smoldering cigarette the color of blood and orange soda.

*Okay,* he signed back. Across the hall, Tabitha signed *She's the Archivist. She's friends with her Ladyship. Be nice to her and do as she says.* He smiled at her, but his shirt hid the effect, and moved onto a new section of the floor and started scrubbing furiously, flagellating the stone harshly with his brush. The old poison spewing thing moved away from him over to Tabitha, leaving clouds of green in her musk-laden desiccated wake. Ilya wondered if he'd used

too many words there, but decided he liked them. This woman required a lot of description. Tabitha and the Archivist, who carried around a rather large beat-up looking notebook, signed to each other for a few more minutes. Occasionally, the old hag looked over her shoulder at him and shook her head, her hair moving back and forth in little scraggly patches like dead seaweed. Ilya only caught, or cared about an interesting tidbit of information.

*There are bugs in the walls, cicadas to be precise,* the Archivist signed. *The workers swear there was a colony of them in the room they unsealed, but can't find a trace of them. I don't know how we'll find them now, since they're hidden from sight and we can't hear them at all.* They didn't know Ilya could hear. He felt no inclination toward being helpful toward a woman that was slowly poisoning him. Eventually, she disappeared down the hall, leaving a trail of swamp colored poison like a chemical weapon.

Tabitha came over and surveyed his progress, trying to smile. He smiled back blankly, still hidden behind his t-shirt. She reached out and tugged it down to his collar. Ilya valiantly tried not to choke. *You're not getting along very well, are you?* she signed, tight-lipped. Failure. That's what she wasn't saying. He was used to disappointing people. He didn't mind. Not anymore. *Why don't you go down and see if the Cook needs some help with lunch?* This was saying go away in no uncertain terms.

He nodded. *Okay.* Throwing in another bright smile so she'd know his feelings weren't hurt even though it was a lie.

*Do you remember the way back?* She signed, pointing out the various turns and forks in the path with her hands.

He nodded. *Yes.* He had no idea what she'd just signed, but anything that gave him the opportunity to wander around the estate was fine with him. He fled the Oriental Hall at a slow walk, not looking back at the three maids. He was almost to the end, Tabitha and the others reduced to little black specks scuttling on the floor like spiders scrounging for blood, when he saw it. It was a box roughly the size of a basketball, maraschino cherry red, with a golden crank, and a glittering gem pattern resembling a dragon's head open at the jaws ready to spew fire out of the top. Actually, he hadn't noticed it until he heard the faint tinkle of musical notes. The faint sound of a jack-in-the-box. The quiet hinting of anticipation. The golden crank moved slightly, pressed by oriental dust phantoms or simple gravity. Though dust phantoms seemed more likely given all the cleaning going on today. He picked it up off the jade pedestal it was resting on, and a few more golden notes slipped out of it, spiraling away into expectant silence.

The Boy could feel the thing inside of the box pulsing and coming to life, asking, begging really, to be cranked alive. The crank moved easily in his hand, and the music came off it in waves of Asiatic minor-mode tinkling. The jaws of the dragon twitched. The tension became too much for The Boy and he could barely stand it. He turned the crank faster and faster, until he could no longer tolerate the explosive feeling in his hands. He put the box back down on the pedestal, unfulfilled but alive. The crank moved, and a few notes spilled out into the golden light. They lingered ephemerally, until silence reigned. The Boy backed away from it. The ruby dragon

eyes tracked his movement, tracked him until he turned the corner and headed away down some dark hallway.

He wandered through nameless corridors until he heard a faint scratching from the baseboards. It seemed to follow him along for a while and grew louder and eventually unmistakable: it was the sounds of cicadas calling to him through the walls, following him. Their sounds attracting more of their kind scuttling through the walls to his location like an army of assassins staying out of sight, but growing and waiting. Ilya tried to remember whether or not cicadas could bite, and decided they were benign. Unlike their aggressive and poisonous cousins, the shelveers, which could pierce flesh with their serrated bodies when they leapt. They also sounded identical to cicadas. Fortunately, Ilya had just invented them, so they seemed unlikely to be lurking in the walls.

Still, the symphony of calls was unsettling and it brought a word into his ear, like they had crawled into his head and put it there. It was so strong a feeling that he tried to swat away the apparitions. The word they brought him, the word they inserted into him, was *Awake*. Things had somehow become disturbing and ceased to make sense to Ilya. It was as though he were in a black pit of emptiness and a shadow had fallen upon him. Then he heard the scream: a deep instinctive sound that ripped through the cicadas and almost blinded him. The voice cursed and yelled, the only cognizant part of which was “*I told you the Exterminators would be required on a weekly basis.*”



The cicadas scattered at the rage of the voice. The voice shocked Ilya so completely that he tripped on a step he didn't see, and he fell, his face catching the end of a sharp ivory table. The maids a few corridors over in the Oriental Hall didn't hear a thing because they couldn't. The boy slipped into pain, then unconsciousness without any sound whatsoever. The Boy had dreams of a flaming bird and a church, then taking his parents to see the Oriental Hall, holding the urn up to each artifact and piece of art in turn and talking to them about it. Then an Oriental Boy reached down and shook him awake.

The first part of the Oriental Boy that Ilya saw was the outline of his cock, barely contained in a tiny black swimsuit. The Oriental Boy was squatting down next to his head, gently shaking him on the shoulder, asking if he was all right. At first, the words didn't register, because the Oriental Boy had delicate almond shaped green eyes, like the scales of a garden snake, only beautiful... but still a little creepy in their perfection, and a lean, smooth body with hair like spun silk so black it reflected light and was almost white in spots. He had thighs that were an example of symmetrical perfection. Clearly, he swam a lot. When the Boy realized he was speaking, from lips slightly pouty and such a deep shade of red he might as well be wearing lipstick, he answered.

“Yes, I'm fine,” he said, as blood leaked into his eye, or was it coming out of his eye?  
“Are you Tatar, or Altai?”

“You don't look fine,” said a voice deeper than his own or the Oriental Boy's. A young man, eighteen or nineteen, came into view, with a mane of wild blond hair and a sprinkling of

golden hairs on his tanned chest and arms. He had a towel wrapped around his waist. He smiled and Ilya noticed the man's eyes. They seemed almost dead, a grayish-blue like melting snow mixed with dirt, like perfection and filth. Ilya guessed that this was the Young Lord. And companion.

“You're that security guard's nephew aren't you?” the Young Lord asked.

“Yes,” Ilya said simply.

He leaned down over him and smiled. “That's quite a nasty knock you've got.” Ilya could feel blood on his cheek, all the way down to his neck. The Young Lord leaned in like a spider, with a multitude of invasive limbs scuttling over his flesh and up to his face, a furry alien presence, repulsive and cold as ice, but alive. The Boy would have recoiled if he hadn't been lying on the floor with his back blocked by the ivory display, and the other side blocked with a penis. The Young Lord leaned down and traced the path of blood with his tongue from above his eyebrow where the cut was, drawing languorous circles along his cheek, and down to his neck, and then all the way up and back down, until the blood was gone. The Boy was paralyzed in revulsion, fear, and something else. If only Tabitha had been here.

“There. All better,” the Young Lord said, helping the Boy to his feet.

He stepped away from the Young Lord and put a hand out to the wall for balance.

“Why don’t you come to the pool with us?” The Young Lord said. “You shouldn’t be working with a wound like that anyway.” There was almost no expression on his face. Ilya looked away nervously.

“I... I don’t think the chlorine would be good for it either, though it would kill all the bacteria, because that’s what chlorine does, that’s why it makes the water clear, but only if the ph. level is between 7.2 and 7.6 for optimum efficiency. Some people think a ratio of 6.8 to 7.8 is usable—” The Boy’s voice grew louder and louder as he nervously expounded on the benefits and curses of chlorine. He drew on many years of reading books full of knowledge that had been useless until now. Ilya knew a clean pool was only logic and numbers. The Boy was saved by the appearance of Yaisha from a hallway several doors down.

*The Boy is wanted down at the Gamekeeper’s cottage, to feed the minks.* Yaisha signed, looking down. *The Master wants him to learn how to handle them.*

The Young Lord turned away with a disinterested wave of the hand, and Yaisha pulled the Boy away by the sleeve.

“I’m raising minks, you know, out back by the woods, they’re such beautiful little creatures,” the Young Lord said to his friend, as they walked away. “Then I’m going to kill and gut them and make the most beautiful fur coats out of them. You see, I’m having a hunting theme for my nineteenth birthday and everyone *must* have a mink coat. I’ll skin them myself... I hear the process is quite interesting.”

Yaisha was shocked to see the cut and bruise on his face. *What happened?* She signed at him, taking his head and examining it in the light of a nearby window.

*I fell,* he signed back, not elaborating.

*I bet you do that a lot, don't you?* Yaisha smiled at him. *You seem the type.*

He smiled at her, not knowing what to sign. He wondered what she thought of him now that she had seen he could hear. He wished he were deaf now so that the gulf of sound would not separate him from everyone here, leaving him isolated with the Young Lord. And companion.

*The Old Lord didn't really want you to go to the mink farm, I just made that up. The Cook can always use an extra hand around lunch time.*

As Ilya looked at the retreating sight of the Young Lord, he thought that he had narrowly avoided the spider in this stone web, and that the Oriental Boy hadn't been so lucky. Maybe the Young Lord was saving him as a snack for later. Ilya thought there was a special significance to seeing an Oriental Boy so soon after leaving the Oriental Hall, but he couldn't quite decide on what it was. Perhaps it was seeing too much of the Oriental Boy. But did he really not want to see it? He would have liked to cut the Young Lord's fingers off. And his tongue too, since he was thinking about violence anyway, which was rare for the Boy.

Said violence would preferably be done with a dull butter knife so it would take a while. Of course, he fainted at the sight of blood, so it was a good thing there were very few mirrors in the house for him to catch sight of his own reflection. He decided to forgive the Young Lord for

licking him, since he didn't have to worry about it anymore. What seemed even more significant was that the Young Lord and the Oriental Boy could hear, yet they hadn't mentioned the screaming or the cicadas.

*What floor is this?* he signed.

*The fifth floor of the west wing,* Yaisha replied, her lips quirking slightly. *You really have absolutely no idea where we are do you?*

Ilya shrugged. *Not Really. Where is the swimming pool at?*

*All the way down on the ground floor in the garden— that's odd. What were they doing all the way over here?* Yaisha stopped.

Ilya smiled. Just as he thought. There had been no more than thirty seconds between when he heard the voice and their appearance. Therefore, they had been up to something, and that voice had been shouting at them more than likely, and they knew that he knew about the voice. That must have been why the Young Lord spoke to him rather than signed to him, to see if he could hear. This was becoming very convoluted and very bad for Ilya the more he thought about it.

*Ilya? Are you listening to me?* Yaisha stamped her foot and made a deep growling sound in the back of her throat, which she didn't know she was doing because she couldn't hear. Ilya was used to that. His father had made all kinds of weird noises which greatly disturbed people when out in public. Sometimes people had thrown rocks at his father and Ilya. He had a small

scar covered by his bangs from where a boy his own age had thrown a rock right at his forehead three years ago. Ilya's father had chased the boy down and beaten him before carrying Ilya to the hospital. Hearing people were scum. Like that boy, like the creepy Young Lord, and the two people who killed his parents. And he was one of them. Yaisha tapped him on the nose.

*Are you sure that you're all right?*

*Yes.* He signed the word slowly, like the winding up of a yo-yo before it was let go, collecting himself. *What did you say?*

*I said,* Yaisha signed, *they were standing in the same hallway as the locked room I mentioned earlier.*

*Who was the Tatar?* he signed. She might think he was weird if he signed the Oriental Boy to her.

*He's half-Japanese, half Korean.* Her eyes got a little dreamy, and she looked up slightly, tilting her head to the side. *His name is Shoji Yamano, but you're supposed to sign his last name first. Always call him Mr. Yamano.* The dreamy look left her eyes, and she smoothed out the ruffles in her skirt. She hesitated for a second before continuing. *He— he's the Young Lord's friend.* She looked Ilya in the eye. *You should stay away from the Young Lord.*

As he walked with Yaisha down to the kitchen to get his cut looked at by Cook, who used to be a nurse before the gory nature of his profession drove him to dismember dead animals and prepare them as food, Ilya daydreamed. He fantasized about himself, Tabitha, and the Oriental

Boy going for a picnic in the swamp near the cabins. For some reason, the Oriental Boy was still dressed in his black swimsuit. Tabitha was wearing a sun dress that revealed quite a bit of her back and shoulders, and then The Boy realized that he was naked in this dream. He quickly jumped into the swamp water to hide that fact, since his belly was nowhere near as flat as the Oriental Boy or Tabitha's. He came back to reality with a gentle tapping on his shoulder.

*Day dreaming is what gave you that shiner,* Yaisha signed, as they walked down a back staircase.

The Boy wondered if he'd been here before.

Yaisha continued: *I was saying, that if the Old Lord ever dies, I'd quit. If I were you. Her Ladyship lets the Young Lord run wild. She still thinks her son is a virgin because he doesn't have any lady friends. The Old Lord is the only one who can keep the creepy brat in line.*

Ilya thought it was solid advice, so he stopped listening to her since he agreed with it.

He asked her if she'd seen any cicadas, but she hadn't. The rest of the trip and the bandaging of his cut in the kitchen passed in a cool amber dream fog. Ilya would have liked to have taken a nap. He had always been a big fan of the siesta, when he'd read about it in a book about Mexico. He thought that it was just what Russia needed, since things had become so serious in the last few years. Cook deduced quickly that Ilya would be of no use to him, especially around knives and cleavers where Ilya was liable to lose a finger. Choosing not to keep the albatross, which had been placed around his neck, he indulged in the time honored tradition of what Ilya had come to call "passing the Ilya," from the quaint American term

“passing the buck.” It was a little odd, apparently no one wanted any male deer and tried to get rid of the responsibility of dealing with them. It happened to him frequently at school, when he would be traded between all the teams during fitness class, until the loser was stuck with him. Cook summoned the Gamekeeper and gave the problem of the unwanted buck to him.

The Gamekeeper was a gruff man in his early forties, immensely fat, immensely abrasive, and a man’s man through and through, or perhaps two, given his size. Ilya dreaded becoming him in twenty five years. He was handed a cage filled with four large plump rabbits, and a bucket with several pounds of chicken livers. *They like to fight over the rabbits. The strong ones like to lord their kill over the others,* the Gamekeeper said, indicating the unfortunate caged fellows. *Give the rest of them the chicken livers. The Young Lord says they do better on a wriggling diet. The pathetic little fuck has been getting on my last nerve for years.* Suddenly Ilya was willing to overlook the Gamekeeper’s fatness and male pattern baldness and become his friend.

*How many minks are there?* Ilya signed as they trudged through the mud to what looked to be a chicken coop.

*Sixty-seven,* the Gamekeeper signed back, grimacing. *They’re a nasty lot. Don’t get your fingers anywhere near them, or let them out of the cage. They’d much rather bite you than chicken livers or rabbits. Have you ever seen minks?*

*No.*

*Ugly little snake dogs,* the Gamekeeper signed. *I’ll show you what to do then leave you to it.* He kicked open a small wooden door replete with black cast iron hinges in need of oil. It



could have belonged to the dark ages in a building that wasn't a chicken coop after all, but a converted tool shed smelling of cat shit and urine-stinking hay. The musky spray of a skunk's anal glands wafted in the air, as well as the lingering scent of decaying flesh that had been striped to the bone by razor sharp needle-like teeth, and left in a corner to warn the four new rabbits eying the situation warily. Death was imminent.

Ilya followed the waddling Gamekeeper up the steps, but didn't turn sideways to get through the door. He set his bucket down and cooed under his breath to his rabbits encouragingly as the Gamekeeper flicked the light switch on. The white light supplemented the grimy light from two windows fogged in a thick, yellow substance resembling vomit, perhaps urine, which also dotted the warped pine floor boards. A rusted stack of disintegrating dried-blood colored cages bracketed either side of the room from the floor to the head of the Gamekeeper. On the far wall, down the gauntlet of cages about four feet wide, showing no signs of use but the effects of the mink's urine, were an assortment of bladed instruments. They were designed to pull a mink's skin and fur off in one beautiful piece, after a firm tap on the temple from the little black rubber mallet. The Boy thought it odd that it was called a mink farm, when it seemed more appropriate to call it the mink inquisition. These were the suspected coats who would be proved to indeed make warm garments after a bit of persuasion. No coat was guaranteed to work if it had not been tortured first. The Boy shuddered.

At least there wasn't a cicada in sight. In fact, the boy was beginning to believe he'd made them up, and the man screaming too. It was just his imagination growing bored with reality

and playing tricks on him. He hated not knowing what was real. It was the only thing that embarrassed him, when he was talking to someone about what he thought was real only to receive a blank stare in response, and the dawning look on their faces that they thought he was insane. Sometimes Ilya thought he was a bit drifty too.

*Careful, they pee. And spray too,* the Gamekeeper signed, reaching down and getting a rabbit out of the safe little cage. Ilya considered grabbing Petrov (he had named them all in that very moment; Petrov, Matilda, Bathsheba, and Sacha), but thought that he really should make a game effort at some kind of job here. So he watched as Petrov squirmed under the urine-yellow lights of the dingy bug-bulbs burning dimly in the spider-webbed and peaked ceiling. The Gamekeeper flipped open the top of one of the larger cages holding four evil looking prairie dogs. Then he threw Petrov to the minks.

Petrov screamed as the little things darted onto him and latched onto his throat and tore it out, which cut his scream short, and left him there, choking on his own blood as they began to feast on his limbs. The Gamekeeper closed the lid, and signed to him: *Never open the lid unless you've got food, otherwise they'll either pee on you, or try to escape. But offer them something to kill, and they'll be nice and wait. Think you can handle the other three?*

*Absolutely,* Ilya signed.

The Gamekeeper ambled off towards the door, signing *Just shove the chicken livers through the bars, but watch your fingers, they'll nip'em if they can.* The Gamekeeper closed the door behind him and Ilya squatted down, listening to his thudding gait slowly amble away

toward the manor house. After a few minutes, Ilya peeked outside. It was deserted, so he snuck out with Matilda, Bathsheba, and Sacha, carrying them to the edge of the forest. Like hell he'd feed them to minks. Not after everything the rabbits had been through in their lives.

Matilda had lived happily along the banks of the Lena River with her parents. Her ancestors had lived and prospered for a hundred generations, until the Sakha hunter had caught her and her parents, before selling her at the Yakutsk market where she had traveled by train to Barnaul where the Gamekeeper had bought her at the market. The train ride had been terrifying for her, packed in with three hundred other rabbits with only darkness and the stench of despair palpable in the train car, awaiting the stop that would bring them closer to death. It was a trip very much akin to those of the Jewish persuasion, taken to Dachau or Auschwitz. Ilya had stories about the other rabbits too, but halfway through Matilda's, he felt that it had become too long and had lost interest in the life stories of rabbits so he shortened the other ones: Bathsheba had spent her life in captivity right here, along with her family, and Sacha was a nameless drifting hare caught in a snare by the Gamekeeper.

"Go be free!" he whispered, flinging the cage door open. They sat in the hay and looked at him as though he were crazy. Rabbits don't live in swamps, they tried to say. He kicked the cage and they scattered into the woods. Bathsheba made it several hundred feet into the woods before an adder lashed out from behind a rotting tree stump and she became brunch. Sacha made his way along the bog-ridden highway where he was eventually chased by a fox until he fell into a bog and suffocated on mud and other dead decomposed animals. Matilda lived for two days

before an owl swooped down and broke every bone in her body, though it was the shock that was fatal. Her last thought had been of the serene beauty of the Lena River in summer, with the plentiful and rich grass for chewing.

Ilya, ignoring the dark ruminations of his subconscious, walked back to the shed believing that this was the only really good and worthwhile thing he had done in his life, merrily swinging the cage back and forth. He went back into the shed and closed the door behind him.

“Failure!” the minks hissed at him when they saw the empty cage. Ilya ignored them, telling himself that it wasn’t real and it was just his imagination growing bored and lying to him again. He moved over to the bucket of chicken livers, thinking of bacteria and his bare skin, but being brave, reached in and grasped the fleshy chicken organ resembling slimy dark rubber. He walked over to a cage with one sickly little mink in it and thrust the liver through, his thoughts still with Bathsheba who was already dead, Matilda, and Sacha. The little mink darted forward and sunk his teeth into Ilya’s thumb. He promptly fainted at the sight of his own blood, falling down and settling into a natural hollow in the floor. The male minks lined up in the fronts of their cages taking turns urinating on his prone body until Ilya was sitting in a puddle of sticky mink urine an inch deep.

The Boy finally awoke when one of the minks managed to hit him in the face with a steaming stream of greenish-yellow urine. He leapt to his feet, screaming and shaking piss out of his hair, though The Boy wasn’t screaming from the pain, which was intense, but from the fact that urine was seeping into the wound as well as raw chicken juice. He was being infected with

E-coli, Salmonella, and probably rabies on top of that, from the mink's dirty teeth. The Boy was dying. He knew it with the same certainty that told him he had saved the lives of those three sad yet dignified rabbits.

“Failure,” hissed the minks in a semblance of toothy dirty-fanged triumph. “You’ve failed at everything you tried to do here, just like you always do!”

Ilya fled the shed, with a shout of “Stop it!” aimed at his imagination, clutching his tainted wound to his chest as though he’d been shot. The minks were right, he was a failure, and he had to get out of this place before he ended up dead of disease, tongue raped again, forced to go back into the mink shed, or have cicadas force themselves into his ears, which all seemed equally horrible.

He ran all the way back to his uncle's cabin, careful to open the door knob with his untainted and uninfected hand, before rushing into the bathroom and taking a shower with every kind of soap he could find, which made it hurt more than anything in his entire life. Worst of all, as he cleaned the wound he began to feel faint. He quickly wrapped a bandage over his injury. The only thing he took from the house with him was Mom and Dad. He didn't need anything else as he walked away from everything he had. He did need a destination. He thought of nearby Barnaul, but the thought of all those people staring at him and knowing he was crazy made a hole in the bottom of his stomach and left him feeling like a freak. He wished he could go where there was no one but people like him. But that place didn't exist. There was only swamps with a lure like an adder rearing back to strike. He walked along the bog-ridden road with limp, dead

trees grasping at the sun with branches ending in needle thin points like syringes trying to steal moisture from the sky, or life from the sun.

He walked past the bog where Sacha lay dying without a second thought and passing along a drainage ditch flush with greenish water rushing past him, telling his mom and dad that things weren't working out with his uncle and he was going home to the apartment he had always lived in even if other people lived there now. It was his apartment, had been for sixteen years. He didn't know what he would do for money. He could always hitchhike. Or just die. It was probably three thousand miles to Petrograd. At least it would save his uncle and the people living at Neimasaurus all the trouble of dealing with him.

He stumbled on a gnarled root of a tree and dropped the urn. It slid down the embankment, spilling a thin line of its grey treasure until it hit the water, and a grey cloud formed briefly around the urn and was sucked away by the currents forever. Ilya watched all of this happen in a few seconds, and looked at his hands, the things that had done his horrible thing to him. A fingernail was chipped, and his thumb was three times its normal size from the excessive bandaging he'd done. Then he frantically climbed down the embankment and splashed into the green water, reaching out frantically for the urn as it bobbed downstream. It got caught in a fallen tree branch and Ilya grabbed it.

When he got up to the bank and looked inside, it was quite empty and washed clean. He sat down on the road and cried. His parents were dead and now they were gone. His parents really were gone. Everything was gone. He'd lost everything because he was a fucking klutz. He

screamed as loud as he could and the world didn't change. His whole body convulsed from his sobbing, and he clutched at the side of his face, slamming his fists into his head, trying to relieve the pressure. The cicadas boiled out of his ear and scuttled away down the embankment. There were four of them. But he couldn't believe in them now, they had to be fake. They had to. Everything had to be. If he disbelieved enough, he wouldn't be out in this swamp of his imagination, he'd be at home with his parents.

He sat there for five hours before his uncle drove up in an old pickup truck, signing furiously at him to get in the damn car.

*They're gone, he signed. I dropped them into the fucking ditch.*

It took Demetri a moment to understand, then his temper cooled, a little. He opened the car door and motioned Ilya inside.

*I killed them.*

Demetri moved as though to put a hand on Ilya's shoulder, but pulled away. *They were already dead, Ilya.*

*That's not what I mean. It's my fault they died.*

*It's never anyone's fault when someone dies. That's just fate, Ilya. You can't control the world. You're not God.* Demetri took him back to Neimasaurus, then after looking at his thumb, which was bleeding through the bandage, turned around and took him to the nearest hospital.

The horrible story poured out of him on the way there. Ilya's signing was jerky and erratic, and stopped and started intermittently with frequent diversions in suicidal thoughts. Demetri was silent for most of it. He didn't sign a word as he listened to the story of his sister's murder and the death of Ilya's father. He pulled over to the side of the road and listened with his eyes. Then, when The Boy's story was over for a second time, though it played again and again in his mind, Demetri signed:

*What happened to my sister and her husband was a terrible thing. But it is done, and you can't undo things like that. Even though I had never met you, I chose to take custody of you in honor of my sister. I could have surrendered you to the State. But I chose otherwise. You're a minor. You don't have say in this, until you're eighteen. You are not a burden. Living is not a burden. You do not need to leave. I want you to stay. You're the last of my family. My parents died years ago, and now my sister, too. I could not stand knowing that my entire family was dead.*

When they were done at the hospital, Demetri drove him back to the spot where his parents had been washed away. They spent hours finding the exact spot in the darkness, shining his flashlight along the banks of the ditch. In the darkening gloom they found the spot where the urn had rolled into the water. They carefully scooped the thin line of ash leading from the road to the waterline back inside. There was still a little bit of his parents left. Maybe a little hope, too.



## CHAPTER 2: AMARANTH'S DESCENT INTO STILLNESS

The statue of the phoenix had lain in dusty silence for more than a lifetime. It had now begun to resonate, sensing the nearby presence of an oracle. The faint red pulsing had disturbed the workers all day long, happening in the corner of their eyes. They had learned to keep their backs to the thing, regretting the necessity of opening the sealed room in the chapel. The Archivist had examined it for an hour, eventually pronouncing it to be a “not very good reproduction” of a sixteenth-century source, possibly Indochinese, maybe Chinese. The Archivist was oblivious to any unusual fluctuations in its aura that left her feeling light-headed and slightly out of sorts. It seemed to any man that set foot in the room that there was a question being asked that could not be answered. Ilya could feel the question all the way across the property in his uncle's house.

He was currently engaged in a conversation with the last three-tenths of his parents around 2 a.m. He decided that his restlessness would be best if walked off. Besides, he had not seen Neimasaurus at night yet. It would be best not to take Mom and Dad on this expedition. He had to keep what was left of them safe. His badge required a slight modification, given: “*Ilya Kollide, Altai Krai, Neimasaurus, night-time creeping expedition.*” It was getting to the point where it was almost too smudged to be legible. He would have to get rid of it soon. The charm was wearing thin anyway. He got up and searched through his uncle's house in search of a lantern. The faint smell of day-old fish permeated the kitchen unpleasantly, penetrating the cabinets as he rifled through them. He found an ancient hooded-lantern which was slightly

greasy to the touch. Ilya was paranoid that he would ignite the moment he lit it with phosphorescent matches from the kitchen. The sound of his uncle's snores were clearly audible from the end of the hallway, which led to his room.

Certain that he would drop the lantern at any moment, thus igniting his legs, before the fire spread upward to his chest and head, he stepped outside. The dozen cottages were arranged in three rows of four, with Demetri's in the rearmost row, facing the swamp. There was a full moon tonight. It made the lantern slightly superfluous, but was a comfort to Ilya. The smell of sour sea decay hit him as a silent wind slid between the trees of the swamp and ran over his face like fingers grazing his cheeks. He followed the tree line for a bit, lacking the resolve to go in. The sounds of insects washed over him as well as the sound of things that slithered splashing through the water.

After a few minutes of walking through the tall, wet, and bluing grass, he came to a boathouse. Attached to it was a half-rotten, disused pier that belonged to the previous century. Since this was the year nineteen-hundred and ninety, that was old indeed. The windows of the boathouse were yellowed with grime and cobwebs seemed to grace every nook and cranny of the establishment. Ilya took a few steps out onto the pier and the structure groaned in protest, the boards bending perceptibly beneath Ilya's feet. A harsh sound, perhaps a scream, at such a shrill tone it seemed to be breaking, came from the swamp. Ilya froze in place. There were birds that made such sounds, weren't there? The insects continued to hum. With a groan, he realized they were cicadas. In the distance, Ilya thought he heard laughter, quiet and wet. Two purple moths

began to circle his lantern, their upturned death's head faces glinting whitely in the lantern's light.

He retreated from the pier cautiously. The structure groaned and creaked with each step on each rotten board. A loud splash came from the swamp, accompanied by the sounds of something large moving through the water. Things suddenly grew dark in the distance as clouds trailed across the face of the moon. Ilya left the dock at a quiet trot. He wasn't scared; there just wasn't anything interesting over there. He looked over his shoulder to make sure nothing pursued him. He walked through what appeared to be disused peasant's cottages as dilapidated as the boathouse. The empty windows stared at him like the eyes of an idiot, or as his imagination turned dark, something hungry. Ilya went in one of the quiet tomb-like edifices to poke around, discovering the floor was covered in an inch of murky water and that once disturbed, the carpet of black mold on the surface began to break apart like lily pads in a strong breeze.

The smell hit Ilya suddenly, like a bathroom that hadn't been cleaned in months, or a butcher's shop at the end of a sweltering summer's day. He was only guessing about the bathroom, because he would clean it himself before letting it get that unsanitary. The butcher's shop was unfortunately something he was a bit more acquainted with. On said summer day, there had been a black out and the stench of rotting lambs and pig had been so overwhelming he'd fled the establishment, but not before realizing that when he died, he would probably smell the same way.

The dim light of the lantern illuminated what might have been blood on the far wall. He didn't stick around to find out. At that moment, the lantern seemed to illuminate something large moving in the doorway to a bedroom, with corresponding ripples in the mold radiating outward. Ilya slammed the door shut hastily, and considered that perhaps walking around at night had been one of the stupidest decisions he had ever made.

He considered turning back, but in the distance, he saw the mansion. A massive ugly structure the color of an ancient stone mausoleum. Ilya had a few seconds to look at it before the moon was again obscured. *Damn it*, he thought. His curiosity always got the better of him. He set off toward it. Neimasaurus glinted darkly in the moonlight beyond, and framed his walk in shadow as the moon passed behind its tallest tower, creating a V of darkness that encompassed the old house that he was walking toward. This old house, perhaps the old estate of the lords before the construction of Neimasaurus on higher ground, looked to be at least a century old, probably two. Ilya guessed from the style of the house, it had probably been built in the mid seventeenth hundreds. It was odd, because to his knowledge, there really hadn't been any Russians here then. If he remembered his history, China had jurisdiction over the area then, under the Qing Dynasty. More of an attempt to preserve this house had been taken than with the boat house and cottages. The windows and doors were intact and locked. When Ilya held his lantern up to the windows, he could see that while the house was no longer furnished, the floors and walls were maintained. It appeared on the north side of the house that the roof had collapsed in places, and crashed through each intervening floor to create a wreckage of rotted timbers, powdered

plaster, and black stone. Ilya's heart quickened. He could get in to the house here; there were several windows that had been shattered by the collapse.

A distant rumbling came in the distance, which Ilya identified as cars. Quickly, he hooded the lantern, and peeked around the corner of the estate to see two black sedans pulling up to the side entrance. They fell within the moonlight, so Ilya could pick out half a dozen figures, the Young Lord and his friend—Shoji amongst them. They were supporting another man covered in a cloak, who seemed to be quite groggy, up the steps of the estate. As they mounted the steps, the cicadas, which had been quiet since he left the border of the swamp, began to sing their song once again. It grew like a symphony, growing louder until it reached cacophony. Ilya dropped the lantern and covered his ears. The figure of Shoji turned and looked back at the old estate, scanning the area. Ilya froze in place. Shoji turned back to Aleksander who had stopped, and they proceeded into the house. The cicada's song broke. Silence reigned in the moonlight. Ilya checked his watch. It was now 4:34 a.m.

This had certainly been an interesting walk, and he was practically bursting at the seams to tell his uncle about it. At the thought of his uncle, Ilya was immediately filled with an ambivalent reaction. Sure, Demetri signed some very kind things to him last night, but Ilya didn't believe they had been sincere. It was what Demetri had to do to prevent him from running away again. Ilya could not accept the man's words as the truth. Demetri didn't know him. How could you say I love you to someone you don't know? It was nonsense. It had to be. Probably. It was just manipulation, Demetri probably got some sort of tax break until Ilya was eighteen. Still,

even if Demetri was just pretending, it was something. At least he cared enough to care about what Ilya felt.

If Ilya offered the same sort of polite lies back he could string Demetri along until he was ready to leave this place and go back to Petrograd, since he didn't care about Demetri at all. Not one little bit. Not in the slightest. Not even a trace of emotion. Absolutely nothing whatsoever. Ilya repeated that last thought to himself all the way back to Demetri's cottage. He repeated it to his parents as he climbed into bed. His mother reproached him for his negativity and told him to give her brother a chance. The next morning, after he had showered and dressed for the day, he had completely forgotten his mantra, as he was wont to do with all negative emotion. Demetri had prepared kasha for breakfast with butter and salt. Not the brown sugar his mother had used when she made the dish, which hadn't been all that common anyway, since kasha was a country bumpkin dish. Still, he was in the country and it tasted alright. He liked his mother's blini more. She had served them with honey and a dollop of fresh sour cream.

*Is there any sour cream?* he signed with one hand, as he poured some hot water from the pot into his glass and spooned a heaping teaspoon full of black spice tea into a steeping ball and submerged it in the steaming water. Demetri got up from the table and rummaged around in the refrigerator for a moment before turning around with a small jar.

Demetri set the jar and a spoon on the table between them before sitting down. *It's made right here on the estate. The Cook makes it. It's quite good.*

Ilya carefully ladled out a spoonful and brought it up to his nose. It smelled like sour cream. He plopped it down on the kasha and tasted it. The flavor of breakfast improved immeasurably. Ilya checked his tea and it seemed suitably dark, so he pulled the steeping ball up by the chain and put it aside. His mother had a samovar. No, she'd had a samovar. Ilya wondered what had happened to all their things. He supposed they had been seized by creditors. Demetri had no need of one with just himself to look after. Ilya put a spoonful of sugar into his black tea and stirred. He looked into the glass to make sure the picture at the bottom was properly obscured before picking up the cup by its metal handle. It was good.

*How did you sleep?* Demetri signed. He seemed uncomfortable with the inquiry, as though men should not ask that question of other men. Suddenly, Ilya remembered the gossip he was burning to impart about the previous night.

Without pausing, he signed almost as quickly as the flapping of a hummingbird's wings: *I woke up in the middle of the night because I couldn't sleep because I went to bed so early so I went for a walk and you won't believe what I saw.* Ilya didn't give his uncle a chance to answer the question. *Two cars pulled up at 4:32 a.m., I know because I checked my watch a few minutes after that because I always take it with me since I can't keep track of time otherwise. Anyway, Aleksander and Shoji, he's Japanese and Korean, seemed to be helping a sick man in a cloak up the steps, because it didn't seem that he could walk on his own. It might be the person they've kept locked in the fifth floor room which nobody has seen come and go for the last week.*

*Was it Tabitha and Yaisha who told you about this?* Demetri had a stormy look about him now. *They're terrible gossips. You mustn't talk about the comings and goings of our employers behind their backs. I'm sure the Young Lord's business is not as unusual as it seems. The man was probably drunk.*

Ilya nodded. Drunkenness did seem logical if unexciting. Unless Aleksander had deliberately gotten the man drunk to lure him back to Neimasaurus. That was more exciting.

*I don't want you spreading this gossip around the estate. It's not our business what the Young Lord gets up to.*

*Fine.* Ilya was disappointed in his uncle for not wanting to gossip and theorize about the odd behavior. He considered mentioning that the Young Lord had rubbed his tongue all over him yesterday, but decided against it. The rest of breakfast passed in silence both literally and figuratively.

Afterward, Ilya trudged up to the back door of the estate, getting his shoes muddy in the process. Cook made him take them off and sprayed them with a hose before setting them in the sun on the back porch to dry. While this happened, Ilya told him all about what he had seen last night. Yaisha came in halfway through the tale and demanded the whole story, which Ilya was happy to do. She took him up to the attic, which Yaisha told him he'd be dusting and airing out today, in between Ilya's story. Yes, he would not gossip at all. It was a small broken promise, but it made Ilya feel good to not be controlled. As they went through the myriad rooms and floors of



the estate Ilya made sure to tell the other servants they came across about last night's adventure. He wished that Tabitha were here to tell her as well.

The hallway leading to the attic was a black and lilac affair, lit by six dark dome lamps which seemed to bleed purple light onto the dusky black carpet and reflect eerily off of the bone white walls. There were no windows in the hall, and it smelled faintly of moth balls and ammonia. The hall gave Ilya a slight touch of dread for some reason. Two large crystal and glass chandeliers hung overhead, causing purple light to be caught in their prisms and reflected in a million different arcs throughout the ceiling and floor. The lack of windows seemed to make the hall more claustrophobic than it might otherwise have been. Yaisha continued on without pause down the hallway, immune to its spectral charms.

*This place is weird*, Ilya signed, gazing around the hallway.

Yaisha looked around and shrugged. *You get used to it. Now, the auxiliary ballroom and chapel, those are creepy places.*

At the end of the hall was a large grey door, which appeared to be stone and set on iron hinges. Yaisha produced a large brass key from the folds of her black and white dress and inserted it into the lock and turned. The key grated, but did not turn.

*I hate this thing*, she signed, the motions swift and aggressive like the buzzing of a wasp. *Here, you hold the knob and I'll use both hands to turn it.*

Ilya grasped the iron and Yaisha turned with all her might, and slowly the tumblers in the lock clicked. With a bit of a snarl, the key moved in the lock. Yaisha threw herself against the door with all of her not really considerable weight, and it creaked open a few inches, but it was enough for her to push it the rest of the way by placing both hands against the door and slowly pushing. The hinges squeaked as though they were some medieval torture device in need of a good oiling. Once it was open, Yaisha stepped up to a small table where several silver electric lanterns sat and below were a variety of cleaning products.

*Leave the door open. Otherwise someone will think it's been left open and close and lock it. That happened to the last boy we had clean the attic. We didn't notice he was missing for about a week.* Yaisha shook her head, sadly. *Poor little thing.*

*Okay,* Ilya signed nervously.

*Ilya, that was a joke!* Yaisha punched him lightly in the shoulder, her own shaking with silent laughter. *There is no power in the attic, so you'll need a lantern, but you can open the windows if you want to. Remember to close them when you are finished. Your cleaning supplies are down there.* She pointed at the bottom shelf of the table, *Good luck! Oh, don't worry about cleaning any of the locked rooms.* And then she was gone, her black dress disappearing into the purple haze of the hallway beyond. Ilya picked up one of the electric lanterns and fiddled with it a bit until he could get it to come on. Eventually pale orange illumination came from the tip.

Not bothering with the cleaning supplies, Ilya crept up the steps to the attic. He counted thirty-nine. The wooden stairwell was completely silent but for the occasional creaks. When he

emerged, he came to what was much more than an attic, but an entire level of the house. The ceiling was tilted like an attic, with a half dozen shuttered windows emitting razor thin blades of white light from their gaps. The room stretched for nearly thirty feet across. To his right and left, hallways branched off from the central room that seemed to be filled with trunks, boxes and other objects covered in dusty gray tarps. His electric torch didn't quite reach across the room and the windows seemed in-accessible anyway. He peaked under a few tarps and saw an assortment of boring objects: a box full of cutlery, an old assortment of radios, empty bronze flower pots engraved with lions and filled with what seemed to be coal or some other black rock.

The smell of the place was odd. It smelled like rats, or rather the smells evoked by the image of a rat; plague, blood, shit, filth. This seemed weird to Ilya, but he could not think of a better description. It smelled like something had died up here, but the body had mostly decomposed. There seemed to be a sense of wrongness, and that was why the smell seemed worse than it actually was. He took the hallway to the left. His hand trembled and caused orange light to leap up and down the passage way. Nothing adorned the walls but dust and spider webs, though the spiders seemed to have died or given up on tasty blood coming their way in the attic and retreated elsewhere, as their webs sat in an empty state of entropy.

Ilya wondered if he'd used entropy correctly in that last sentence. Did it go well with empty? He wasn't sure, so he tried something else: the spiders had retreated elsewhere, leaving their moribund webs to collapse in on themselves, in the hopes that fresh blood could be found beyond the dry and dead domain of the attic. It was weird that there weren't even insects in here.

That was curious. Did the cicadas he'd heard earlier have anything to do with it? Had they driven the other insects out? Had the spiders moved downstairs to eat? He should ask the other servants about the state of bugs in the estate when he was done cleaning the attic. It looked like it could take weeks. If he was expected to clean the dust away.

There were four doors on either side of the hallway. Their brass handles glinted like the sun thanks to Ilya's electric torch. Someone had cleaned them within the last year at least. Ilya sneezed, and rubbed his nose for a bit before sneezing again. A sound, faint, like a sudden pressing of a piano key or perhaps metal being hit, rang out ahead of him. Ilya froze. He switched off his electric torch. He really should just go downstairs, hide in one of the rooms, and come down around lunch time to tell them he was all done with the attic.

It was completely dark in the hallway now. Ahead of him was only blackness. Behind him, he could see the slashes of sunlight from the shutters. Nothing seemed to move. Only his breathing could be heard. A shadow passed over one of the slashes of light, for just a moment. Ilya stopped breathing and stared into the room behind him. Had it been a cloud or even a bird passing by the window? Or had someone walked in front of it? He waited for what seemed like forever before walking back the way he'd come and looking around the room for any interloper. Purple light shone faintly from the stairwell leading down to the stone door. No one had locked him in. Emboldened, he switched his torch back on and scanned the room. Nothing had changed; there were no footprints in the dust but his own. Ilya seemed to deflate, so much tension over

nothing. He could have drowned in his own chagrin. Ilya stopped for a second: did that make sense? Chagrin wasn't really all that common a word. Was drowning in it properly evocative?

First, he needed to complete a circuit of the attic to see how monumental his task would be. He continued back the way he'd come, arriving at the wood-paneled hallway and trying the doors one by one as he went. All eight of the doors were locked, so he moved on, and passed a ninety degree turn, came to eight more locked doors in an identical hallway, before emerging into a large room filled with many covered relics and junk identical to the room he'd first entered in the attic complete with the same slashes of light from the shutters. The wall opposite the windows had no stairwell leading down from the attic. That seemed a little odd to just have the one for what seemed to be an endless procession of attic, for another wood-paneled hallway with sixteen doors and a ninety degree turn awaited him. Dutifully, though more from curiosity really, Ilya tried each door and was rewarded with door number thirteen, which opened. The room was well lit by an un-shuttered window with iron bars crisscrossing it. The radiant light shone down on what appeared to be a bedroom, unused for decades at least, judging from the dust. The contents of the room were a wardrobe, one single bed with a rusted white metal frame and dull brown sheets, along with a small vanity, with mirror cracked right down the middle. Two Ilyas stared back at him, one stretched and twisted with a delicate spider web of fractures across his cheek. A small scratching sound came from the room next door.

Ilya exited the room and tried door number fourteen. The door was locked. Scratching came from the other side of the door. Ilya knocked three times. The scratching stopped abruptly.

He put his ear against the door to listen and the scratching came again, low to the ground and moving off to the right. Ilya followed the sound, which was like wood scratching against wood. He followed it into a large open room, much like the one he'd first come to in the attic, though significantly less crowded. The sound moved along the baseboard until it hit stone, and then it became muted. The room had one distinctive feature about it though; the left-hand corner was occupied not by clutter, but a door.

It was unlocked, and Ilya pushed it open eagerly. The most dominant feature of the study was an old antique oaken desk varnished a deep shade of black. A thick layer of dust coated it and the lamps that sat on either end. Ilya ran his finger down one of the globes, revealing a dingy emerald green finish. Sitting between the two lamps was an old book, bound in brown leather with a brass locking mechanism covered in what seemed to be black mold. It opened without too much pulling, though the pages had begun to stick together and yellow with age, the writing was still quite legible. It seemed to be the diary of a woman named Amaranth Cecilia Neimasaurus from nearly seventy years ago. Ilya sat down at the antique Makassar chair and set his electric torch so that the orange sphere of light poured over the yellow page, giving it a golden sheen. The diary covered many decades of her life, but didn't start until her eighteenth birthday, by explaining that her uncle, one Fyodor Neimasaurus, had given her this book as a gift, to write down a story that she had told him many times, which apparently Amaranth was now sick of telling. It was a vignette from her childhood. Ilya was impressed with the writing, it seemed much superior to his own diary. The story was written in third person, as though she wanted to distance herself from the childhood memory:

*The Diary of Amaranth Aliana Neimasaurus:*

The town grew in two halves like a seed split in two and growing into a pair of misbegotten twins on the fertile soil of the Dakota Territory, the jagged painted white teeth of a picket fence winding between the two halves like a tattoo or scar tissue leftover from the separation of the two seeds. Amaranth, a girl of no more than eight passed beneath the wilted and warped walnut trees in front of her Church. She thought of blood, her mind fresh with the Holy Scriptures. Blood to her synonymous with the church. It consumed her thoughts, just as the good book did. The blood she imagined from a slit in a boy's stomach, spilling like syrupy strawberry preserves, was Emernon's blood. And her own. She shifted the package of sugar to her left arm as she passed the stained glass visage of Saint Nicolai. He was perpetually on the verge of tears, his hand gripping a staff, his other resting on a lamb's back, staring at her retreating form. The darkness of his robes cast shadows in the center of the purple landscape that surrounded him.

Without a second thought to Nicolai's pouting gaze, she thought about the differences of blood. Irish and Russian. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox. One was more important than the other. One was for life. One was right. She ran her honey-stained fingers along the tip of the fence being careful of the bee sting on her knuckle and not to scrape it and make the waxy white puss run again. The yellow flaps of her bonnet cut off her peripheral vision, and gave her a clear view of the fence tips and her muddy kid skin boots. Thirty-four. Thirty-five. Thirty-six. Thirty-

seven. And thirty-nine. She lost count and began again at one before her mumbled count trailed off at fourteen.

“What’re you up to at this hour?” the Orthodox priest with the name of Kabalevsky had come from the churchyard behind her, his steps silent, and his beard long. “Amaranth? Girl, I’m talking to you. Why aren’t you at the fair?”

“Father,” a curtsy, an incline of the head. “My family don’t celebrate with Catholics. Daddy says it ain’t right to mix faiths.” She curtsied again. “Father.”

“Nonsense. That’s no reason. You go on down and tell your father to come on over to the fair, you hear?”

“Yes Father. Absolutely.” Amaranth smiled without cheer as she turned to go.

Kabalevsky moved past Amaranth with a shimmer of black that seemed to glow when it hit the light in between the shade of the walnut trees. The arthritic branches made the shadow of a hanged man appear for an instant as the clouds partially obscured the sun, and she could see around Kabalevsky the outline of a man hung upside down by his foot. She nodded to herself. That was right.

One. Two. Three. Her hand grazed the fence post. She shifted the pound of sugar to the crook of her right arm with a sound like sand paper as it slid. Four. Five. Six. Amaranth didn’t know why Mama wanted sugar anyway. Honey cake was sweet enough without anything else. It seemed excessive to her, beyond necessity. Kabalevsky disappeared down a side road like a big fat black ant crawling down a hole. She heard nothing. Not a single sound from the rows of houses on either side of the fence that cut the village in half. Seven. Eight. Nine. She looked over



the fence at the Catholic side of town. Empty and poor. And all gone to the fair to play the fiddle with the Devil, as her Daddy would say. They'd snuck out of the war too. Good Russian Orthodox, good Americans, supported The Union. Irish men were cowards.

Somewhere, hundreds, if not thousands, of miles to the east, men were dying trapped in a sea of their own blood. They smelled of burnt ash, the tang of gunpowder, and lay in the lines where they had been shot and stabbed with rusted bayonets when field doctors had pronounced them hopeless cases and bullets were too expensive to waste on the dying. There must be a lot of blood. It had to be everywhere, staining all the cotton and the grass, soaking into wool uniforms and seeping into the ground. It filled the air with the stench of rotting meat and flesh like slaughtered pigs and cattle. She wondered at the smell and sight of the red fields, and dreaded hearing the sounds they could make. It was what men were for. It was their God given responsibility to sort these things out themselves.

Pansy McCray's mariposa lilies caught her eye. Hanging all fat and dewy in the shady garden next to her house with the faintest hints of purple on the white petals and orange marmalade-colored pods in the center. They were on the Irish side. Amaranth walked on, eyes following the Mariposas until she was forced to turn her head to continue looking at them. She saw no one. Payment was due. She stopped and carefully set the sugar down. Pansy McCray's Mariposas were famous in town for their lushness and size. Everyday Pansy was out there tending them. Not today. She crawled over the fence, hiking up her dress and her shawl with one hand until she was over. She crept over to the Mariposas. The flowers were larger than her fist. They made the tiny stems they sat on droop.

She stomped the mariposas into the ground with her boots. They were crushed into an orangish-green pulp. The petals were a bloody and juicy mess of off-white. She ran for the fence. Pansy deserved it. She had two sons who should have gone to the army. What were flowers to that?

Back on the Russian side of the fence, she walked on as though nothing had happened. After a minute or two, she doubled back to get the sugar she'd forgotten. She walked on. Her boots crunching into the mulch placed along the fence leaving bloody footprints of purple and tangerine swirled lily nectar for a dozen or so steps. The flower fluids had seeped into the side of her boot, with a tell-tale petal dug into the brown lacings. She leaned down and yanked it out with her hand. She tried to flick it away, but the nectar glued it to her finger. She brushed it away with her other hand, smearing it with flower blood. It made her flinch as it soaked into the knuckle with the pustule. She sucked on it to clean the blood off. The acrid, bitter tang of the flower's blood burned down her throat and made her choke. Her eyes watered. It felt as though flowers had sprouted in her guts.

She walked back to see the ruined Mariposas. She should not have done it, yet she could not help but smile at the destruction. No one had noticed yet. She walked back down the path. *O Lord our God.* She prayed. A simple prayer her mother had taught her in moments of doubt. She hurried down the rows of houses until she reached home. Smoke belched from the chimney sending ash into the sky, unlike the other townhouses in a row which sat dark and empty.

Once inside, she squatted down and pulled her boots off one at a time. *Grant us grace to desire thee with our whole heart.* She unlaced the ribbon that held her bonnet on and put it up on

the hook and placed her shawl there as well. *That so desiring we may seek and find thee.* She walked into the sitting room where Daddy sat. He read from a book of ecclesiastical essays about deism which he considered to be quite dubious in nature. His beard was as long as Kabalevsky's and as black as tar, though bluing on the edges.

"Father," a curtsy.

"Did you pass many a reveler on your way, dear?" he said.

She crossed the room and kissed him on the cheek. "No, it was empty," she replied. *And so finding thee may love thee. And through love may adore thee as a newborn babe.*

He put his book down and patted her on the arm, rubbing at some tangerine blood from the mariposas. "The Devil will tempt the weak, but they will return unscathed."

"Why is a fair so bad?" she asked. She looked down at her dress, nervously twisting a length of it in her hand. She continued her prayers. *And adoring thee, may hate those sins from which thou has redeemed us, those sins that stain and rot the soul.*

"You may not go. Ye are better than that," he said, patting her on the arm. "Now get that sugar into the kitchen." *Only through suffering may thee cleanse the soul. Amen.*

It was dark as she walked through the house. Too early for lamps, yet dark enough that she had to squint. She looked out the window and saw only darkness in the sky, a black as dark as a hanged man. The clouds blotted out the sun. Her stomach twisted and gave her a few quick jabs of pain. It hadn't felt right since she'd sucked at her finger and gotten some of the flower's blood inside her.

She helped make the syrup with Mama, but she thought of flowers. Crushed. Bleeding. Thunder sounded outside. Dinner sat in the oven slow roasting while Mama put the finishing touches on the cake. Rain began. Not heavily, just a little storm. But it was as windy as a nor'easter. It sounded like a jar of nails being shook around in her hands. Then came the sound of locomotives. Tornados.

Amaranth's back stiffened. It was true then. Payment was due. There would be blood. Mama grabbed her hand.

"Get to the storm shelter," Mama said, though her voice sounded distant to Amaranth's ears, as though it were coming from the next room.

Daddy came into the room and said, "There isn't any time for that. Get under the table." The window in the kitchen was shattered by the jagged end of a plank which carved into Daddy's chest. He fell to the ground, the wind spraying Amaranth in the face with her father's blood, which ran down her like the sticky nectar of mariposas.

Mama dragged her beneath the kitchen table screaming in her ear to get down. Amaranth did the only thing she could. *Almighty and everlasting God be thou present with us in all our duties, and grant the protection of thy presence to all that dwell in this house.* The other windows on the west side of the house shattered. She could see nothing because Mama was on top of her. Everything was black. There was no sun. Only screaming. Herself. Mama. Then everything got real quiet. *That thou mayest be known to be the defender of this household. That thou smite the wicked and punish the unjust. That thou forgive venal sins of youth.*

The wind blew away. She crawled out from beneath Mama. The table had blown across the room and shattered like toothpicks, though Mama had held onto the corner of the oven. Several of the sticks of wood Mama used as kindling for the stove had splintered and driven themselves into her back and head like a pincushion. Her blood was all over the room, mixing with Daddy's. But not on Amaranth. Though it was now soaking into the hem of her dress as she walked around the room in circles. Slowly at first, then in a panic when she couldn't complete the prayer, couldn't think of anything but to look at Mama and Daddy's blood meeting and mingling on the floor. *And the inhabitants of this dwelling, through Jesus Christ our lord. Amen.* With the roar of the words in her mind came a peace of purpose upon her. Amaranth walked past her Daddy, knowing he was dead just like her Mama. She cut her stocking clad feet on shards of glass. She felt nothing except her purpose. She had to go to the church. She had to beg God. She left her boot and bonnet by the door because she couldn't find the ribbon or the other boot since the door had been ripped from its hinges and flung across the street. She did not need them anymore.

A haze hung about the town, fine particles of dirt seething in a cloud of brownish dust, reaching as far as the eye could see. The town was still nearly deserted. Empty except for the sound of wailing. Amaranth heard it faintly each time she walked by a road as she followed the remains of the fence to the church. An old woman came out of the dust, her hair wild and her face dirty and streaked with dirt. She grabbed Amaranth by the shoulders.

“Are you all right, child? Where are your parents?” Her voice was harsh and tinged with desperation.

“I have to go to the church, they’ll meet me there.” Amaranth gave the old woman a smile with no cheer in it. The woman looked down and her eyes widened.

“Child, your feet, what happened?” The old woman’s hands dropped away from her and Amaranth walked away from the old woman, whose eyes never left the blood on the ground.

The tornado had picked up every plank from the fence that divided the town and flung them at the Orthodox half. The Irish side of town was untouched. Except for dead flowers. She heard voices, people returning from the fair to see the damage. These people didn’t matter anymore to her, only God, and what God must do.

She arrived at the church, her feet almost slipping in her own blood, as she paused to look at the place. The front doors had blown inward, cracking and twisting the wooden frame until the doors lay on their sides. The pews were flung on their sides and the red carpet plastered to the back wall. Everywhere teeth from the fence had embedded themselves in the walls and floor of the church. Staining the icons with dirt and rending the frescos. The statue of Christ that she came to see was untouched except for one alteration. A single plank from the fence had jammed itself into his mouth. Her feet stuck to the floor. Each step she took was work because the blood created suction against the wood.

Christ’s body glistened. The water seemed to make him glow, but also cry.

“Please,” she said. “I’m sorry I crushed the flowers. I said my prayers after.” The statue stared across the room. Gagged. She climbed up onto the altar marring the purple cloth with bloody foot prints. She was face to face with Christ. When she tugged the shard of wood free, Christ’s lower jaw came off with it. She looked at the piece of plaster as it rolled off the edge of

the altar and fell to the floor. It did not shatter. It skittered a few feet as though it were alive and grew still.

“Why did this happen to me?”

A crack formed on his upper lip.

“Why did this happen to me?”

Another crack. Growing along the side of his nose.

“Why won’t you answer me? I’m sorry.”

Silence in the church. Only the faint sounds of footsteps and voices saying, “The footprints go in the church.”

Amaranth looked up at the Christ one last time before tears blurred her vision. “Please undo it,” she said. “Please.”

A spider-web of cracks traveled over his face. Something broke inside her. Meaning, faith, purpose, all the symbols of her life collapsing into cracks, and she went numb. People came into the church with lanterns to see in the haze and cloths over their mouths to keep out the dust. *And I shall smite the wicked no matter how small the infraction. And through suffering you shall know me better.* Was this the voice of Christ? *For no infraction can be truly forgiven, no infraction can be undone in the soul. Only suffering can bring true forgiveness. Render your suffering unto me. You pathetic little girl.*

“My God,” one of them said, voice muffled. “Look at all the blood.”

“It can’t all come from her,” said another.

Amaranth took the plank up in her hands. She began to cry, her red tears splattering all over her hands and dress. She smashed the face of Christ and it seemed to laugh at her. White dust and chunks of plaster flew everywhere as the head shattered. She smashed her stick against other parts of his stone body, but they did not give as easily as the head.

“Stop her.” Hands reached up and took her from the altar. They carried her to the doctor. It took two of the Irish men to get the stick away from her after she laid one of them out cold with it. Several of them slipped in the blood and chased her into a corner before wrestling her to the ground. She did not make a sound. *Render suffering up to me, Bitch.*

The Irish doctor they took her to filled two buckets with her blood as he dug the shards out of her feet and sewed them up. She kept on bleeding through the stitches for five days. *And so it was that Emernon became a curse on the people of Israel for he never stopped bleeding.* She remembered the story her Daddy had told her of the cursed youth Emernon and how he'd come to live in a lake of his own blood, the lake known as Behelin, near the Dead Sea.

“Emernon was just a boy that no one took care of, because there was no king to command that they be good and care for the sick,” Daddy had said, filling his pipe before continuing, a little curl of acrid smoke rising out of it. “The land needs a king, or there will be chaos and God will punish us for our lack of civility.” Daddy had regaled her with stories of how his blood made an entire lake, and from this lake came the disease of leprosy carried by rats, who devastated the countryside until a few brave souls rowed across the lake of blood to the island where Emernon had sat for years pleading for help.



His once beautiful features had turned waxy and sallow. His emaciated body, bleeding from uncared for abscesses and boils, and from where the men of Canaan had pierced him with arrows. He'd tried to pull them out, but hadn't been strong enough, and so they hung there, buried in the wounds. These brave men carried Emernon from his island to the coast. Already showing signs of leprosy, they built a ship and carried Emernon from Israel forever. This was the story that she now repeated in her head. There was no Christ, there was Emernon. There was blood.

Father Kabalevsky came for her and took her back to the church. Amaranth sat quietly in the room he'd given her. She went to her parent's funeral without shedding a tear. She sat quietly. There would come a time when she would come alive again. Father Kabalevsky found relatives in Russia and wrote to them about Amaranth's situation. He told her they lived at an estate called Neimasaurus.

A month later he put her on a train that took her to New York City where a lawyer met her. There she saw boats full of Irish men arriving and being conscripted into the Union Army which pleased her. Here she saw what the war was doing to Americans. In Dakota it had only been words. The lawyer put her on the boat that took her all the way across the Atlantic, and away from America forever. She sat quietly on the boat for three months. There would come a time when she would come alive again. *Render your suffering unto me*, Emernon whispered to her.

### CHAPTER 3: THE BLEEDING SWAMP

The story stayed with him for the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. Demetri asked him if anything was wrong, and he said no. He couldn't explain why the story affected him in such a way, except... Something bothered him about it, and he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. He went to bed early that night.

At half past one o'clock in the morning Ilya awoke to a noise. It sounded faintly like crying. Ilya rolled onto his side and held his pillow against his ear in an effort to muffle the cries, but then decided such things were against his nature. He rolled onto his back and spread his arms out. Damn it, he thought, if only he weren't curious. He stumbled out of bed and into his sandals, and taking the lantern he'd purloined the night before, he exited the house in search of faint cries. He walked into the moonlight, heading toward the abandoned work cottages, and his mind turned to nebulous and dark thoughts, which he supposed meant that things were perfectly normal for him.

The closer to the cries he came, the more unnatural they began to sound. Was it some deformed freak of nature, bemoaning his horrific state? Or perhaps some artificial monstrosity as made by Dr. Frankenstein, because Ilya, unlike most people he'd encountered in Petrograd, knew that the doctor was named Frankenstein, not the creation. They might know Pushkin and Gogol backwards and forwards, but Ilya liked to read something a little more upbeat every once in a while. Compared to Russian literature, *Frankenstein* was a frothy little adventure. Not that there was anything wrong with *War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*,

he just couldn't stand them. He crept forward in the dark, the only sound the flapping of his sandals and a few noisy cicadas up past their bedtime. He saw movement near the ground. The cries stopped without warning. He hooded the lantern to form a beam of sickly yellow light and cast it upon the grim visage that awaited him: two Arsenic-yellow eyes starred back at him for a few seconds before the young black cat fled.

Its mother lay motionless on the ground, her silky black coat wet, with the bloody ground near her neck the only way of telling in the dark that her throat had been ripped out. He felt a little woozy at the sight of blood, like the time when he was twelve and the doctor had given him a local anesthetic before giving him stitches on his foot. He had screamed when the surgical hook sunk into his foot, because he'd only been pretending to sleep since he thought that was what he was supposed to do. On reflection, perhaps this really wasn't like that at all, but that was the last time he'd seen this much blood. He closed his eyes and willed himself not to faint like he had when he'd banged his head two days ago in the hallway with Aleksander. There had been surprisingly little blood when his parents died. Or was his memory painting a sanitized picture for him?

Eventually, the light-headedness and nausea left him and he was able to open his eyes with the ephemeral thought that it was a burden to have a personality so bursting with interesting quirks. Sometimes. Ilya wondered if that made him sound arrogant. He still felt like he was worthless and couldn't do anything right, just like he had when he arrived at Neimasaurus. That sounded like another one of his hang-ups, didn't it? He cursed under his breath, not a real bad curse though, because he wasn't that kind of person, but still bad enough to not be written in this

book. He picked up a nearby stick and poked the mother cat. Not too hard, in case she was alive, but hard enough that if she was alive, he'd get a reaction. He supposed if she were dead he'd have to bury her. One yellow eye opened, and her black legs twitched pitifully. Blood bubbled out of her neck and a sort of watery-hiss-growl came out of her mouth. Damn it. That was worse than the other curse, but now he didn't know what to do. Her body began to twitch and shake as she tried to stand. She bared her fangs and blood bubbled out of her mouth and Ilya wanted to cry just like the Arsenic-eyed cat. Shakily, she rose up on her front paws, but with a yowl, collapsed into the dirt again, sending particles of blood and saliva flying.

He had to do something to put her out of her misery. He could... he could... he could stomp on her head, couldn't he? That should finish her off. His vision blurred a bit. He rubbed the tears away. No, he probably couldn't do that. It wasn't in his nature. He couldn't bear the thought of just abandoning her either. He sat down a few feet from where she lay. She'd started to wheeze since her collapse, though her breathing was growing shallower and more bubbles of blood were coming from her neck. Ilya wondered if this was the oft-mentioned "death rattle" he'd heard described in so many books he'd read. It was an ugly, wet sound. He should have stayed in bed.

It took about half an hour for her to stop breathing. Ilya lived his life within the interval of her wheezes, hearing them grow fainter and fainter until they stopped. He pulled his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs, staring up at the moon. When he'd still lived with his parents in Petrograd, there had been many stray cats living in his apartment block. He'd give them what he could, and pet the ones that weren't biters. He liked cats, most animals, really.

If they were friendly. And not too big. And did nothing unsanitary. Some of the other boys would attack them with hockey sticks, and once someone had thrown a bag tied shut with a cat inside it into the fountain, but he'd only heard about that from his father, not seen it. His mother had been furious because the boys who'd done it weren't even punished by their parents. Ilya just wasn't that kind of person.

His parents hadn't liked animals much, and he'd never been allowed a pet, except for a little hamster that had committed suicide by leaping off the edge of a table before it was eight months old. The poor fellow, named Ivan, had gone into a zip-lock bag and then into the trash. The cage had sat empty on the desk, awaiting a new occupant. Twelve-year-old Ilya had even done up the cage like the palace of the tsar, with cardboard turrets taped to the corners. He liked the thought of a power mad dictator like Ivan the Terrible being reduced to a hamster. He had whined to his parents that he wanted a new one. They had not relented. One day, several months after the Tsar had thrown himself off the edge of his kingdom, the cage had disappeared from the desk in his room. His mother had thrown it out while he was at school.

When he was sure the cat was dead, he got up and walked back to the house. He got a shovel, work gloves, and rooted through the cupboards for something the Arsenic-eyed cat might want. Why not just call her Arsenic? He found a small can of pickled herring with a faded red and gold label that had begun to tear away. He put it, along with the work gloves and a can opener, into a paper bag he found before heading back to Arsenic's mother. A quick dash of a black shape told him Arsenic had been back beside her mother's corpse.

Ilya set the sack and lantern down before beginning to dig a grave for her. A few minutes in and he'd had to take a break because it was much harder than he thought it would be. He opened the can of herring and sampled one which tasted every bit as revolting as he'd thought they would. He set it a few feet away from him, in the direction Arsenic had run off in, and began to dig again. When he'd dug deep enough, he put on the gloves and picked up Arsenic's mother. It felt like picking up a baby. He carefully cradled the head and back legs. He put her in the sack and tied it shut. He placed the bundle into the grave and began piling dirt on top of her. About halfway through, he heard a quiet munching sound. Arsenic had emerged from hiding and was eating the herring, keeping a careful eye on him. He finished filling in the grave, and packed down the earth as hard as he could, because he'd read that you had to do that or else other animals would dig up the body and eat it.

As he walked back to his uncle's cottage, Arsenic stalked him. Occasionally, he'd turn around and catch a flash of yellow. After he'd put the shovel and lantern away, he got into bed, and noticed the first light of dawn creeping into his window. He'd burned hours dealing with a dead cat. He had to remember to feed Arsenic tomorrow or she'd starve since she didn't have a mother anymore. Arsenic. That was a good name. Though he needed to get what sleep he could as he had more of Amaranth's diary to get through tomorrow. He'd been forced to stop right when she was about to arrive at the estate. He wanted to see how the estate had changed over the decades. It seemed odd that she had written a story about herself in the third-person. It seemed like the kind of thing he would do. Her story was interesting to him because he'd had religion

forced on him briefly as a child, though he recalled no story about Emerson. He should look it up, though he didn't know if his uncle had any religious books or not.

After two hours, Demetri roused him from an almost fitful sleep. He stumbled out of bed and into clothes before shambling to the breakfast table. Everything was laid exactly as before, even the sour cream he'd requested yesterday. He could see it now: his uncle was a creature of habit and routine. In a few short, yet monotonous years, Ilya would become a man who measured his life in coffee spoons. Or was it teaspoons? He couldn't remember, but the British drank a bunch of tea, or at least they did in movies, and there was no such thing as a coffee spoon, was there? Soon, just like a euthanized patient, Ilya would be wandering in a dull and listless existence. He wondered if people still read *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*, a poem that made him long for Russian literature. His uncle waved to him to get his attention, before he could start comparing more books and poems in his mind.

*Why are my work gloves on the counter?* he signed, holding one up. He squinted down at it before dropping the glove. *Why are they covered in blood?*

*Umm...* Ilya was a little slow to respond, trying to think of a good story. Nothing came to mind, so he signed nothing but a smile to his uncle. He didn't need his hands for that, so he heaped some kasha onto his plate, pretending that he was excited to eat it.

*Ilya Kollide, I'm signing to you.* Demetri pointed at the gloves. His movements were even more abrupt and to the point than usual.

Ilya responded with increasingly languid hand movements. *Well... I heard some crying last night. So I got up and went to check it out... Arsenic's mother had died. She's a cat... So I*

*had to bury her. I didn't want to get blood on my hands so I picked her up wearing the gloves before I buried her. Arsenic ate that old can of herring with the faded label, I think it might have expired, hopefully she's okay, while I buried her mother... I used gloves because something had torn out her throat and it made me feel light headed but I didn't faint at the blood, which was pretty good for me because when I banged my head the other day I fainted. But only for a few seconds. Then Arsenic followed me home... We need to get some more herring. I think she likes it...*

Demetri looked stunned, but he recovered quickly. He was learning the routine with Ilya already. *I see. If you want the cat, then you have to pay for the food out of your own wages.*

*I get paid?* Ilya replied, surprised. Maybe he should do some work. But only a couple hours, otherwise it would be exhausting.

Demetri shook his head. *Yes, Ilya, every Friday like everyone else, though I wouldn't expect too much with the job you've been doing so far.*

*How much do I make?*

It was more of a resigned look on Demetri's face now. *Fifty roubles a week. Tabitha explained it all to you yesterday.*

*Oh. When had that happened? Must have been when his mind was wandering. Is that a lot?*

*Not really.*

*How much do you get?*

*More.*



*Why?*

*I do real work.*

*Oh.* Ilya supposed that was true. Maybe if he worked more, he could afford to leave when he was eighteen.

*Eat your breakfast.*

*Is this the longest conversation we've ever had?*

*Probably.*

*It's not really a conversation though, because we're signing, not talking,* Ilya signed. It was like talking but not technically talking, which is why there weren't any quotation marks.

*Just eat your breakfast.*

*Where are you going?*

*To wash the blood off of my hands.*

By the time Ilya trudged back up to the estate to resume his now paid pseudo-work, his uncle had promised to take him into town to get supplies for Arsenic, though his attitude was a bit disquieting to Ilya, who got the impression Demetri didn't expect the cat to live very long. There was no sign of the cat on his walk. He loitered and took twice as long as normal, periodically calling out "Arsenic..." At first, he'd signed, but then realized that he was trying to communicate with a cat, so he switched to his voice.

By the time he was safely ensconced in the attic, thanks to Tabitha, since Yaisha was busy, it was nearly nine 'o'clock in the morning. She had decided that the large brass key to the attic could now be his, so that someone wouldn't have to let him in every morning. He was

already plotting night time attic expeditions. To mark the fact that he was now being paid, he took the box of cleaning supplies from beside the door and carried it up to the room with Amaranth's desk in it. He made a perfunctory attempt at dusting, but only managed to bring on a sneezing fit. He suspected he had an allergy to dust. He righted some boxes that had been knocked over, cleaned up some loose articles on the floor. All of this was just the floor show to Amaranth Neimasaurus's diary. He admitted to himself that the rote diary entries were not that exciting, but when she told stories, they were quite good. He thumbed through the diary for a few pages until he found a curious entry that Amaranth had transcribed from her "dear cousin" Alexei when they were children and she had been at Neimasaurus for nearly a year:

*August the 14<sup>th</sup>, 1865:*

The day Rustam died, I wrapped him up in a white sheet. I asked Amaranth and Dano to come with me and bury him in the swamp where he'd told me he wanted to be buried. We would go deep into the Bleeding Swamp, across the spot where the mangrove tree had grown bent over the river. We would go all the way to the marshy field where the deer grazed, to where the pines grew tall and kept out the sun. It was there, where the sun had not touched the ground in forever, where Rustam wanted to sleep. He weighed very little as I carefully placed him in my backpack and then put in the paper tombstone I'd made with the words: "Rustam: RIP 1863-1865." I laced up the canvas flaps of my backpack, careful not to bend the paper. His voice was already fading from my memory.

I offered Amaranth a pair of pants to wear, but she wrinkled her nose and told me I smelled funny and that she would rather wear her yellow dress because she was a lady. Well la-de-da. It was important all the swamp animals not mistake her for a boy. Plus, the dress was new and she was showing off the blue bow in her red hair. Dano demanded we leave Neimasaurus by eleven o'clock so that we could be back before dark. He pushed me when I didn't move fast enough down the steps. Dano was always like that because he was ten, and Amaranth and I were only nine. He was my cousin too, from down near Barnaul. We were only distantly related, though.

The screen door slammed shut behind Amaranth as the three of us made our way behind the house and toward the fields. We walked past the rusting gate, the boathouse and dock, that uncle Giorgio wouldn't let us anywhere near. Truthfully, I was told never go near the Bleeding Swamp. Beyond the boathouse were fields left to lie fallow. They were an overgrown jungle of weed where I had spent many hours playing hide and seek down the rows of vines. My father, Fyodor Neimasaurus, told me his father had been the master of our house when it was a crown jewel of the Russian Empire. All of Fyodor's money came from that time. When he died, I would have all that money. I don't know what Grandpa grew, but he'd had a lot of peasants to help him. Probably local Altai.

I said my prayer of protection under my breath three times as we crossed the fields, occasionally patting the angel in my left pocket, and reaching in and squeezing it when I finished my recitation. I loved the world, so I had to love God as well. The angel was my mother's charm:

a gold outline of an angel with a diamond for a head and small blue stones for wings. I took it from her jewelry box the day after she died from en-ceph-a-li-tis. The doctors had drilled holes in her head to relieve the pressure when the drugs didn't help her. The drugs had helped Dano and now he was okay. Mother died. Fyodor wouldn't let me near her when she was sick, but I knew because I looked in the doctor's bag and saw the drill. It was just like the one Giorgio and I had used to drill holes when we made the boat last summer, except it wasn't all rusty, but shiny and silver.

Dano and Amaranth would have laughed at me if they'd heard what I was doing with my silly little prayers. Amaranth would have done more than that. She could be quite volatile, especially when it came to God. Once her mind was made up, to hell with you if you disagreed with her. The straps of the backpack were itchy and dug into my shoulders after a while but I ignored it. Dano was starting to sweat. So was I, and I would be glad when we got into the woods and the shade.

"I didn't know you had a pet mouse," Amaranth said.

I replied: "Yes, but only for a month."

"What kind was it?" Dano asked.

"White."

Amaranth smiled. "The white ones are adorable. Unless they've got red eyes. I hate that. It's like blood. The blue eyes are much cuter, but I heard that the mice with blue eyes are

probably deaf. What color were Rustam's eyes?" Amaranth asked, looking at the pine trees as we passed.

"Brown."

"Oh. That's nice. Kind of plain..." Amaranth's voice wandered off.

Dano sighed. "How come we have to go way out across the Bleeding Swamp to bury it?"

"Shh! Do you want somebody to hear where we were going?" Amaranth said. "Or are you afraid?"

"No."

I pushed an errant branch out of the way and it almost slapped across Dano's face.

"Because that's where Fyodor found him, so now he can be buried with his family," I said. Even if it wasn't true, the thought of exploring the swamp got me excited. Was the water actually red deep within, like some of the servants said?

"What was he doing way out there?" Dano said, apparently bursting at the seams with stupid questions today.

"Hunting," I said.

"You've been out here before, right?" he asked.

"Yes." I had not, but Soldier told me all about it before he went away and I knew I could find it. Of course Soldier was only a toy, but there was no point in telling them that.

We were passing the peasant quarters now. Great big falling apart log cabins that were handy for hide and seek. The trail really began past the cabins, beyond the normal places where we played and out into the desolation of the Bleeding Swamp. It smelled bad. Swamps tended to stink. Gnats and mosquitoes were everywhere making the skin of all the puddles slip and sloop. Fyodor had told me that en-ceph-a-li-tis was caused by bugs. I didn't want holes in my head; that was why he forbade me from going into the swamp, or so he claimed, but if that were true why did he go into it? I had faith that God would not take both Mother and me from Fyodor. I prayed whenever a mosquito drew near. I prayed to God because I didn't understand. I didn't understand anything at all. God was supposed to be appeased. That's what Fyodor said about the Old Testament. God's wrath was terrible against those who defied him or denied him.

Dano shaded his eyes as he looked ahead. "Alexei, are we going in the right direction?"

"Yes. We just head to the river, until we get to the big mangrove tree. It's all bent so we can crawl across it to get to the other side."

"Is there all this blasted mud on the other bank?" Amaranth asked. The hem of Amaranth's dress was already smeared with the stuff.

I wondered where she'd heard the word blasted. "No, it gets pretty dry over there." It wasn't fun dragging our feet through it either. *I'm tired already*, I thought.

"Let's go back," Amaranth said

Dano laughed. "Just like a girl to give up with a bit of mud, and wear a silly dress."

The poor fool. Amaranth's eyes narrowed. She trudged through the mud up to him and shoved him hard into a scraggly tree. She was big for her age, and I'd learned my lesson long ago about picking fights with her. Dano didn't seem to be as quick a learner. The audience didn't appreciate it either; two fat old vultures, black as the mud, ruffled their wings and shrieked at us from the branches above. They sounded like old men spitting up phlegm, only much louder and wheezier. Dano jerked away from their tree. We backed away from them, our feet sinking in the mud and making sucking sounds.

"They're so big," Dano said, and we left them behind, along with our argument.

A few minutes later the crippled mangrove tree came into sight. Its bent trunk growing from the middle of the river like, the heavy branches spreading around it like a spider web. It looked firm and easily scalable. All we needed to do was climb along the trunk and use the branches for support. I had only been out this far once with Fyodor, and had seen the mangrove from a distance. Now I was old enough to be out here and I wasn't stupid enough to step on an adder like Fyodor thought. We had seen one when he had brought me out here hunting a wild boar. It had killed one of our dogs. It took all day for the poison to kill the poor thing.

We hadn't found the boar, but I remembered that wavy S with an extra bend, the color of dirty copper, like I had seen when Fyodor smelted toy Soldiers for me. Except this S moved and had a red mouth. I had almost stepped on it. When I saw it, I screamed and ran, which was dumb. Fyodor told me later, they chase you if you run. He threw his walking stick at it and the monster sank its two fangs into the dry wood. Then Fyodor shot it. I remember the strike the most. I

didn't even see it move, and then it was on the stick. Everywhere I looked after that, I saw snakes striking at my legs. When I got home, they struck at me every time I opened a door. They struck at me when I peered over the edge of the bathtub, right in the face. The snakes didn't leave me alone for a week. Why did I run from it? Fyodor wouldn't have had to shoot it.

I shoved away thoughts of snakes and thought of the mangrove instead. "This is it."

Dano rolled his eyes at me. "Thanks for pointing that out."

"You're welcome. If you hadn't pointed out how big the birds were, I never would have known."

"Do we go over one at a time?" Amaranth asked, looking at the winding tree, with its withered knees poking from the water and the shoreline.

"Nah, we can go over together," I replied.

Dano cut in front of me. "I'm going first."

"You're rude." I sounded like a whiner, saying that.

He gave me a nasty smile. "Yup, I'm the oldest too."

"Fine, you can clear all the big fat poisonous spiders out," Amaranth said.

"Yeah, wise elder," I added.

Dano scowled as he climbed onto the dry trunk. Bits of bark came loose and slipped off beneath his boots, letting off a brown cloud of dried wood dust. I climbed onto the trunk after



him, and swung from branch to branch, occasionally waiting for Amaranth, whose now ratty dress made the climb difficult. I noticed a fat brown spider crawling along my shirtsleeve and shook him off. Brown spiders were harmless. The river below us was sluggish and brown, but was there a slight rusted-red sheen to it? I couldn't quite tell. It could have been a million miles or six inches deep.

It was a short jump from the tree down to the ground. It was only after Amaranth jumped that I wondered how we would get back up it. This side of the riverbank was a bit of an incline, which kept the area dry. The grass grew all the way up to my shins. We climbed up the hill, and the sun shone down bright on us, and I felt alive. I turned to Amaranth and kissed her on the cheek and she slapped me back. Not hard. I think I surprised her. Dano looked mad for some reason.

“Where do we go from here?” he said.

“We go that way,” I said, pointing away from the mangrove and the river, down the other side of the hill into the deep, deep green swamp. Dano stomped off, and I had to run to catch up. I jumped on his back and knocked him into the grass. He pinned me down and felt superior, but not before I gave him a few good blows.

“You're weird,” he said.

“Okay,” I replied, not quite sure what to do besides grin. I guess it was true. I think he liked holding me down on the ground. Maybe I wanted him to like it.

Amaranth wrinkled her nose and walked past us toward the tree line. I figured she wanted to have fun, but was afraid to. We caught up with her, Dano in the front of course, which made her snicker slightly. Before us was a forest so dark it looked like night inside, with the occasional shaft of sunlight penetrating the canopy. My heart hammered and I smiled like an idiot.

“There’s an island in the middle of it. That’s where he belongs. We have to go through the woods to get to it,” I said suddenly. “An ancient tribe of cannibal pagans used to worship there.”

“Really?” Dano said. He sounded more interested.

Amaranth spun me around to look at her. “You’re just making this up, aren’t you?” she said. “There aren’t any pagans out here.”

“I said there *used* to be pagans,” and shook her off.

“Maybe we’ll find some arrowheads or spears,” Dano said.

“If by arrowheads you mean snakes, then yes,” she said. “Alexei, this isn’t the island your father mentioned that one time, is it?”

Dano looked over at her. “What island?” Then understanding dawned on him. “The Weeping Church! I didn’t think that was real.”

“It’s not,” Amaranth said.

Ignoring their bickering, I stepped into the darkness. We were going downhill again. I heard the sound of Dano and Amaranth following, but I didn’t care, I swatted at some

mosquitoes as I took out my angel and put it around my neck, whispering the prayers for protection. This was the test now. We were in God's hands. I walked slowly until my eyes adjusted to the darkness. We crossed half a dozen little streams. At each one, a cloud of gnats tried to crawl up my nose and down my throat. Finally, we saw light ahead. It was a small lake, and the sun reflected off of its rippling waters. The sun had traveled across the sky farther than I had thought.

Dano whistled as he looked up at the sky. "You better bury him. We got to get home now, or we'll be in the dark."

"But the island," I said. I don't know why, but I was positive it was out there, just like I had been certain about this swamp. I scanned the lake for any sign of land. Nothing.

"Just do it here," Amaranth said.

I set my pack down on the ground and got out the two spades I'd taken from the garden shack and gave one to Dano. Amaranth cleared off a spot of sand on the beach and sat down to watch us dig. Lazy girls.

"It has to be deep," I said, "so animals don't dig him up and eat him."

We dug down about two feet and stopped. Then I got Rustam carefully out of the pack and placed him in the hole. I said a prayer over him and Dano laughed at me. Amaranth threw a stick at Dano's head, and it smacked right against his cheek.

“What’re you hitting me for? He’s the one praying over a stuffed animal. Look, you can see the stuffing. The sheet is almost off,” he said, reaching into the grave and uncovering Rustam.

“Alexei, you baby,” she said.

I covered up Rustam again and felt like crying. We filled the hole up and I smoothed the top out. I carefully got the tombstone out and put it in the dirt. Dano laughed. Dusk was fast approaching, and I was so thirsty. The bugs were coming out in force now, and it seemed I was always slapping at something crawling on me. We began our journey back into the swamp.

After ten minutes or so Dano said, “It’s this way,” pointing toward a large pine tree I didn’t remember crossing.

“I think it’s this way,” I said, pointing at the more familiar path.

Dano walked toward his pie tree. “Well, I’m going this way.”

I looked at Amaranth.

She shrugged. “I just want to go home.”

We followed him, and the farther along we went, the more certain I was that this wasn’t the way. I held onto my angel and prayed to see the way. We came to a point in the swamp where we looked out and all we could see was water. It was not the way.

“Where are we?” Dano said, sounding bewildered for the first time.

“I told you it was the other way,” I shouted, almost ready to cry.

“This is all your stupid fault for dragging us out here for your dumb toy.” Dano punched me in the face. It was like an explosion, and then pain in my right eye. I kicked him back in the leg and he jumped on top of me and started forcing my head into the mud. I heard Amaranth screaming at Dano, and he got off me. I got up on my knees and gasped for breath, wiping the mud out of my eyes. Then Dano snatched the angel from around my neck and I heard the little clink as the chain broke.

“Give it back!” I screamed as I stood up.

Dano turned and threw it into the swamp water. I looked at his smirk, and I looked at the water. Then I fell down in the mud and cried. I couldn’t stop myself.

I looked up at Dano through my tears. “I hate you. I wish you’d died when you got sick instead of Mother.”

He looked away. I curled up in a ball on the ground and tried to will myself to die. Then I heard a splash behind me. Dano was wading into the water and reaching around beneath the surface, looking for my angel. I stared at him, and he kept his back turned to me. He didn’t give up. He kept on looking.

“It’s gone,” I said.

Dano’s movements slowed, and he got out of the water. He sat down on a log and looked down at his feet. Amaranth came up and hugged me. I stopped crying.

“Come on Alexei, let’s go,” she said, taking my hand and turning to walk away. Dano got up to follow and she whirled on him: “Don’t you follow us, we don’t want you.”

Dano’s whole body jerked and he sat back down on the log and stared at his feet. I think he started to cry. We left him there and tried to escape from the swamp. I looked back at him several times and he never moved. He never looked up. I should not have tempted God. This was all my fault, not Dano’s. I wanted to go into the swamp because I didn’t think I would die. I had faith in myself, not in God. Now we would all die. I started to pray again, but remembered I didn’t have my angel. My words drifted away from me, entwined with the trees and mud and rotted away.

“We’re better off without him,” Amaranth said after ten minutes had passed and Dano was out of sight. “He gave you a black eye.” Her hand reached out and touched my muddy cheek and I flinched. It still hurt.

“I want to go back for him.” There was safety in numbers. At least that was what Fyodor had told me.

She looked fed up. “Why? Everybody knew about your necklace no matter how hard you tried to hide it. We all knew you loved it. He threw it away anyway,” she said. “Are you sure this is the way out?”

“I don’t know,” I answered truthfully. “I lost track of the direction when he hit me.”

Amaranth sighed. I think she was ready to cry too, because she hadn't paid attention on the way here. Distantly, we heard Dano crying out for us, and the sound of him crashing through the swamp in pursuit.

"Come on, we have get out of here," she said, grabbing my arm and dragging me along.

"No." I ripped my arm out of her grip. "We have to stay together. I'm waiting for him."

"I'll go without you," she said, stomping off a short distance, then coming back and looking mad. "Fine. We'll wait for him, then!"

We could see him now, and even in the late twilight, there was enough light for me to see him running in desperation toward us. He had been crying.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Please don't leave me alone."

When he ran into a circle of dying light from a hole in the tree canopy, I saw the flash of red, but Dano heard the warning hiss too late. I screamed as the adder lashed out and buried its fangs into Dano's arm. The snake reared back to strike again as Dano screamed. I ran toward Dano as he tried to run from it and tripped. I flung my backpack off as I barreled forward. The snake lashed out at his boot, its fangs sinking into the rubber sole. I shrugged off my jacket. The snake reared back for another strike as I reached them. I threw the jacket over the snake's head and jumped up and down on it with all my might. Something broke beneath my feet. Like a twig beneath my boots, but I kept jumping up and down. Dano got up, shaking slightly. I could see he

was getting dizzy. His arm hadn't started to swell yet. He held it to his chest and just stared at it dumbly.

"Is it dead?" Amaranth had come up behind me and I hadn't noticed.

"I don't know. Let's get away from it." No one was tempted to look under the muddy jacket. We walked a short distance away, until we found a place for Dano to sit on a log. I reached out for his arm.

"Don't touch it!" he shrieked, holding the arm even tighter.

"Roll up your sleeve," Amaranth commanded. The snake had bit him on the fleshy underside of his forearm. He was barely bleeding, but the area around the wound was purple.

I'd wished him dead. Now it was happening. *I don't want you to die*, I thought over and over to myself. I prayed, even without the angel, for him to live. No, I wasn't praying, I was begging. Amaranth took the blue ribbon out of her hair. She rolled Dano's sleeve all the way up above his elbow and tied her ribbon around his arm, and he screamed. I reached out with my hand and laid it on the bite. Dano flinched, but didn't move. I kept my hand there, and then I hugged him, praying that he would get better. Dano sniffled, but didn't cry again.

"I'm sorry," I said stupidly.

"You can have all my stuff, just promise you won't let Amaranth die in here." Dano was expecting to die.

"Okay—I will."



“Stop it. People hardly ever die from adder bites,” Amaranth said.

I looked up at the descending gloom. “We have to sit here and wait. The more we run around, the harder it will be to find us. It’s almost dark now, so they’re probably out looking.”

“We can’t stay in the dark.”

“There isn’t any way around it.” I turned and stared into her eyes. They were cold, blue, and afraid. “I don’t have any matches to start a fire.”

We sat in silence. I could feel the throbbing of Dano’s arm and tell he was going to sleep. I didn’t think he would wake up again. *Please don’t make him die*, I thought. *I’m the one that’s to blame, I dared you, but you were supposed to hurt me. Hurt me. Make me die!* Amaranth was right. I was such a baby. *Please don’t kill anyone else*. My eyes leaked tears and I ignored them. I was too tired to cry anymore, too tired to count on someone else. But I had to. I had to count on Fyodor to find us. No, I had to count on God to make Fyodor find us. I knew how far away from home we were. It could take days. We didn’t have that kind of time. Without warning, Dano threw up a pink viscous liquid all over his legs, his whole body heaving with uncontrollable convulsions. I pulled his head to the side in case he threw up again.

He closed his eyes for a moment. “I don’t want to die, Alexei.”

“I know.”

There was no retort from Amaranth, only two words: “You won’t.”

As my eyes adjusted to the swamp at night. I noticed more of my surroundings. There appeared to be a small clearing a little ways ahead with a brackish and shallow pond. With a shock, I noticed that the waters had a definite reddish tinge in the moon light. Beside the pond was a bird. It was the color of blueberries and it had small black legs the thickness of pencils that jutted out from it and ran beneath the surface of the water it stood in. The bird gently bobbed its way across the pond scanning for fish. It was the most beautiful thing I had seen all day. It left the pond and came toward me. I looked over at Amaranth and noticed that she was asleep too. I could see the crane. I think that's what it was. The bird's eyes were dark gold and the moonlight made them glow. It limped. One of its legs was wounded, and it favored the other slightly. I kept perfectly still. The bird came up to me slowly, a few feet at a time, until it was within touching distance. The crane stood at almost four feet on its spindly legs and looked down on me from where I sat.

Slowly, the crane leaned down and tilted its head towards me. The bird smelled me, and I could feel the beak grazing my hair. Then I heard Amaranth gasp and the crane jerked back and took flight. It was gone in a few seconds.

“Why'd you do that?” I said.

“I didn't mean to.”

My reply was a fierce whisper: “Well you did!”

“I didn't want the bird to go away! I got surprised!”

Then we fell back into silence. Time passed. Maybe hours. Dano woke up moaning and said, “It hurts.” He clawed at the ribbon Amaranth had tied around his arm to stop the poison. It was too dark to see the bite, but I couldn’t feel his arm throbbing as it had. Cautiously, I untied the blue bow. Dano sighed as it slipped off.

“Better?” I asked.

“Yup, my arm was getting numb. It doesn’t hurt so much now.” Dano opened his eyes and screamed. “I can’t see!” He started to thrash around, and it took Amaranth and I both to hold him down.

“It’s only temporary, Giorgio told me!” Amaranth said, trying to calm him. She shook her head at me, a horrified expression on her face. He calmed, or ran out of strength. He slipped into unconsciousness and Amaranth followed shortly thereafter. I stared at the red pool. It was true: this was the breeding swamp, literally. It killed those foolish enough to come inside. Nearby, the blue crane suddenly landed on a log. She stared at me, because I realized such a beautiful creature had to be a girl. I stood up, being careful not to disturb them. I walked into the swamp toward it. It turned to look at me before continuing on. This was my blue angel, and I had to follow her. It was my mother, too. I stumbled into the darkness, following her blue feathers. We didn’t go far, just to the wood line. We came out on another beach, and I looked around in shock. The sand was rust colored, stained by the bloody water lapping at the shore. It was a lake twice the size of the other one we had found, and this one had an island. What was on the island made me fall to my knees in shock. It was a church. What Dano called it? *The Weeping Church*. That

much was unmistakable in the moonlight, for I could see the large cross emerging from the steeple. Beside the church was what appeared to be a fountain. A fountain of blood running into the lake, and I stood on a shore of blood. This was the life of Christ, but it was not for me, but Dano. I scooped up a handful of the sacred bloody water and hurried back to him, careful not to trip in the darkness. I knew that my power of purpose would protect me.

I got down on my knees, and nudged Dano awake

“I found some clean water, drink it,” I said, bringing the blood to his lips, thankful that he could not see. He drank the blood of The Christ eagerly.

His skin had taken on a grey tinge. But he drank deep. When he was finished, he leaned back on my legs and sighed.

“What happened to your hands?” Amaranth had come awake without me noticing.  
“They’re bleeding!”

“It’s the water,” I said, indicating the red pond. “I rinsed off my hands.”

Amaranth got up and walked over to me, with her hands on her hips “Then why is there blood all over Dano’s chin?”

“I got him a drink from the pond.” This would not go well for me.

“You did what?” Amaranth wasn’t quite shouting, but it was enough to rouse Dano.

“What’s going on?” he said

“Nothing,” Amaranth said.

He opened his eyes and looked around. “Hey you were right, I can see again.”

I hurriedly wiped my hands on the back of my shirt.

“How long have we been sitting here?” he asked.

“The moon was over there, and then it passed over us,” Amaranth said, pointing with her finger along the path the moon had taken. “It’s been at least a couple hours.”

Dano smiled. “Shit.”

“You’re not supposed to say that,” I said.

“Shit,” Dano repeated.

“Don’t say it.” *Don’t make God angry, now that he’s saved you*, I thought.

Dano grinned and said, “You’ve been sitting here for hours? Kids.” Like his extra year made that much of a difference.

“Alexei said it was better to stay in one place so they could find us, and he’s right.”

“You bet,” Dano said, nodding away.

I looked up at the trees and the sky and said, “I want to go home,” as though God would magically transport me there, since I had repented.

“Yeah.”

“Me too,” Amaranth said.

The moon traveled almost the whole way across the sky, and every inch of my skin was covered in bug bites of some kind. It was almost like a miracle how Dano had recovered. Maybe he hadn't been bitten too deeply. Maybe the blood had brought him back. It would be dawn soon. I was so thirsty and hungry. I considered the Bloody Shore a short distance away. But it wasn't for me, only those who truly needed it.

Orange and yellow lights appeared in the distance. They seemed to float along the surface of the swamp far from us. Then we heard the voices calling out our names. I stumbled to my feet and called back. So did Amaranth and Dano, who got shakily to his feet. The lights drifted towards us, though progress was slow in the dead of the night. I could hear Fyodor's voice amongst the throng of men's voices that called out to us.

"Father!" I called, cupping my blood-stained hands around my mouth to make it louder. I saw the shining of a hooded lantern cut through the swamp and shine on us. I squinted into the light and it dropped down to our feet. We were saved. When Fyodor got to me, I ran into his arms, nearly knocking the lantern from his hand.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, holding me out at arm's length and looking me over with the light of the lantern.

"I'm okay." My voice sounded like a squeak.

"I told you never to go in the swamp." He scooped me back up into his arms.

"Dano got bit by an adder," I whispered into his ear. I felt his hands stiffen around me.

Fyodor's expression was grim as he sat me down and conferred with the other men over Dano's arm. Dano insisted that he felt fine. Meanwhile, Giorgio was asking Amaranth why in the world she wore a dress into the swamp. Her legs were covered with mosquito bites. I tried not to smile.

One of the men spoke up. "Someone his age should be near death with an adder bite."

"Maybe it was some other kind of snake, or it didn't hit a vein, and the poison sat in his arm," one of the other men said, an Altai by the looks of his jet-black hair.

"The bite could have been shallow, but there's nothing we can do about it out here. Let's get the kids home as fast as we can." Fyodor kneeled down with his back to me, and tapped his shoulders. I put my arms around his neck and he carried me piggyback, all the way home.

*Fyodor will punish me when we get home*, I thought. I could see blue light creeping up the horizon as we entered the house. They loaded Dano into a cart and took him away to the doctor. I wouldn't know if he would live until tomorrow. Fyodor insisted on a bath before I went to bed, and Mrs. Tuvila, my nanny, rubbed calamine lotion all over the bug bites. *Fyodor will punish me before I go to bed*. He didn't. Instead, he hugged me good night and blew out the lamp in my room. He quietly shut the door behind him as he left. I wanted him to stay, but I didn't say anything. It was just me acting like a baby again.

Morning light was filtering in through my window. I crawled out of bed and tiptoed over to the curtains. Behind them, orange light grew from the horizon like the flame of a candle. I opened my window and sat on the ledge in my nightshirt and wondered to myself, *If I jump, will*

*I die?* Of course I would. That's what happens to people. They die. I looked at my arms and counted over thirty mosquito bites. Any one of them could kill me, just like they had killed Mother. As I watched the sunrise, and the candle turn into a bonfire, I stared at my hand, the one I had held Dano's arm with. There were still flecks of blood beneath my fingernails.

\*\*\*\*

Ilya put the diary down and considered what had been written. Was this story meant to be true or symbolic? He couldn't decide. Amaranth seemed to treat it as fact, but admitted in the diary entry that she hadn't actually seen the island. He flipped ahead a few pages to see if there were any other mentions of Alexei and the church and discovered that when Alexei was seventeen, Fyodor had Dano committed for some un-named transgression he had done against Alexei. Amaranth felt that it was her fault, and that she wished she had never told Fyodor, because it had become quite clear that she had been in love with Alexei. A hand came down on his shoulder and Ilya jumped a bit and nearly screamed.

"You don't appear to be working very hard for my family, do you?" the Young Lord, Aleksander Neimasaurus said, from where he stood, just behind him.

Ilya shot up out of the chair and saw that the Asian boy, Shoji, was here as well, along with a third boy with a swarthy complexion and dark hair. Ilya's hair stood on end when he saw that they were all carrying heavy cricket bats, and he was trapped in the corner of this room.

"I... just stopped for a minute."



Aleksander smiled at him. “You’re a liar. But that’s okay, you can make it up to me by playing a game. What do you say?”

“I don’t know how to play cricket.”

Aleksander laughed, Shoji looked bored, and swarthy boy leaned on his bat.

“We’re not playing cricket.” Aleksander hefted his bat in his hands. “Here is the game: each time one of us asks you a question, you have to answer correctly or remove an article of clothing.” Aleksander smiled in that empty way Ilya was coming to fear.

“I don’t want to play, I have to get back to work. Tabitha’s going to come get me for lunch and she’ll be mad if I haven’t gotten this room dusted.” The words spilled out of him in a rush, and his hands clutched at his sides. He’d backed up all the way into the corner now.

“Fine. We’ll play a different game. In this one we don’t ask you questions, we just beat the hell out of you.” Aleksander smiled coldly at him as he swung the bat.

## CHAPTER 4: THE THING IN THE WALL

Ilya told Tabitha and Demetri that he'd fallen down the stairs while trying to juggle too many bottles and sundry items of cleaning supplies. They believed him because it was perfectly plausible that he would do such a thing. He'd taken the diary before leaving, in case he wasn't allowed back in the attic. He had a black eye, maybe a broken nose, but probably not, and his right arm ached continually. Ironically, they were all wounds he could have gotten from falling down a flight of stairs. After Cook examined his wrist, he said it might be sprained. Ilya was off the work schedule for the rest of the day. Instead, he went back to the cottage. The only thing left to wonder about was just how many places his arm was broken in, and how bad the internal bleeding was.

A pair of yellow eyes met him from the wood line. Ilya waved to his cat before going inside to look for food, his anger evaporating at the sight of Arsenic. It took flight like a vulture, interrupted from a tasty bit of road kill by a speeding car. But it would be back for its pound of flesh. After much rooting around he found some old canned smelt in beer. Did cats get drunk? He wasn't sure so he took the four smelt out of the can and washed them thoroughly beneath the tap. Their little black dot eyes stared balefully up at him. Neither he nor his anger wanted any of this particular pound of flesh.

"You're already dead, it won't hurt to be eaten," he said. Ilya gave thought to becoming a vegetarian but decided that was silly. What would he eat in his dumplings or his soup, if they

weren't full of lamb, fish, and pork? He laid the smelt out on a saucer with a faded blue ribbon pattern, before stepping out on to the back porch, which Ilya was fairly certain Demetri only set foot on to pile junk upon. Most of it was covered in tarps. After much rooting around mildewed brown flaps, Ilya found a wooden rocking chair. He dragged it to the steps leading down into the backyard before laying the smelt down in the grass. Then he sat down to wait, glad of the shade afforded him by the ancient wooden awning, parts of which were covered in black mold, which probably wouldn't be good for his allergies. He stood a good chance of becoming asthmatic because of all the fungus here, not to mention various fumes from the swamp, and the possible lake of blood.

Ilya had a weak desire to see it in person, but given what Amaranth and the boys had went through to get there, he decided that discretion was the better part of valor. Which meant that yes, he was afraid. He started to get tired, he guessed it was around 4 o'clock, maybe five, which meant Demetri would be home in a little more than an hour.

He tried to doze in the chair, but he kept opening his eyes to check on the smelts and make sure ants weren't getting on them. In Petrograd he could have never left food out this long. If some cat didn't get to the smelts, it would be a stray dog, or even some homeless person. It took about ten minutes, but eventually a black shape slinked from the woods through the grass, almost like a snake, keeping low to the ground. For a moment, Ilya thought it might be one of those horrible minks. But he could see two Arsenic yellow eyes staring intently at the smelt and occasionally swinging back and forth to keep an eye on her flank. An upward flick of the eyes

rested upon Ilya every once in a while, just to make sure he wasn't doing anything threatening. After the herring last night, surely Arsenic realized she could trust Ilya? She sniffed at the food a bit before batting it around, until the smelt was in chunks that she gobbled up whole, but yet still in a very dainty cat-like fashion. She cleaned her plate. Once, a loud crack sounded from the forest and Arsenic was suddenly several feet away from the food, head pointing into the forest. Ilya tilted his head, looking at Arsenic's backside before speaking in a whisper:

“Oh. Sorry, boy, I thought you were a girl.” At his voice, Arsenic whirled on him, but didn't bare his teeth, which Ilya took as a good sign. Once the smelt were gone, he picked a spot about twenty feet from Ilya, in the shade where his black fur gave him natural camouflage. He curled up into a ball, his eyes bright and alert, keeping an eye on Ilya and the swamp. Ilya decided it would be a mistake to approach him this soon. Maybe in a few days. He didn't want to scare Arsenic off. Ilya dozed until he heard the sound of Demetri arriving through the front door, Arsenic's head swiveled in the direction of the sound. Ilya got up just as Demetri came through the back door. Arsenic was up, with a wary eye on him.

*There he is, Ilya signed, pointing. There's my cat.*

*It's still alive then, Demetri signed, a bit reluctantly. What's this about an accident?*

*It's nothing, I just tripped, happens all the time with me. But we need to get some cat food so that Arsenic has a proper diet.* He wasn't certain of the nutritional value of smelts pickled in beer but it seemed dubious to him.

*If it's nothing, then why are you signing with one hand? Let me see.* Demetri drew him into the house and examined his face. He touched his wrist and Ilya made the sign for pain repeatedly, until Demetri let it go. *We will visit the doctor, before you get the cat food. Why don't we have dinner in town too? That would make a change from our normal routine, wouldn't it?*

The storm clouds suddenly parted for Ilya; he would not have to look for coffee spoons in town in order to measure out his life.

*Do they have Tatar restaurants in town? I like those, and Uzbek kabob houses, lagman stands, how about Armenian or Georgian food?*

Demetri made the sign for laughter. *This isn't Petrograd, Ilya. There are three restaurants in town. All serve Russian food: one in the hotel, one cafeteria in the government building, and one dumpling house. There is also an Altai restaurant, but that's about two hours away. They'd be closed before we got there.*

He was displeased at the lessening of his culinary palate. *Isn't Barnaul close? That's a big city, isn't it?*

*Three hour drive. It's quicker to take the train, but that's still two hours, Ilya.*

In that case, *Dumpling house. What do Altai eat?*

*Same things we eat, only with different spices.*

*You haven't been there, have you? Ilya asked.*

Demetri almost smiled, but not quite. It was the sort of expression the bored kid in the back of the class made, because he thought he was cool. *No, Tabitha told me about it. Her boyfriend is Altai.*

*What do they look like?*

*You probably saw plenty of them on the train and in town. They look much like Tatars, dark-haired, Asiatic features, and a more tanned complexion. A little shorter than us, but some are quite big. Typical Turkic stock.*

He was slightly crestfallen. *Oh. That does sound like a Tatar.* He'd seen plenty of them in Petrograd.

*Enough talk, let's go so we can be in town and back before nightfall.*

*Let's eat first, I skipped lunch, Ilya said.*

The dumpling house was like the restaurants Ilya had seen in old movies, almost an ethnic cliché with a mixed clientele of Russian and Altai origin. Demetri ordered them large steins of beer which, he signed, was the only way to eat plenty of *pelmeni*. They had several fillings here: potato and onion, mushroom and onion, Lamb and onion, and sour cherry. Did they forget to add onion to the cherry ones? Ilya sampled them all, dunking liberally in sour cream, and politely sipping on his beer and trying not to gag when he did so. He really should say something or he'd be stuck drinking it every time they came here. Demetri ordered them thirty

*pelmeni* to start with, and then kept ordering another batch of ten, or rather he indicated to Ilya to order another ten, who sometimes had trouble getting the waitress's attention. It was strange: in town Demetri deferred to him, even relied upon him. It was only because Demetri couldn't hear, but it reminded Ilya of the past. It was like being out with his parents when they'd relied on his ears and words. It made him uncomfortable to eat in silence.

*Where is the doctor?* he asked.

*There are several in town, including a clinic. But only one of the doctors knows sign language. We'll go to him,* Demetri signed. *His name is Zdansky. His office is a few blocks from here. The grocer is a few minutes away from his office—*

"How is everything?" the dark-haired heavy-set waitress asked, as she stopped by their table.

"Fine," Ilya replied, with a wan smile.

"Will you be wanting anymore?" She leaned over the table at him, ignoring Demetri, who was looking down at his plate.

*Do you want anything else?* Ilya signed.

*More beer for me, and if you want some, and another batch of lamb dumplings, and then the check.*

Ilya relayed the command, resisting the urge to sign, *But you're driving. Should you really have a second stein? They do appear to be half gallon sized.*

The waitress glanced from Ilya to Demetri. “He doesn’t speak, huh? Does he work up at the estate, what’s it called, Blood Manor?”

“Do you mean Neimasaurus?” Ilya asked.

“That’s the one.” The waitress knocked on the table. “We call it Blood Manor, and the House of Screams down here. I knew your father had to be from there, they always employ the deaf.”

He resisted the urge to jam his fork into her hand. Demetri was not dumb, he just couldn’t hear. “I’m new here. If you don’t mind me asking, I would like to know why it’s called that.” Ilya did his best to look like a lost puppy without overdoing it of course.

“Because of all the shriveled up blood-less corpses,” the waitress said with a little laugh. “And because visitors say you can hear something screaming between the walls.” She patted Ilya’s hand. “But all of that happened a long time ago. Must have been sixty or seventy years ago now.”

“Does it have anything to do with the Bleeding Swamp?”

The waitress looked at him quizzically. “Do you mean Gdanski marshland? It’s over there by the estate.”

“That could be it I guess.”



The waitress slammed her hand down on the table again. “Wait, my grandmother called it that when I was a girl. She told me a story about Alexei Neimasaurus disappearing into the Bleeding Swamp with another boy, Danov or dani...”

“Dano?” Ilya asked.

“That’s the one. Anyway, they disappeared into the swamp and were never seen again. After that Amaranth, the lady of the house, forbade anyone to go into it. She hired this strange Italian family, I think their name was Calvarri? Cavilerri? I don’t know, some complicated Italian name, to guard the Gdanski swamp. They might still be around. Every once in a while they scare off some hunters, encroaching on the swamp.”

*What are you talking about?* Demetri signed, looking up from his food.

*Local legends. Have you heard about some Italians in the swamp?*

*Calviarri. Don’t go anywhere near the swamp.*

My uncle Demetri says it’s the Calviarri family and they are still around,” Ilya said to the waitress.

“Oh, he’s your uncle. I thought he was your father,” the waitress said with a slight blush.

“No, both my parents died about a month ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” The waitress nervously picked up a few of the dirty plates.

“I used to carry them around in an urn with me. Demetri said that was weird, so now I keep it by my bed.”

The waitress picked up Demetri's empty cup, "You should keep listening to your uncle."

The waitress turned to go.

"Hey wait, Demetri wants more beer and another ten lamb dumplings."

The waitress nodded and retreated into the kitchens.

\*\*\*\*

The doctor's office building was as grey and lifeless as most of the town Ilya was discovering, with the dumpling house being a notable exception. Zdansky had a cadaverous quality to him, a certain zombie-like pallor that the sterile white light his office was bathed in couldn't hide. His assistant, one Helina Ustvol'skaya, had the eyes of a serpent set in the face of an even more cadaverous countenance. The worst trait of Zdansky, however, was that he was a smoker. To Ilya, this seemed especially bad since as a doctor, he knew just how dangerous it was and how second-hand smoke could very likely kill Ilya, with his possible asthma. As soon he'd set foot in the office, the collar of Ilya's shirt had crept up above his nose. Demetri promptly yanked it back down.

*Stop being a child*, he signed. Demetri had been short with him since the Dumpling House. Ilya should have known better, and signed to Demetri everything the waitress said. He knew from his parents, the deaf hated not knowing what was going on. Maybe Ilya had been forced to drink that terrible beer as compensation, and undoubtedly would be forced to on all future trips as well. So Ilya made do with holding his breath as long as possible and taking quick gulps of air when the doctor's back was turned. Zdansky pronounced his nose not broken, and

the bones of his wrist bruised, not broken. Like hell it was just bruises. He knew a break when it happened, even if he'd never broken anything yet. When Helina and Demetri left the room to do some paperwork, Doctor Zdansky leaned down in front of him to fit the brace on his arm. The cigarette dangled from his mouth like a tubular tumor, belching little puffs of yellow smoke.

“How did you come by these wounds?”

“I fell down some stairs.”

“Don't give me that little song and dance you gave your uncle. You've been the recipient of blunt force trauma to the head, and you attempted to shield yourself with your arms. I'm a doctor, not a fool.” Miraculously, the cigarette stayed in Zdansky's mouth the entire time he spoke. He took his cigarette and extinguished it in a nearby ashtray. “Did your uncle beat you?”

“I lost at cricket.”

“The insect?”

“No, the English game.”

Zdansky was incredulous. “He beat you because you lost at cricket?”

“No, not him. The people I was playing the game with did it.”

“Oh, I didn't realize the loser was beaten in that game. I'll make a point of continuing to never play it.”

“You're only beaten when your class is lower than everyone else playing the game,” Ilya said, looking down at the brace on his right wrist.

“I see. Maybe you shouldn’t play games with these people.”

“But what if they catch you alone in the attic and beat you with cricket bats. How do you get out of doing that?”

“That’s a hard question to answer. I’m afraid I can’t help you. Since you apparently aren’t foolish enough to go seeking trouble with them. I will say this, learn their schedule if you have not, then avoidance will become easier, but do not get complacent.” Zdansky got slowly to his feet, his joints popping loudly, and tapped out another cigarette from the pack in his pocket. “I suppose his name begins with the letter a?”

“Oh, you’ve met him?”

Zdansky laughed. “Yes. Don’t look weak in front of him. Show him you’ve got a spine. But avoid him if you can.”

Ilya nodded. Flee if possible, but then be brave when cornered. “Can you check to see if I have asthma? I think I might be developing it spending all that time in the attic,” Ilya said.

“Do you have difficulty breathing?”

“Not really, but I feel like I might in the future.”

“Do you cough frequently for no reason?”

“Not yet. But after a few more weeks at Neimasaurus, I probably will”

Zdansky was beginning to smile. “You don’t have asthma.”

Ilya was not deterred by the doctor's logic. He just didn't properly understand Ilya's situation. "What about allergies? Sometimes I get a stopped up nose and sneeze a lot."

"When you're in the attic?"

"Exactly!"

The doctor's smile widened. "Is there a lot of dust in there?"

"I guess."

"That's normal. You don't have allergies."

"What about—"

"Nor do you have cancers, tumors, heart conditions, or any other condition. You're perfectly fine. Live with that knowledge in contentment or suffer."

Ilya had made his choice. He chose suffering. Zdansky took his head and turned it into the light.

"Though I do see that you've got ceritikonus in both eyes. Why aren't you wearing glasses? You have trouble seeing at long distances don't you?"

Ilya got up from the chair he'd been sitting in. "I don't want glasses."

"Probably for the best, they would've been broken when the cricket team bashed your face in. Seriously, if you change your mind just give me a call. One hundred and fifty rouble

charge. You will see the world for what it really is for the very first time.” The doctor was smiling at him again, knowing that Ilya would never get glasses.

They arrived home around eight o’clock at night with a five pound bag of kibble, which cost Ilya five roubles. Demetri bought two other boxes of groceries. After putting them away, they played a few games of cards before going to bed around ten. After lying in bed for a few minutes, Ilya sprang got up. Quickly, he went into the kitchen and filled a small bowl with kibble, before heading out to the backyard with the hooded lantern from his previous night time jaunts.

“Arsenic...” Ilya called for the cat, but he felt foolish shouting his name, so it came out as sort of a loud whisper, which didn’t attract the cat’s attention. Needless to say, the cat didn’t respond. Ilya walked around a bit, but didn’t find any trace of him. When he walked around to the outside of his window, he saw little cuts in the wood. They were no more than scratches. They went from the floor, all the way up to his window. There was only one track of them, so it couldn’t have been Arsenic at his window. He couldn’t think of anything that would leave marks like that. Slightly perturbed, he went back inside and went to bed, listening for anymore tell-tale scratching until he drifted off to sleep.

## CHAPTER 5: TALON, FANG, AND FLAME

The night was silent, despite the teeming life of the swamplands around the estate. The question was still being asked, even if the Boy had not noticed it since the day he had arrived here. Then, he had come too close to the source, close enough for his mind to have been burned. Even now, the shadows stretched and grew in the night, thinning out like kneaded dough, reaching to encompass the land, searching, asking the question that Ilya could not understand. The night was silent, because animals sensed the wrongness stretching through the air. Carried on a tendril of dreams, Ilya ceased to be alone in his slumber, despite the watchful presence outside his window.

Ilya's dream, a pleasant concoction of teenage love fairly innocent for someone his age, and directed at a certain maid, came to an end. It was as though he were suspended in mid-air, as though he were a bird. Ilya looked down on the sight Alexei had described to Amaranth. The Weeping Church stood on a small island in a lake of blood. It arose, monolith-like from the center of the island, a door-less tower of stone a hundred feet high, the walls covered in mold and vines of centuries of neglect but still strong enough to stand. The black branches of trees, almost spider web-like in their intricacies, spread across the small island, strangling other plant life with the exception of almost thirty feet of paved stone around the tower, where the foliage could not grow.

In the area to the south was a fountain, dry and decrepit. The statue of a youth, naked and tied to a pillar, adorned the center. His head had long since been knocked off to sit in the empty bottom, both of his arms forced away from his side by metal manacles, with metal studs driven into the wrists. Small holes were there, perhaps to allow for the flow of water or blood that had once filled the fountain long ago. Around the edge of the fountain, several fauns danced with their pipes at their lips, set in stone. At the front of the fountain was a small plaque with writing in Latin, which Ilya could not read. It didn't matter, because somehow, in this dream, he could understand it. *Drink from the Fountain and your pain will know no boundaries. In this terrible place, fear dwells forever.*

From Ilya's aerial view, as he approached the top of the tower were several large windows of stained glass. Whatever they had depicted was long since grown over by black mold and bits of dirt and other things that had accumulated from never being cleaned. Within them, faint flickering light could be seen. Ilya continued his circuit around the tower, looking down on the black and gray island surrounded in red. What sort of bird should he be? he thought, as he became more aware that he was no longer within reality. Ilya pictured himself as more of a blue jay than a hawk or eagle, which he supposed was a little embarrassing for a boy. He liked the bright red of cardinals, too. His curiosity was more in line with a blue jay, so that was what he became. He heard the voice on his second pass around the tower. It was almost inaudible. Ilya flew in closer to the Church, circling around the stained glass windows, his blue wings little more than a foot away.



“Help me,” came the pitiful voice of a boy, really still a child, desperate and afraid.

Ilya tried to call out to him, but a blue jay couldn't speak. He landed on the window sill and pecked at the glass with his beak. The glass didn't budge. He heard movement, the shifting of metal, and a painful cry.

“I can't get out.” The voice was plaintive and desperate. Ilya attacked the glass furiously with his beak to no avail. He was beginning to understand. Now. Amaranth had figured it out as well. Within this Church was Emernon. The boy from ancient times still lived, trapped within the holy place. His blood both nourished and poisoned the swamp, and had for thousands of years.

An ugly and harsh cawing sound came from behind him and Ilya slowly turned on the window sill, carefully hopping around. Behind him and upon the branches of dead trees sat dozens of vultures. They were enormously fat and glossy black in color, their long necks the dead-gray shade of human corpses, and their eyes glittered like red rubies in their black skulls. Except the one that shrieked at Ilya for a second time, opening its mouth wide, the curved beak open to reveal the diseased looking insides of the carrion eater. This vulture's eyes were milky white and pupil-less. The thing was blind and it stared right at Ilya. Did vultures eat blue jays?

“I can't get out.” Plaintive and desperate.

Storm clouds had appeared all around in the sky, throwing the tower into shadow. It made the eyes of the vultures glow brighter, the darker the world got.

“We will eat you,” the blind vulture said, in a scratching whisper.

The storm clouds made everything as dark as midnight. Ilya couldn't fly anymore, he didn't seem to have any strength. The sun had been blotted out as though by the black ink of the clouds.

“I can't get out!” the voice within the tower screamed, making Ilya jump on the ledge with its sudden urgency. He became aware that the boy, now that he knew who it was, spoke not in Russian, but some ancient tongue. He understood, somehow.

“We will eat your children.” The scratching hiss was patient. The beak barely moved and its useless eyes didn't waver.

It was night now, and the vultures were only harsh glittering rubies in blackness. Thick, oily fog seemed to be rolling in off the bloody lake, like the smoke of smudge pots.

“I can't get out!” The force of the scream rattled Ilya. The sheer desperation in the voice was palpable to him now, as though Emernon knew something horrible were about to happen and he was trapped, just as surely as Ilya was, because he couldn't fly in these conditions.

“We will eat your children's children.” The whisper was infinitely patient. It raised whole generations of carrion around the tower, waiting for this moment.

Ilya was choking in the oily smoke; it smelled and tasted of burnt flesh and stung his eyes, and snuck down his throat to his little bird lungs, making him cough.

“I can't get out!” The screaming desperation of the voice cut into Ilya like a knife, nearly deafening him.

“While we wait.” Great black wings beat in the oily smoke, as the blind vulture took to the air on glossy wings that the smoke almost seemed to cling to like mucus.

Ilya could see fire in the black smoke. The lake was no longer blood, but fire, eating its way up to the trees, surrounding the stone tower. The rubies in the smoke took flight and began to circle overhead. A symphony of razor-sharp caws tore into Ilya's ears as the vultures began to... Sing?

There were only choked sobs and screams coming from within the tower now, as the flickering illumination within slowly began to fade away.

“The bounty of the tower will feed us forever.” The whisper came from above Ilya's head and he looked up to see the blind vulture sitting on the peak of the cathedral tower, while its offspring circled overhead.

The fires ate the trees and began to die out, belching the malodorous black smoke into the air. Motes of light shone down through the storm clouds as the smoke cleared, revealing a bracken and raised landscape around the tower, with only the cathedral and the fountain untouched.

“Help me,” came the pitiful voice of a boy, desperate and afraid. All the vultures had found purchase on the peak of the tower now, looking down greedily at the ground.

“Once it dies,” the elder vulture said, and a harsh wrenching sound came from the fountain.

Ilya looked down and saw the wrists of the statue of the bound youth begin to drip blood. Eventually, a drop became a stream, and the fountain began to fill with blood. As if by an invisible signal, the vultures descended on the fountain, fighting each other brutally for the opportunity to dip their beaks in the vermillion ambrosia. Ilya looked out and saw that somewhere, a floodgate had been opened and blood was rapidly filling into the island around the tower.

“My children feed again,” the elder vulture said, as he took flight from the peak, stretching out monstrous wings. To Ilya’s horror, the creature landed on the window sill beside him, with such a gust of wind, that his little blue jay legs almost lost purchase. “And you, little one, should not be here.” Was the vulture cooing at him now, as though Ilya were a baby? “Fly away home, little jay.”

“I can't get out.” Plaintive and desperate, the boy's voice began its refrain again and the world faded to black as Ilya awoke, soaked with sweat in his bed.

Ilya knew that there was some sort of cycle going on in the dream, but he didn't know what it was. There were some things he just didn't know. What he did know was that what was in the tower was not evil. Emernon was not evil, he was only a child. No, the evil was all around the tower and in the swamp around it. He couldn't explain, but that was what he felt. The evil existed because the child was trapped in The Weeping Cathedral. What happened around the tower and at the estate was a by-product of the boy's imprisonment. That was what Ilya had decided, because he couldn't believe in inherent evil.

No child was evil enough to be locked in such a place. Therefore, he had to help him. Ilya had to end his suffering. Despite what the vulture had said, Ilya didn't think they were evil either. Yes, they would feed on Ilya, his children, and his children's children, but they were carrion feeders. That was their thing; it wasn't evil, just a bit disgusting. The blind one who had spoken in the dream, had seemed evil at first. Ilya felt ill at ease about that vulture, as though it had been around far too long and grown too intelligent. A sense of wrongness filled Ilya at the thought of it. But at the end, rather than forcing Ilya to relive the cycle again, and then again, Ilya felt the vulture had been the one to break the cycle.

He checked his watch. It was twenty-two minutes past one in the morning. There was time tonight. He could go out in the swamp and get this settled right now. What was it Zdansky had told him? *Show him you've got a spine*. Fine. That's exactly what he would do to the swamp and those birds. He would go out there tonight and rescue Emernon. Decisive action was best, especially when no one else was up to stop him. And he hadn't had time to think it through properly.

\*\*\*\*

The fetid, rust-colored water of the Bleeding Swamp teemed with life and the eyes of animals that glowed as Ilya's electric torch passed over them. The little boat he'd borrowed from the boathouse, the only one that didn't have holes in it, had a small outboard motor that he was afraid to start in the dead of night, until he'd rowed a safe distance away with the little oar he'd found in the boat when he'd dragged it into the

water. He was constantly concerned and worried, which was pretty normal, that the rotten creaking boards would break beneath his feet and plunge him into the sludge-like water below where poisonous snakes would be waiting to bite him, and his foot would no doubt get stuck in an old bear trap that the Calviarri family had left to keep trespassers out, which would cause him to drown before the poison got to him anyway.

He'd stolen a gasoline can out of Demetri's truck, just in case he found a boat with a motor. He'd carefully filled the tank after prying the rusty cap off, and put the lid back on, screwing it tightly, otherwise it would come loose when he was in the swamp and spill all over, and then a small spark would ignite it and Ilya in a blazing inferno of incompetence. He'd brought the can just in case he got lost and needed to refill the motor, which probably wouldn't work anyway. He was ready for the Bleeding Swamp. Sort of. So long as nothing really bad happened. He had the old pistol he'd found in the drawer of the desk in the attic, too. It probably wouldn't work, but he'd cleaned it the best he could after getting Demetri to show him how to clean a gun last night. Demetri only had a rifle, but Ilya assumed and hoped that the principle remained the same for an antique revolver. It was still a barrel and firing chamber, only in miniature, therefore, everything would be fine.

Ilya reflected for a moment that this was probably the bravest thing he'd ever done; to venture alone, at night, into a location called the Bleeding Swamp, guarded by a nefarious Italian family of backwoods Cannibals, to find a cathedral with no doors, on an island surrounded by a lapping shore of blood. But the dream had changed everything for

him. It wasn't dusty words in an old diary anymore. Despite what had happened to Alexei and his friends when they'd reached the shore, he knew now, someone was trapped inside. They couldn't get out because there were no doors, and within was a child being perpetually tortured.

No one would believe him or help him, so he had to go by himself to save the boy. Did that make him a hero? Or a fool? If being so terrified you couldn't even shine your flashlight straight, leaping and whirling around every time you heard a noise and causing the boat to tip precariously, but not turning back, made you a hero, then Ilya supposed that he was. A cowardly hero. Maybe. At least he was trying. The knapsack he'd brought with him, next to the gasoline can, had some sandwiches, two thermoses of water, and a first aid kit that he'd stolen from the kitchen of the main house, from where Cook kept it. He also had some rope, matches, a change of clothes, some wellington boots in case he had to wade around in the water, and a bottle of rubbing alcohol to disinfect any part of his body that got in the water or was otherwise rendered dirty by the swamp. He had a citronella candle which he hoped would keep the insects away to prevent him from getting encephalitis or hydrocephalus from mosquito bites. He wasn't sure what he'd do about ticks and Lyme disease. He would just have to hope the rubbing alcohol could disinfect the area before the disease spread to his nervous system and he died a horrible and protracted death.

He continued to slowly paddle his boat into the slough-like lake. He'd had to turn his light off when he'd pushed out of the boathouse. Across the lake were the marshlands

where little streams fed into the lake. To the south was the stream that emptied water into the main river. He didn't want to go there. That was the exit out of the swamp. It was to the north and west that he wanted to journey. Whether it was fortuitous or not was debatable, but there was a full moon tonight, which made Ilya in his little boat painfully obvious on the lake to anyone looking out of a window of the house. Since it was a little past two a.m., it seemed unlikely that anyone else would be about. Ilya spared a moment to hope that everyone was in bed. It would probably take him a good ten minutes to clear the lake. It should be safe once he was in a little stream in the swamp, to give the engine a try. He just hoped it wasn't loud enough to attract the Calviarri.

It took him nearly twenty minutes to carefully paddle his little boat steadily to the northwest, the peeling white paint on the sides and loose boards on the edge reminding Ilya of a leper victim losing his skin and bones. It was to the north that Alexei had headed from the house with his friends, cutting through to the west. Ilya hoped he could take a more direct route on the water than Alexei could have taken on foot. Besides, when he got to the bloody shore, he would need a boat unless he planned to swim in the red waters that surrounded the Weeping Church. He did not plan to swim. He was not even open to the idea of considering it.

His arms ached from the paddling. He really wasn't used to this kind of exertion at all. He'd always been an indoors kind of guy. He was more at home with a book than a tool. The closest he'd come to using his arm muscles like this had been when he'd been forced to clean the floor in the Oriental Hall. He hadn't worked very hard. Stuck in the



middle of a brackish lake, he had no choice but to continue paddling. There were several moments in the journey when he was certain he'd seen something large moving in the water. He told himself that wasn't possible, nor was it likely that whatever it was seemed to be following him. Had he seen two yellow eyes above the surface of the water, seemingly floating toward him in the moonlight? Did the brackish water hide the large jaws and tail of an alligator or crocodile? It was impossible; they didn't live in this part of the country, did they? Ilya told himself that it was further south, deeper into southern Siberia where they lived. Their cold blood froze this far north. But it was summer and quite warm now...

As he reached the other side of the lake, he took stock of his options. Illuminated in the moonlight were four possible waterways through the mangrove trees that were big enough for his boat to make it down. He needed to find deep water. Deep and red water. It was hard to plot a course on water. When he had experienced the dream, he'd seemed to circle the lake of blood, like a bird, high in the sky seeing the crimson waters surrounding the Cathedral. He had no big picture to draw upon.

He switched his electric torch on and shined it at each of the four small streams feeding into the mangroves that separated the lake from the swamp. He thought that perhaps the rusty tinge to the middling path almost directly north-west, was a bit more pronounced, and assuming that the blood would slowly flow out of the lake and through the swamp, diluting as it went, then the redder the water got, the closer he was getting to his destination. Ilya took the bloody path. He rowed his little boat toward the stream and

into black-spidery trees and half dead overhanging foliage that plunged him into darkness where the moonlight didn't penetrate. He risked switching his light on in the blackness.

He should be safe from the prying eyes of the estate in here. He put his oar down inside the boat. He got the lantern from where he'd set it and opened the hood. He got his matches out and struck a flame. The light was painfully bright, blinding him for a few seconds before he could light the wick and replace the hood. He put it carefully on the hooked pole on the front of the boat. Its light stretched out maybe a dozen feet or so from the boat. Hopefully, it would be enough for him to navigate by and not blind him. He couldn't use the electric torch all night, the battery would run down. He did close the shutters on the back of the lantern so it wouldn't shine in his eyes.

With a fair amount of trepidation, he gripped the motor in one hand, and the little silver ring attached to the starter wire, and yanked as hard as he thought he could get away with and not cause damage. Nothing happened. He pulled again. Nothing. Everything was fine, he'd expected this. He pulled again. Nothing. It was going to work. The engine seemed sturdier than he'd thought, so he decided to pull it as hard as could this time. The engine spluttered and he thought it would die, but the thing slowly began to belch out a little put-put rhythm. Ilya aimed the little motor down the stream and let it rip. It put-putted and he slowly drifted down river, perhaps marginally faster than when he had been paddling. Maybe not as fast as even that. But at least his arms didn't hurt with the motor going. Though to be charitable to the desperate sounds coming from the motor,

it was the equivalent to a ninety year old man with lung cancer puffing away on a pipe.

He could go at any minute. At least the motor wasn't that loud.

He made his way deeper into the swamp for almost an hour. Eventually, the dense tree cover gave way to open bogs and fens, with a vast network of little streams and rivers. For the first time since he left, Ilya saw lights in the darkness, flickering lights of flame, like his lanterns. Quickly, he cut the throttle, and reached out for his lantern. The boat tipped precariously at his sudden movement. He took the top off and blew it out.

The only other people who would be out here in the middle of the night were probably up to no good. They could be Calviarri. That seemed too fantastical to be true. The cannibals had to be just a story. Ilya couldn't believe in a family of Italian cannibals living amongst themselves in the Bleeding Swamp for nearly a century. That was what, five generations? Probably six or seven incest generations if the brothers and sisters got started early. Ilya paddled toward the light, the sore muscles in his arms making sure he knew that they were painfully objecting to the task in no uncertain terms.

As he neared the light, he saw that it wasn't swamp cannibals out to get him. Instead, it seemed to be almost a light house in miniature. The little stone tower was on a finger of land that jutted a few feet out of the water. It was about four feet tall and small enough for Ilya to wrap his arms around it. At the top was an open dome from which a flickering flame burned, almost a foot in height. As Ilya's boat neared the strange sight, the smell of rotten eggs became palpable. Wasn't that the signaling smell of sulfur? What about swamp gas, or natural gas? When he was close enough to reach out and touch it, he

could see the edges of the flame burning green and heard a hissing sound. From the blossoming pattern of the flame, Ilya deduced that it must have been fed by natural gas beneath the swamp. Wasn't that dangerous? Couldn't fire ignite the swamp gas or sulfur?

Ilya reached out and touched the rock. It was dry and warm to the touch. The point of the tower eluded Ilya, but it was very convenient to help his navigation. He took some soot from his own lantern and drew an X on the side that faced the canal he'd come in on. At least this way, he wouldn't be lost in the labyrinth that this swamp seemed to be, so long as he could find the burning light in the night. He was hesitant to restart his motor, so near the flame and all the gases. He paddled away from the tower, his arms once again lodging a formal objection at the labor, and then performing under protest.

Where should he go from here? Everything looked the same in the moonlight, and he was afraid to light his lantern until he was far enough away from the tower. A thought suddenly occurred to him. In his dream, the swamp had burned, hadn't it? There had been thick, black, oily smoke. Had it been caused by the gas? He didn't understand how gas could burn a swamp full of so much water, without an enormous amount of gas. Still, wouldn't the tower light ignite it?

Nervously, he lit a match. When the entire swamp didn't explode in a huge flaming inferno and thick black smoke, Ilya let out his breath and re-lit his lantern. He hung it on the pole and then turned to the evil engine, which regarded Ilya with a smug feeling of superiority. It knew that Ilya's arms would give out before he could get it going. Maybe it would start on the first try this time? It was used to running now, so it

should be easier. He grasped the silver ring with his aching arms and yanked. The engine sputtered to life.

Ilya was beginning to have the nagging suspicion that he'd made a terrible mistake in his rescue mission. The swamp was endless. It didn't take long before he saw the light in the distance again. After ten minutes he cruised up to the little tower with the flame on top, but he saw no X drawn in soot anywhere. The finger of land the stone tower sat on was at least a foot lower, as well, only a few inches above the water line. This was a different tower. How many were there? He put another X on the side where he'd come in from. What if these little towers were spread out in a ring around The Weeping Church? When they ignited swamp, the fire would close in on all sides like it had in the dream. Therefore, he should head away from the tree line, and into the center of the swamp. He turned his little boat in that direction and he slowly pattered along, hoping for the best.

The best as it turned out was not in the offing for Ilya. His boat ran aground five minutes later. The channel he'd picked to take him to the center had gotten steadily narrower and shallower. He leaned over the side and looked down into the water. It definitely had a noticeable red tinge to it now, but the blackness still hid whatever the obstruction was. Damn it. What did he do now? The bottom of the boat was stuck. He'd just have to get in the water and push the boat over it, wouldn't he? Ilya laughed at the thought of himself actually getting in the water. He got his oar out and checked how deep the water was. It looked like it was about a foot and a half deep. On either side of him, the banks rose almost two feet into the air and seemed to be made of packed earth. He

could look down it and see that it led away, almost like a little earthen bridge across the swamp, at least as far as he could see with the lantern. He looked down and reached around in the bottom of the boat for his Wellingtons. Maybe he could stand in the water or the earthen bridge and drag the boat across the obstruction?

He found one of the Wellingtons. As he picked it up and brought it toward his face, he heard a hiss, sharp and sudden. Two yellow eyes appeared in the Wellington and Ilya saw the flash of white jaws and fangs as the snake lunged out of the boot at him. With a shriek not altogether unlike a woman, Ilya flung the boot from the boat. He saw it arc out into the water, the black adder half out of the boot, with perhaps a fleeting look of chagrin upon its supine features that quickly slid into betrayal as the creature glared back at Ilya. The boot landed with a plunk, and sunk into the water, taking the snake with it.

Ilya stood perfectly still, his breath ragged, every hair standing on end. *Black adders were poisonous, his mind nervously chattered, though rarely fatal, attacks to the head can be lethal if the venom penetrates to the brain. You remember reading that, don't you?* Ilya was now trapped in a boat, with his boot in the water, guarded by a poisonous, potentially fatal snake. He clutched the oar to his chest. *Adders can deliver up to 15 milliliters of poison per bite, with some species inflicting multiple bite wounds on a single victim if properly provoked.*

“Shut up!” Ilya mumbled to himself, clutching the oar to his chest as the weapon of choice against black adders with vendettas.

*The Russian subspecies of adders are known for their distinctive gray and black patterning and notably aggressive behavior from an otherwise docile species that only lashes out when provoked or cornered. The Russian adder needs no such excuse and goes looking for trouble...*

“Why do I have to read so many books?” Ilya said to himself. He carefully scanned the area to the left and to the right. He craned his head around to look behind him and saw nothing. When he turned around, he saw a shadow on the earthen path. There was a man watching him through long, lank, greasy black hair. He had a machete in his hands and was dressed only in a pair of dirty denim jeans. He was barefoot and bare chested. His eyes were a deep and clear shade of blue.

“I thought I heard a little piglet,” he said, with an unmistakable Italian accent. “What brings a fine little thing like you into the swamp?” His voice was almost smooth and seductive, but it had an unmistakable and brutal danger to it. The man narrowed his eyes at Ilya.

“I'm just cruising around, sir.”

“Aren't you looking for something?”

“I don't know what you're talking about. I'm from the estate, back there.” Ilya pointed back in the direction of Neimasaurus

“Little piglet lies. Little piglet speaks.” The cannibal gave him a rotten toothed smile. “They don't use words there, they use their hands.”

*My name is Ilya*, He signed with exaggerated flourishes. He smiled wanly at the backwoods Italian cannibal that did, in fact, exist.

The man narrowed his eyes at him. “Little Piglet waves its hands around, but I don't know hand speak.”

“My name is Ilya.” He clutched the oar to his chest as the man took note of the action.

“You can call me Giovanni Calviarri.”

“Both your names end in I's.” Ilya couldn't help but make the comment. “That's almost a cliché of Italian.”

Giovanni smiled. He still had most of his teeth. Ilya supposed the keyword there had been *most*. In the flickering light of the lantern, Giovanni had a satanic quality to him. The light illuminated all the scars, bites and tattoos he had across his chest, along with a light dusting of black hairs.

Ilya pushed furiously against the earthen barrier with his oar and felt the boat free itself with a slight lurch.

“Little piglet stays.” Giovanni put his foot down on the end of the boat and leaned down and rested his arm on his knee, the well-used and nicked machete free in the other hand.

“Little piglet wants to go,” he replied, lapsing into the cannibal's lingo. He wasn't a piglet! He shook his slightly, as if to get rid of the bad grammar. Ilya could see that the



man's toenails were yellowing and scraggly. "A little bit of tea tree oil painted on twice a day will remove the fungal infection in your toe nails."

Giovanni ignore Ilya's advice on hygiene. "I'm not unreasonable. How about I just take your arm?"

"F-for what, sir?" Ilya barely choked the words out, again clutching the oar to his chest.

"A man's got to eat, doesn't he?" Giovanni looked down at him carefully. "We get tired of eating snakes, gators, and fish."

"But I'll bleed to death before I can get out of the swamp." It was the logical thing to say, and it seemed to be the only part of Ilya's mind still in working order, the rest paralyzed in fear.

"That's not my problem." Giovanni raised his machete with a smile, the missing teeth and knotty hair making the man look almost inhuman.

A small part of Ilya noticed that Giovanni's remaining teeth were nearly the same shade of yellow as his toe nails. Ilya held onto the oar tightly. Out of the blackness, with a harsh cawing sound, came a large and black vulture. It went right for Giovanni's wrist. Blood splattered everywhere as the bird raked across the soft flesh with its talons. Blood flew against the side of the lantern, which swayed precariously, casting the tableaux in a sanguine light as Ilya pushed away from the earthen barrier. Giovanni lost his balance and toppled into the water. The vulture disappeared into the night.

Frantically, Ilya tried to start the motor, pulling on the silver ring as hard as he could. Giovanni stood up, his wet hair plastered to his chest. He glared at Ilya as blood oozed from his wrist. He waded toward the boat with a roar. He didn't see the black shape of the adder as it came upon him from the right and sunk its teeth into his thigh. He screamed and reached down with one hand and grabbed the snake behind the head. He dragged the snake out of the water with a grimace, and squeezed until blood bubbled out of the Adder's mouth and the eyes popped out like peas from a pod, yellow sacral fluid running down the Calviarri's hand. He laughed, a harsh and high-pitched sound, as he looked back at Ilya. Finally, the engine roared to life and Ilya gunned it away. He turned back and his last image of Giovanni was the man bringing the snake up to his mouth and biting deep into its flesh. Giovanni chewed slowly as the lantern's light slowly faded and obscured him from view.

As Ilya slowly pattered toward the little lighthouse in the distance, he fumbled in his knapsack for the antique pistol. Every minute or so, he would turn and scan the swamp for any sign of danger. As he neared the lighthouse, he thought he saw lights. There were three of them, dancing in the swamp, but unmistakably heading in his direction. Quickly, he reached up and extinguished his lantern. He was certain he could hear boats pursuing him in the darkness, their own lanterns illuminating their way. He reached the lighthouse and took the path the X pointed to and realized his mistake.

They knew he couldn't possibly know his way around the swamp at night, because they lived here and knew he did not. Therefore, Ilya would have to use the towers to

guide himself. There were three boats, so they could go directly to each lighthouse and wait for him to arrive there. Their boats sounded louder than his. They were probably faster than him as well. He'd made it to the first lighthouse before them, but they would make it to the second before he could. Then all they had to do was wait for him. If he hid in the reeds, he would be trapped until morning and it would be a race then, for him to get back to the estate before they spotted him. His boat was too slow for that.

He turned and looked behind him. One of the lights was still following him, but the other two had split up, going to Ilya's right and left. Undoubtedly to other swamp lights. He was trapped by the Calviarri. Backwoods Cannibals? Yes. Stupid? No. They would eat him and probably turn his skin into shoes or a coat. Isn't that what cannibals did? But these were Italian cannibals. They wouldn't be as crude as the ones in American horror movies. Would they prepare him in a nice red wine sauce, or a Marsala? What was the dish called that Italian hunters prepared with wild game? Was it Cacciatore? He'd had chicken cacciatore before at a restaurant in Petrograd. Now, they would make Ilya Cacciatore and probably serve him with good smoked Gouda and some fresh garlic bread. The clothing they made from his skin would be of impeccable workmanship as well. Ilya told his subconscious to shut up and swerved down a side artery of the main channel he was zipping along that would have taken him to the next swamp light.

He couldn't go that way; his only hope was that he'd find his way into the trees and then find his way through that labyrinth to the shallow lake by Neimasaurus and the boathouse. The channel he'd picked grew narrower and narrower as he went along, He

could see the trees in the distance, illuminated by the merciless moon. His little waterway opened up into an area with four branching choices for him to pick from. He wanted to yank his hair out in frustration but was unwilling to slacken his clammy grip on the antique pistol. He cut the throttle and looked at each of the paths for any sort of clue as to where they went.

Ilya let out an undignified shriek as the large black vulture landed on the pole his lantern rested on. The thing glared at Ilya, its milky white eyes glowing in the moonlight.

“You!” Ilya whispered suddenly, recognizing the bird from his dreams. There was a slight whitening on the tips of the feathers that gave the bird a distinct look, rather akin to a human being whose hair had started to go gray in old age. The vulture craned its head down to look at Ilya and cawed harshly in his face. Words could not describe the breath of a carrion feeder so Ilya didn't try, except to say that if he'd had anything in his stomach to vomit up, he would have.

He clutched the pistol to his chest in case the bird got any ideas about eating him. Why was everything in this swamp something that wanted to eat him? The vulture launched itself off the pole and the boat nearly capsized. The thing beat its black wings frantically and almost hit the water, but gained altitude quickly and soared down the path to the right, disappearing from sight. Ilya sighed. Now he had to go down that one, didn't he? He aimed the boat to the left and gunned the engine, which meant that he drifted forward a little faster than if he'd been paddling.

The channel proved to be a little deceptive as it immediately curved to the left until he was heading straight toward the trees. He felt good about this, but since when had vultures been good omens? Weren't they supposed to be evil and try to deliberately sabotage things so that Ilya would die and they could get a good meal? His boat was practically a dinner plate floating in the swamp, wasn't it? Without warning, the reeds gave away and Ilya could see clearly to the trees. There was no sign of the black vulture, but then again, if it had landed somewhere, he would never be able to see a black vulture on a black tree in the middle of the night, full moon or not.

He headed toward the safety that he imagined the trees represented from the Calviarri. He saw numerous places that he could drive his boat into, nearly half a dozen little waterways among the mandrakes. Which one would he take? His ears picked up the sound of another boat heading toward him. He looked around but saw no lights. He drove his little boat into one of the waterways and in between some mandrakes. He cut the engine and lay down low in the boat, so that only part of his head was exposed, just enough for him to look out in the moonlit swamp beyond the trees.

The sound of the boat grew louder. Orange light reflected on the water and through the mangrove trees to his right. The motorboat drifted into view, slowly moving along the perimeter of the trees. There were three men in the boat. One was controlling the motor from the rear, while another sat in the front with a hooded lantern that he was shining into the trees on one side and the reeds on the other. The last man sat behind the light operator and had a rifle in his hands. All three of the men were cut from the same

cloth as Giovanni: long greasy black hair, shirtless and with olive skin tones. Relieved, Ilya noted the fact that the light from the lantern didn't reach far enough into the trees to detect him.

“Mariana was mistaken,” the man with the rifle said.

“She don't make mistakes,” the man with the lantern replied. “If she says he's over here, then he's over here.”

Rifleman didn't seem convinced. Slowly, the boat drifted out of view and the orange light faded away. Ilya sat up, stretched his arms a bit, and rubbed his left leg, which had started to go to sleep. He used the oar to push the boat out from amongst the mandrake roots and floated it back out to the channel. He jumped almost a foot up in the air as a loud and harsh cawing sound came from above his head. He looked up into the blackness and he could have imagined it, but he thought he saw two white eyes in the darkness. Good, maybe this waterway would lead him to the shallow lake. He paddled into the darkness for a minute or two, but it was difficult going because there was no visibility whatsoever, and he was afraid of drawing the attention of the Calviarri.

His progress was pitiful, and every once in a while he was certain he heard the scampering of claws and the beating of wings above his head. The vulture terrified him twice more with its cawing. Eventually, after trapping himself in the mandrake roots twice, Ilya decided he'd had enough. He lit a match and squinted at the brightness as he re-lit his lantern. He glanced up into the trees above his head and saw the vulture, its

wings spread wide, and its gray claws wrapped around a branch. Its long neck bent down to stare at Ilya with unseeing eyes.

Ilya looked away quickly. He had no desire to see that literally hanging above his head again. On reflection, it seemed much worse than an adder, and perhaps even a mink. He reached back and started the motor by yanking on the silver string, and soon he was on his way down the channel. Black trees with their spidery limbs seemed to pass endlessly, and Ilya maneuvered the boat around several fallen trees. The vulture followed. Alighting from branch to branch, it always kept the boat in sight. It was always waiting when Ilya's boat got to a crossroads, and the vulture pointed the way. It took him another half an hour before the trees gave way. He was in the shallow lake. Neimasaurus lay before him like a giant coiled serpent on the far bank. The vulture had disappeared into the blackness of the trees.

“Thanks,” Ilya whispered to his spooky guardian angel that was fond of eating dead things and that he would probably have nightmares about, waking up and seeing it leering at him with its wings spread wide, its claws perched on his headboard, a bit of blood dripping down on him from the intestine dangling from its beaks. Ilya would look down at his stomach and see it chewed open before him, entrails flung about the room.

*I felt a little peckish*, the vulture would say apologetically. Stupid imagination. Though it was a double entendre, wasn't it? Ilya was always proud of himself when he came up with one of those. He used the motor halfway across the lake and then extinguished it along with the lantern and paddled the rest of the way to the boathouse.

By the time he'd unloaded the boat and put everything away and closed his bedroom door, the light of dawn was poking through the window. He took off his shoes and socks first, before struggling out of his shirt. His uncle Demetri opened the door.

*Good morning, he signed to Ilya. Up already?*

*Just getting dressed, Ilya signed back placidly, picking up his dirty socks again.*  
The urge to laugh hysterically almost won out.

*Good, you have to leave in half an hour to make it to the market.*

Damn it all. Ilya had completely forgotten it was time to go with Cook to the market in town, which happened every Sunday, since Ilya had no interest in religious services and neither did Cook. He was going as slave labor to load and unload the truck from the market in town. It was at least an hour ride there. Maybe he could sleep some. Fortunately, his arms weren't sore from the paddling or all the loading and unloading would be a real ordeal. He just needed to say that another hundred times or so to make himself believe it. Still, it was better than being disemboweled by a vulture while he slept.

He really needed to be more charitable to vultures. They couldn't help their nature, and this one had saved his life. Kind of. The least he could do was not imagine it killing him every five minutes. Really, it could have done him in last night, if it had wanted to. It wasn't as though the vulture would get several dozen of his friends and ambush them on some deserted stretch of road. They would eat both Ilya and Cook, after forcing the truck off the road. How could vultures force a fast moving pick-up truck off a road, anyway?



One of them could ram the windshield, and cause Cook to lose control. Or they could drop rocks. Well, it wasn't like these vultures were clever enough to have a plan like that... Ilya reflected on the period of his life before coming to Neimasaurus, when he had enjoyed having an imagination, until Cook came for him twenty minutes later.

## CHAPTER 6: THROUGH SECRET CORRIDORS

It was the day from hell for Ilya. Unlike all the other wonderful days that he'd spent here. It just kept getting better and better! Maybe, if he were lucky, no one would beat or try to eat him today. He crossed his fingers and hoped. He didn't sleep on the truck ride, because the roads were far too bumpy. He stumbled out of the truck when they got to the market, which was all out in the open in the late morning sun, so there was no possibility of him grabbing a few winks of sleep there, either. It took several hours for Cook to pick through ingredients, sampling a bit of apple at one stall and some butter at the next seller, occasionally having Ilya taste some ingredients to see what he thought. Ilya blindly loved everything in the hopes of being able to leave sooner.

When the truck was loaded, they departed the market around one o'clock, with Cook opting to eat lunch on the way back to Neimasaurus. They stopped for lamb kabobs and a skewer of wild mushrooms and onions from an Uzbek seller on the side of the road. They split a babluk between them along with some spiced cider. Ilya fell asleep, or passed out, depending on how you looked at it, as soon as he was done with his kabob. At least while he was unconscious his arms didn't feel like they were on fire. He dreamed that the Uzbek kabob maker sold his little cart on the side of the road and opened a big restaurant in town, so he could go there whenever he wanted to.

After unloading the truck, Ilya was banished back home for looking sickly. According to Cook, he looked like he hadn't slept in days, which was true. He stumbled

back toward Demetri's cottage. Ilya did keep one bleary bloodshot eye open for Arsenic, though. He stumbled around to the back porch, calling out

“Arsenic...Arsenic...” He saw no sign of the cat. “You little bastard, get out here,” he called in a sweet voice, secretly hoping the cat was somewhere else so he wouldn’t have to get him food. He waited for a moment or two and turned to go inside, when a black shape detached itself from the trees and slinked through the yard toward him. Damn it. Why did he show up now when he was so incredibly tired and out of it?

“Hey, boy,” Ilya said, pretending to be happy and waving to the cat. He got a bowl of kibble from the kitchen and stumbled outside with it, spilling a little bit of it on the floor and not really caring. He grabbed a jacket off the hook before he went back outside. He set the bowl of kibble down next to a chair and sat down to rest for a few minutes while Arsenic ate. He wrapped the jacket around him like a blanket and watched as Arsenic devoured the kibble, occasionally looking up at Ilya to make sure that the nearly hairless primate hadn't suddenly become an evil monster intent on feline death. Really, how paranoid were cats?

Without realizing it, he was sound asleep. He awoke later, sometime in the early evening. There was still plenty of light. The bowl of kibble was gone, and Ilya spied yellow eyes in the corner of the porch, where Arsenic was curled up underneath an old bench. The cat watched him for a few moments, and then curled into a ball and went back to sleep. Ilya decided that was a fantastic idea and pulled the jacket up over his head and fell back into unconsciousness.

When he awoke again, it was dark outside. Where was Demetri? Shouldn't he be home by now? Where were the stars tonight? Suddenly, light flooded his vision, as Demetri pulled the jacket off his head. The light came from the porch light, as it was evening. He looked angry as he looked down at Ilya.

*Why is there blood all over the lantern?* Demetri signed, in sharp and sudden movements.

Ilya looked up at Demetri, his brain still not firing on all cylinders. No lie popped into his mind that was plausible. Shit. What should he say? Why the hell did the man seem to instantly find anything that Ilya brought back spattered in blood? Why couldn't he remember to clean them off and save himself all this trouble? *I cut myself*, Ilya signed. Hopefully, he wouldn't ask where. What the hell did Demetri do? Check everything in the house every day to see if he could catch Ilya up to no good?

*Where?* Demetri signed back.

*In....On....It's all better now.* He smiled up at his uncle.

*Where were you that you needed a lantern last night?*

*Out looking for Arsenic.* The lie was smooth and spontaneous, as he looked over at the yellow eyes beneath the bench. Arsenic was warily watching the other primate threaten his food supply.

*Did you need a can of gasoline out of my truck to build a fire to find the cat as well?*

*Yes.* Ilya smiled up at Demetri again, because he had nothing else in his bag of

tricks at the moment. The bag was mostly empty most of the time anyway. *He was cold!*

His mouth quirked as he looked at Ilya. *Where is the gas can now?*

Where had he left it? Was it sitting in the boathouse? *I don't know.*

*Then you'll have to pay for a new one, and a new lantern. The glass cracked on that one. That's at least ten roubles.* Demetri sat down in the chair next to him. *Or you can just tell me what you were doing.*

So, his plan was to hit Ilya in the pocket, was it? Little did Demetri know that Ilya really didn't care about money at all. *I'll pay.*

Demetri looked down at Ilya with a smug little smile. He knew Ilya didn't care about money, but he did know what the lying boy did care about. *Then you won't have money to feed the cat next week. Do you want him to starve?*

Damn him. He'd laid a trap for Ilya. Demetri was a little more observant than Ilya gave him credit for. *I went for a walk in the woods, looking for Arsenic.*

*So you just walked around with a lantern and a can of gasoline, cutting yourself, while calling out for the goddamn cat.* Demetri was getting angry now. *And according to Mikhail—*

*Who?* Ilya signed, looking confused.

*Cook. According to Mikhail the Cook, you looked like you had sleep deprivation all day. He says you passed out on the ride back,* Demetri signed. Demetri was a full participant in reality, unlike Ilya, who could work at an estate with dozens of people for weeks and have only talked to a handful of them, and didn't even know the name of the

man he'd spent all day with.

Ilya hung his head and sighed. *I went to look for the island.*

*You needed the gasoline for the boat?* Demetri was still angry but slightly mollified now, leaning back in his chair. *So you went into the swamp.* He seemed to have signed that to himself.

Yes. Ilya knew it was forbidden to go into the swamp. He supposed he would be punished for it. He wondered how. Demetri didn't have very many tools to punish Ilya, unless he wanted to beat him. Demetri didn't strike Ilya as that kind of guy.

*Did you find it?* Demetri signed.

*No. The Calviarri tried to kill me.*

*Is that their blood on the lantern?*

Yes. *Giovanni cut himself with his machete when he was trying to kill me and got blood on the lantern. I beat him back with the oar and got out of there,* Ilya said. He started getting into his fiction, where he heroically escaped from the cannibal family all on his own, without the aid of creepy vultures and weird dreams to guide him.

*You know you're not supposed to go in the swamp, Ilya,* Demetri signed, holding his hand up to forestall his protests. *You could have been killed. Going into the swamp is a fire-able offense. If the Calviarri report you, then you can't stay with me anymore.*

*I didn't tell them who I was.*

*How many teenage boys who aren't deaf and have orange eyes do you think there are here?* Demetri signed.

Ilya looked away from Demetri. He always forgot about that. It wasn't like he was staring in the mirror all day. He just forgot about them. *One.*

*That's right. Just you. Promise me you won't go back into the swamp.*

*I promise.* It was a painful admission for Ilya, because he knew he was lying to Demetri, and these weren't little niggling lies of omission, this was an outright and deliberate lie where he knew he would do the opposite of what Demetri wanted.

*What was so important about this island in the swamp?*

*It's the center where the blood comes from to stain the water. Shit! He wasn't supposed to tell him that. He was still a bit sleepy.*

*Ilya, I know people call Gdanski the Bleeding Swamp, but it's just red clay deposits that make the water that color.* Demetri smiled at him and punched him in the shoulder. *I suppose you believe in the blood fountain of youth that's supposed to be there too?*

*Fountain?* Ilya's head shot up. How could Demetri know about that? It wasn't in the diary. As far as he knew it had only been in his dream. He couldn't know about it unless...

*That's the story. In the swamp there is an island with a fountain that pumps blood instead of water, and it overflows into the swamp and stains the water red.* Demetri paused, as though he were considering whether he should actually be telling Ilya any of this. *Supposedly, to drink from the fountain will delay death. It also slowly turns you into a monster each time you drink from it until you crave human flesh and blood to stay*

*alive. Stop looking at me like that. It's just a story and you promised not to go into the swamp again, right?*

Yes sir, Ilya signed back. Is that what the thing in the walls was? Someone who had drank from the fountain and lost humanity and become an immortal monster that craved human blood? Cool! They went inside and ate some meat pie that Demetri had gotten from Cook, to help put some color back in his cheeks. It was delicious and rich, the flaky sour cream pastry that the ground beef, potatoes, onions, and hard boiled eggs were wrapped in was almost like a dessert, once Ilya put a dollop of sour cream on it.

Demetri shook his head as Ilya slathered his pie in sour cream.

*I just don't see the appeal of putting that on everything.*

*I don't put it on everything.*

*What don't you put it on?*

*Cook and I stopped for some sashlik from an Uzbek street vendor.*

*I bet you had some of that thick yogurt they serve with it.*

*Well it's not sour cream, is it?*

Demetri made the sign for laughter. They ate their pie in silence, Demetri downing a shot of vodka and some water with his. Ilya had a glass of tea. Ilya's mind was still on the story Demetri had told him. He was fitting it together with what the waitress had said the other day, and what he'd read in Amaranth's diary.

*Demetri, is there a blood-beast at Neimasaurus?*

Demetri hung his head for a moment, putting his fork down on his plate. When he



looked up, he was smiling. *No. I told you, it's only a story. No such bloodless corpses have been found within living memory. There is no proof that any ever were, either. It's just a story. The people that disappeared during the ball were never found. That doesn't mean a blood-beast ate them.* Demetri went back to eating his pie. He poured himself another shot of vodka as well.

Ilya nodded in agreement. He knew something that Demetri didn't, because he had the Diary of Amaranth, the mistress of Neimasaurus during the blood-beast's reign of terror. Her diary hadn't been absolutely clear about things, but there were enough hints for Ilya to put two and two together. Is that what the Young Lord had found and was keeping hidden in one the many secret rooms of the house? Did Ilya know the name of the Young Lord, like Mikhail? He wondered what it was for a moment. Aleksander. Someone had mentioned it in passing. Were the strangers the Young Lord brought back food for the beast? If these facts were true, then the blood-beast was a prisoner of the Young Lord. It also made something else obvious to Ilya: the Young Lord wanted the location of The Weeping Church, because he wanted the immortality the fountain supposedly offered.

It seemed to Ilya that it would be quite bad if he let the Young Lord get what he wanted. He was bad enough without becoming an immortal blood-beast. He had to find the poor fellow and break him out, didn't he? Yuck. How would he stop the creature from feeding on Ilya when he found him? What had Amaranth's diary said? Her beloved Soldier would watch the secret entrances forever? Well where the hell was this Soldier?

He had to find the Soldier and the blood-beast. Then, the creature would lead him to the island, and somehow, he would break the child out of the tower, and put an end to the evil process that created blood-beasts, through the only answer he could think of: take Emernon to the hospital to get his wounds treated by a doctor.

He went to sleep early that night, supposedly to catch up on his beauty sleep, but after his six hour nap, he wasn't all that tired. He intended to prepare his plan of battle for tomorrow. Amaranth had mentioned there were secret entrances throughout the house into some sort of secret space, almost like a second house. She'd had all the entrances sealed, but clearly the Young Lord had found one and gained entrance to at least a part of what Ilya would now call "The Secret wing." Amaranth had mentioned one where the desk was and another somewhere in the west wing, and another near the basement. It seemed logical for Ilya to make his first attempt at getting into the secret wing via the attic, because the Young Lord didn't know about that door, since Ilya had the diary. He probably didn't know about the Soldier, either. Tomorrow, he would get into the attic and try to enter the secret wing.

He would definitely bring the pistol with him, the electric torch, and the lantern. Demetri said the glass had cracked. Ilya didn't want to look at everything through a dried blood haze anyway. Was he supposed to buy a new one? Did he have that kind of money? He wouldn't be expected to buy a new one tomorrow. That wouldn't be until Sunday or Wednesday when Demetri had off. He would bring the diary with him in case of reference. What he really needed was a map of the house. That would make it very easy

to see where the secret wing was, where every passage and every room went throughout the house.

The problem was that Neimasaurus was so massive that it was nearly impossible to discover these areas without deliberately looking for them with the aid of a map because a visual image of the house was too big for Ilya to unfurl in his mind. His spatial sense was simply overloaded by it. Where would he find such a thing? There were workers on the north side, refurbishing the cracked interior walls. Was one of them furnished with a map? Wait, the auxiliary ballroom had been piled with books and papers while the library was renovated. Were the plans for the house somewhere in there? If they were, he really didn't see how he'd find it in that mess. Unless the Archivist could dispel her poisonous green cloud long enough to tell him where it was without him actually letting on that he wanted it from her. That didn't sound too difficult. Impossible, sure. But difficult, no.

With many plans swirling though his head, Ilya went to sleep. He would go straight for the Archivist to see if he could get a map from her by simply asking about any books on the history of the house and family itself. The big difficulty would be in finding his way to the auxiliary ballroom. In the morning, He grabbed a quick breakfast with Demetri before heading up to the house and going into the kitchen. Tabitha and Cook were there, silently arguing over a piece of paper. They signed hello to him and Cook said that Ilya was going to be working with Tabitha from now on, doing work around the house.

*What about the attic?* he signed. *I haven't finished it yet.*

*That was just to make you go away because we didn't think you could do anything else,* Tabitha signed bluntly.

Ilya blushed. *But I like cleaning the attic.*

*I was just telling Tabitha how you didn't complain once yesterday, and it was a lot of work,* the burly man signed.

*I like to finish things,* Ilya signed in what could only be described as a whining manner. He'd simply been too tired to complain yesterday. Damn it. One day of doing what they said and he was a real worker. Soon he would have real responsibilities, and that was the last thing he wanted.

*It could take months to finish,* Tabitha signed, looking chagrined.

*But then it will be done,* Ilya replied, smiling. He hoped the smile conveyed that it was the thrill of accomplishment he was after. Not wanting free reign to do as he pleased, while secretly thrilling at the prospect of literally having months in which he could pretend to clean the attic. He wouldn't need that long to solve the blood-beast riddle.

*You really want to go back up in the attic?* Cook asked.

*Yes, please.* Ilya signed it with his eyes as big as saucers and his best attempt at a lost little boy with a dream: A certain slump of the shoulders, a furtive look up at Cook before looking away. Sadly, they couldn't hear the sound of him scuffing his shoe on the floor.

*Let him do it,* Tabitha signed, the corners of her mouth quirking. She had his

measure but enjoyed the show.

After a moment, Cook shrugged. *Fine. It's your life, if you want to live there in the dust, go ahead.* Cook went back to slicing onions by the sink. Tabitha winked at him. Ilya practically skipped in the direction of the attic, but stopped mid hop.

*Tabitha, do you know where I can get a map of the house?* He made doe eyes at her. *Sometimes I still get lost looking for the attic. Sometimes, I even get lost in the attic.*

*You should quiver your lower lip when you're trying to look pathetic.* She looked him up and down. *But you are the kind of guy to get lost in a closet, aren't you?*

Ilya sniffed. He did not get lost in closets. Had he gotten lost in the house before? Had he gotten lost in the attic? Had he gotten lost in the woods by Demetri's cottage? Had he gotten lost in the Gdanski Marshlands? Maybe she had a point.

*I've never seen one. I would try Mrs. Silkovskaya, the Archivist. She might have something for you. Tell her I sent you. Her office is over in the eastern wing, off the oriental hall. You remember how to get there don't you?*

*Of course,* Ilya signed, and stormed off up the servant's staircase. Once out of sight, he stopped and looked around. He had no idea how to get there. He tapped his foot on the floor. How had they gone the first day he was here? With a groan, he headed back down the stairs. Tabitha was still there, staring at him.

*Well?* she signed, smirking at him.

He hated that look on her face. *I don't know how to get back there.*

*Then follow me.* Tabitha swept out of the room, Ilya trailing along in her smug

wake. They didn't take the servant's stairs, but instead traveled down a small side corridor to a winding staircase and traveled up two levels before turning left and then taking the third right on to another servant's staircase. At that point, Ilya gave up plotting the course in his head. He would never remember all of this anyway, and soon, hopefully, he'd have a map.

After another half dozen turns, the oriental hall came into view in all of its rich, ornate absurdity, and to Ilya, a certain quality of beautiful and seductive evil. He remembered long hours polishing the same spot on the marble floors, that had really only been about fifteen minutes. They passed the auxiliary ballroom, still filled with books, and went down another two doors, past the carved dragon jack in the box that called out like a siren for Ilya to turn the crank and release it.

They came to a nondescript door with a golden button next to the handle. Tabitha pressed several times. Ilya already had his shirt up around his mouth and nose in preparation for the gas attack. Tabitha yanked his shirt down and he gave her a betrayed look.

*I have asthma. It's a serious medical condition.*

Tabitha rolled her eyes. *You already tried that.*

The door opened a moment later and the cadaverous figure of the Archivist arched an eyebrow at the sight of him and turned to Tabitha with a questioning look.

*He needs a map of the house. He keeps getting lost,* Tabitha signed.

*I see,* she signed back, throwing Ilya a slightly disgusted look.

He was struck again by what a thoroughly unpleasant woman the Archivist was. Really, did she have any good qualities? At least she wasn't poisoning the very air he breathed today. She gestured for them to come in and they stepped into an office every bit as messy as the auxiliary ballroom. Books and loose papers were stacked everywhere, and a large mahogany desk with inlaid bronze plating was nearly covered by the weight of it all. The Archivist backed behind the desk to a filing cabinet in the corner and opened the top drawer all the way out. It made a horrible screeching noise, and Ilya covered his ears. Tabitha looked over at him curiously.

*Can't you people oil hinges?*

*Excuse me, "You people?"* Tabitha signed.

*Yeah, you know... Women! Can't women oil hinges? Everyone knows men clean locks, but women need to do their part too!* Ilya signed. *What did you think I meant?* He looked over at her with a look of confused innocence.

Tabitha rolled her eyes. *I guess I know what job to give you, tomorrow. There's at least a thousand locks you can clean.*

Fortunately, the Archivist's back was turned during their silent exchange, as she rifled through a stack of papers and then withdrew a small piece of paper, folded over many times. It was so old the white paper was yellowing with age. She unfolded it and looked it over. She nodded to herself and turned with a small smile on her face.

*This will do,* she signed, passing the map over to Ilya, who took it carefully as he thought the paper might tear. *It's a few decades out of date, but only the north wing has*

*changed since then, and with the workers crawling all over it, you shouldn't be over there anyway.* Ilya smiled at her in thanks. He doubted it was a few decades out of date, more like a century, at least, judging from the fragility of the paper.

A map this old was exactly what Ilya wanted. With any luck, it would show the secret wing entrances before they were sealed up by Amaranth. Though it seemed to Ilya that such maps would have been systematically destroyed by her. Tabitha and Ilya beat feet from the oriental hall. She put a hand on his elbow when they were out of sight from the Archivist's luminous and ancient domain which smelled faintly of the mixture of menthol and camphor.

*Why do you really want this map, Ilya?*

*I get lost.* He held his hand up to his temple. *I can't see well at distance because of my eyes. You don't need to keep harping on it...*

*Don't try that shit on me.* Tabitha rolled her eyes. *You don't care about being lost. You just wander around until you find where you're going. You're looking for something, aren't you?*

Ilya rolled his eyes at her and tried to seem like a cocky and obnoxious teenage boy. *I think you're a little paranoid. Maybe working here is bad for people's health. I'm fairly certain the dust has made my asthma worse. What would I be looking for, anyway?*

Tabitha rolled her eyes again. *I can always go and ask Demetri, can't I?*

Ilya bit his lip. *Yes. I suppose you could. I'm looking for the secret wing.*

*Huh?* Tabitha now looked confused. Apparently that was not the answer she'd



been expecting. Obviously, Ilya was much more complicated than a typical sixteen-year-old boy. She probably thought he was looking for hidden treasure. Clearly, he was marvelously, endearingly complicated with several rather endearing hang-ups.

*You know the network of corridors and rooms between the walls that Amaranth Neimasaurus had sealed almost a century ago? Was that a smirk on his face, or a certain smugness to his features as he signed?*

Tabitha's eye twitched as she looked down at him. *I see. And where did you find out about this fantasy from?*

*Oh I don't know.... Let me see, where was it? Oh yes.* Ilya was definitely smirking now. *It was the personal diary of Amaranth Neimasaurus that I found in the attic when I was working...* He took forever to sign that last word, drawing it out painfully for Tabitha.

She cracked a smile at his exaggerated sense of victory. *If you find it, don't tell anyone, or we'll have to clean it!* she signed back at him.

*You don't tell anyone about it either,* Ilya signed back, now quite serious. *There's a blood-beast in it.*

*I see. Was that in Amaranth's diary too?*

*Not exactly.... It was a logical inference.* He smiled at her and did not say that he hadn't been far off the mark when he told Yaisha there was a vampire in the house.

*Was it? And what does a blood-beast do?*

*Drain people of blood.*

*Like a vampire?*

*No... Not really. Vampires aren't real, they're only in fiction.* He made the sign for laughter, as if to say the question had been silly.

*Not real, like a blood-beast?*

*Exactly!*

Tabitha shook her head, as if to say you sad deluded little fool. *Listen, if you really do find some sort of secret wing, you come and get me before you go in. I need to know where you are if something happens in there.*

*Like a blood-beast?*

*No, like centuries old rotten steps and floorboards. Promise me on your parents.*

That last bit stopped Ilya cold, his hands about to form the sign for “Promise.” If he signed it now, he would have to mean it. What was with people demanding promises from him? Where had all the trust gone? What had he done to make everyone believe he was untrustworthy?

*Well? A promise or I'm sending you back to the mink farm, and I know you're terrified of them.*

Damn her. Minks were evil. She knew it too, and she was willing to taunt him with them. How had she found out all this stuff about him? The stench of mink urine was still all too familiar to him. *Fine. I promise.*

*Good. I'll be in the north wing for most of the morning, and then I'll be out on the veranda on the south side.*

*Okay. I'll be seeing you then.* The map was clutched in his hand as he waved her

away.

She backed away from him, smiling slightly, and waving back. *Come back at lunch so I know you're alive, even if you don't find anything, all right?*

*Sure!* he signed. They both knew that was probably a lie, but neither knew for certain. The uncertainty worked in his favor. Because he might check in, but if he didn't she would assume he had forgotten, or didn't care. Because this wasn't a promise. This didn't mean he wasn't trustworthy. Well, maybe it did. She disappeared around a corner. Slowly and with great care, Ilya unfolded his treasure. It took him awhile to figure out just how the map was laid out. Eventually, he found the attic level, and climbed the stairs to his personal domain, still trying to figure out the lay out of the attic, turning the map this way and that until he found the entrance. He stepped into the attic and followed his route on the map as he walked; passing the large piles of what was essentially wreckage that the Neimasaurus family had collected throughout the years. With a lantern that he'd taken off the shelf with the cleaning supplies in one hand and his map in the other, he found his way to the attic room where Amaranth's desk sat.

He looked at the room on the map and looked at the shape of the walls around him. On the map, the door was in the middle of the room. In the room he stood in, the door was flush against the right wall and the corridor outside. Therefore, the wall to his right was new. Or at least was put in after whenever this map had been made. There was no sense of scale on the map, but at a rough guess, Ilya supposed that the room had lost nearly a 6 x 16 foot space, assuming the room had originally been a square 20 x 16 foot

space. He carefully folded the map up and put it in his pocket. He had not brought the antique pistol with him. Nor Amaranth's diary. Really, his planning was atrocious.

It would take forever to go back to the cottage and get them now. He would have to proceed without it. And the electric torch he had also forgot. He studied the wall carefully, looking for imperfections. It seemed to be an oak paneled wall, with indentations running down between the panels. Perhaps there was a false panel? Maybe the brass edges moved? He fiddled around with the wall, knocking on various places, but it all sounded solid behind it, and the brass did not slide.

He stood back and looked at the wall. It looked seamless to him. Would he have to get an axe and smash his way through? If anyone caught him doing that, he'd be fired for sure. Also, there would be no way to seal the entrance again and whatever was inside the secret wing would no longer be sealed in there. It would be free. There had to be some way to get it open without wrecking it. He got down on the ground with his lantern and examined the skirting board carefully. It seemed perfectly sealed, until he got to the panel on the wall, on the far side of the room from the door, next to the desk. With a certain thrill of triumph, he saw that the skirting board was not attached directly to the wall like it was everywhere else. He could stick his finger behind it and bend the board slightly.

It was the panel in the corner. The whole thing had to move, but how? There was barely room to squeeze between the desk and the wall. Ilya wedged himself in there and pushed on the panel, knocked on it and tried to jimmy the bronze edging to no avail. Maybe the latch or other form of key for the door was somewhere else in the room? He

looked at the contents of the room. There was the desk and the chair, a day bed and a lamp with a small table in the far corner. There was a small window, which Ilya had opened the shutters on days ago, to let the sunlight in, but that was it. Therefore, with his flawless logical deductions, the release for the panel, if there was one, had to be somewhere on the desk. What about that odd drawer he'd been afraid to stick his hand in? The one that had gone back into the wall? It was the second drawer down. He opened it from the top. He shined the lantern inside as best he could but saw nothing but blackness in the hole. With a considerable amount of terror, he set the lantern on the desk and rolled his sleeve up on his left arm. It would be better not to lose his right hand, he reasoned, because he wrote with that one.

With the mental image of the adder striking at him out of the boot playing in his mind over and over again, he reached his left hand into the hole, all the way up to the elbow. He felt smooth wooden sides without any obstruction. His hand did not slip over the coils of a snake, nor the mouth of a large rabid rat. He didn't even feel a spider web. With a sigh, he pushed his arm further into the hole, all the way up to his shoulder now. He felt around and there was something. What was it? His hand jerked back involuntarily. Had it been a snake? No, it was circular, but it was not alive. He carefully reached out with his fingers again. It was a rope with a small circular ring on the end.

For a moment, he considered not pulling the rope. What if the blood-beast was on the other side of the panel, having heard him knocking, and was now salivating at the thought of fresh blood? At least he would get to see a blood-beast. He gripped the ring in

his fingers and pulled gently, slowly increasing his pressure. Suddenly, without warning, the rope gave way by almost an inch, and there was a loud click and the turning of gears behind the wall. The panel slid open quickly, rising completely into the ceiling. Ilya felt the inch or so of rope slowly descend back into the wall with the turning of gears, and then there was silence.

The open panel had revealed another door, almost immediately on the other side, this one made of iron with no handle, but instead, a small wheel in the middle almost like the sort of thing one would see on a large boat. It was quite rusted in places. It still looked quite imposing. There was no window for Ilya to look through. What the door represented was both fascinating and frightening to Ilya. Not only was there a secret wing, but whatever was within it was so dangerous it needed a bank-vault like door to keep it in. *Needed*, Ilya reminded himself. If it needed blood, then it had gone nearly a century without it. It was either weak, or dead by now. He just wanted to verify that. Of course if it was alive maybe it could point the way to the cathedral of the Bleeding Swamp. He needed to know exactly where he was going to avoid the Calviarri. Who knows, maybe the blood-beast needed help just like the child trapped in the cathedral.

He withdrew his hand from the hole in the desk and closed the drawer. He wedged himself between the desk and the iron door and reached out to grasp the iron wheel with trembling fingers. It was easier to turn than he thought it would be. There was a scraping sound, like metal against metal as he turned the wheel. The whole door slowly rose out of the wall. Ilya continued to turn. Apparently, his analogy of a bank vault door had been

quite accurate. It slid out nearly three inches before he could pull the door open. Nothing jumped out of the darkness and ripped his throat out as he pushed the extremely heavy door open, the rusty hinges protesting loudly. There was only blackness within. Ilya picked the lantern up from the desk and shined it within. Beyond the iron frame, there was a brickwork tunnel stretching as far as the lantern illuminated which was only a few feet. The air was musty smelling and everything was covered in dust. Ilya crouched down and examined the floor with his lantern.

There was no sign of any footprints or disturbance in the dust. That was good. Nothing had been here in a long time, so there was nothing to eat Ilya, either. Carefully, he stepped into the dark hallway. He had to hunch over slightly, as the brick tunnel was only about five feet tall. He traveled along it for perhaps a dozen feet before the passage opened up into what would have been a grisly sight. There was an old and rotting mattress on the ground with stains that had to be blood, now almost reduced to a cracked and rusty powdered consistency. Upon the mattress was the skeleton of a human being. All the flesh was cleaned from its bones, and a pile of shredded clothing lay in a pile next to the mattress. Ilya recoiled slightly from the sight. The brick passage continued on from the room in the same small, almost bunker-like tunnel.

There was just one thing that Ilya had to check of the poor fellow that had died here so long ago. It went against his better judgment to actually confirm this, but he slowly stepped toward the body, the shaking light of the lantern slowly illuminating the sight. Whoever it had been had a lantern as well, for it lay smashed against the wall to the

left of the body, a black scorch mark on the brick. He leaned over the body with his shaking lantern, his own breathing a little ragged. He now had his suspicions confirmed. There were gnawing and teeth marks all over the bones.

The tableaux was now easy to explain; this poor man had been trapped in here when the blood-beast had found him, the lantern had smashed against the wall, then the man had been killed and his clothes ripped from him. Then the blood-beast had eaten every last scrap of flesh and blood from his bones and departed. It was safe to say that the blood-beast probably wasn't misunderstood or kind. He turned to leave and saw the corner of a book amongst the pile of bloody tattered clothes. He set the lantern on the ground and fished it out. He would wash his hands later. He opened it to the last page. It seemed more prescient to Ilya to start at the end and assuage his curiosity and then read the rest of the book later tonight, when he wasn't here in this spooky place. The pages stuck together, having bled together in the heat of summer. Slowly he pried the last page with ink on it apart, and slowly puzzled out the blurry text:

*I have been trapped in here for six days. I am afraid to go down the staircase. The screams I hear echoing up to me are enough to ensure to me that certain death awaits me down there. I hope and I pray to God that the door opens. They watch you when you try to open the door. They watch you study the mechanism, and they know when the rope is pulled. They let you go inside. To anyone who finds this journal of Leonya Kirkuk, They shut the door behind you. They shut the door behind you!*



They shut the door? Did he mean the iron door he'd come in through? Then, almost as if it were on cue, came the sound of metal scraping against metal. The book of the doomed man slipped from his fingers and fell to the ground. Ilya ran to the tunnel, and from the far end he saw the iron door two thirds of the way closed.

“Wait!” Ilya screamed, running the short distance to the door. It closed seconds before he reached it. He banged on the door and screamed as the thin line of sunlight around the edges slowly faded away to blackness as the wheel was slowly turned on the other side. “Are you the Soldier?” Ilya shouted, pounding on the metal as it slowly sunk in. The scraping sound stopped for a second and then resumed. “You are, aren't you? You're Amaranth's Soldier. Please, I don't want to die in here! I'm sorry!”

Ilya was left in darkness. He started to cry. He hadn't remembered to tell Tabitha like he'd promised. Now no one had any idea where he was. He heard the sound of the wooden panel descending on the other side of metal. “Please, I don't want immortality...” He'd had a hard enough time making it to sixteen.

He could pound on the door all day and all night or even six days like the dead man. No one would ever hear him, because everyone was deaf at Neimasaurus. His cries would literally fall on deaf ears. Was that the real reason everyone employed here was deaf? Ilya laughed bitterly. That was one mystery solved. Only his jailor would ever hear his calls.

## CHAPTER 7: A LITTLE PIECE OF HELL

He spent the next several minutes crying in the dark, his face pressed against the iron door, banging futilely on it, hoping the Soldier was still on the other side and would take pity on him. When none was forthcoming, he got to his feet and banged his head against the low ceiling. He bit off a curse and slowly felt his way along the dark corridor toward the flickering light of his lantern. He had more time to read the journal now. Actually, he didn't, he realized with a sinking feeling. The lantern would last only a few more hours before the oil ran out. Then he would sit in the dark, hoping to be rescued like the poor fellow who'd been devoured. He had no choice but to explore as much as he could, in the hopes of finding another exit before he was in the dark.

He picked the lantern up and looked down the dark hallway. Stooping, he resumed his explorations. The dusty corridor continued on for at least another thirty feet before he came to a junction. He wasn't quite as badly off as he thought. He had something Leonya Kirkuk hadn't. He had a map of the house. Could that help him at all? He unfolded the map and looked at the room where he'd entered the secret wing. He followed the path that he'd taken down the secret corridor. It followed the wall of the attic. This T-junction corresponded with the next set of rooms after the open area between hallways in the attic. That meant that the passage to the right would follow the wall, and the passage to the left could not go anywhere but down after about fifteen feet, because this was the top floor and the edge of the house.

Perhaps that was the staircase which the man had heard screams coming from the bottom of. Ilya had no desire to rush down those stairs to face a death that probably couldn't be worse than the man whose bones he'd met earlier. If he went the other way, it might lead to another way out into the attic, if it was patterned after the direction he'd come from. Ilya carefully folded the map up and tucked it in his back pocket. Slowly, he walked down the brick tunnel. The thick layer of dust still covered everything with no sign of a footprint. This was reassuring in that no one had been here recently, but did reinforce the idea to Ilya that he was walking the halls of his own personal tomb.

The light shook around him and it took Ilya a moment to realize it was the shaking of his hand causing the lantern to jump. Why was it a not particularly brave fellow like himself kept getting thrown into situations where there was no choice but to be brave? Was a kid afraid of minks supposed to be trapped in the labyrinth of death? Or fight cannibals in a swamp of blood? Obviously not. He should be polishing spoons in the kitchen complaining to Cook about the effect the ammonia had on his eyes and how it was probably damaging his lungs, which would complicate his asthma in the long run, maybe his allergies too. Curiosity killed the cat, and Demetri didn't think Arsenic would last the week in the swamp. He should have been worrying about Ilya surviving in, what was it the waitress had called it? Blood Manor? The House of Blood? Apparently, curiosity killed the Ilya, too. He thought he saw something in the shadows, just out of the range of the light of his lantern.

“Hea—” his voice came out as a nervous croak, immensely loud in the echoing

silence. He cleared his throat. "Hello?" The thing, whatever it was, didn't move from the shadows. It seemed to fill the whole tunnel. Ilya just stood there, waiting for something awful to happen to him. He lacked the nerve to continue, and wasn't yet scared enough to run like hell the other way, or was he too scared? He leaned out as far as he could, holding the lantern in front of him to peer into the darkness, but all he did was blind himself. With a sigh, he lowered the lantern and stepped forward. The thing came into view, or at least two large skeletal hands did. They were almost twice the size of Ilya's own, and he could see that they ended in sharp points, almost like claws. They were clutching the ceiling, with the tips slightly dug into the mortar between bricks. The bones were, well, bone white for want of a better descriptor.

Ilya took another small step forward and the light of the lantern fell on what had now become the creature's head. It could probably have fit Ilya's head within its jaws. It was generally human shaped, but the lower face was vaguely stretched out, and the teeth were more pointed, like a wolf's mouth. The skull had a nasty tinge of yellow to it that the hands lacked. Despite the differences, were it not for the size, the creature probably could have passed for human at a distance. Ilya took another few steps forward and the light fell upon the rest of the skeleton. It was massive. The thing had hunched over at almost a ninety-degree angle in order to fit. Its hands had been on the ceiling to help pull itself along. Ilya guessed it would probably stand seven or seven and a half feet tall when erect. It had to have died decades ago. Now, it blocked his way to the other end of the tunnel. Ilya supposed that he could get down on his hands and knees and crawl between its legs

to the other side.

Was that a tail? Ilya got down on his knees and stared between the human-like creature's legs. It did in fact have a segmented bony protrusion from where the tailbone would be on a human being, except this creature's tail had probably been about six feet long. So much for it passing for human at a distance. Ilya noticed that the creature's claw-like yet still recognizably human toes were braced on either side of the wall, digging into the mortar. That was why it had not fallen over when it had died here who knows how long ago. The tail wasn't in the way, so Ilya should be able to shimmy around it once he'd cleared the legs.

Was Ilya seriously considering doing this? Playing leap frog with the blood-beast? It was long since dead, but still immensely creepy. He set the lantern on the floor and slowly pushed it between the creature's legs. It sent little dust motes up, which Ilya knew would aggravate his allergies. He was allergic to dust and mold, as well as pollen, probably pet dander too. He was quite certain. Shellfish was simply out of the question. Why risk outright death, anyway? His mother had tried to force shrimp on him when he was eight years old, and he had refused no matter what punishment she devised. She had probably cooked them in peanut oil, too. He had refused them for dinner and gone to bed hungry. In the morning, he met his mother at the breakfast table and she had a steely look of determination and a half dozen reheated shrimp on a plate. She had given him a cool appraising look that said, *I've got your measure, and I'll win, one way or another.* She should have known better. Ilya had done what he did best; he looked away from her and

did not acknowledge reality. He wore her down. It had been a slow and difficult ordeal to avoid poisoning, but he had pulled through, just like he could literally pull through this. He got down on his hands and started to crawl through the creature's legs, bending onto his side to avoid a clawed toe, in a bizarre mockery of leap frog.

He was almost through when his hips caught between the creature's femurs. He sighed and wondered why no plan ever went without a hitch. Carefully, he tried to twist and turn his body through with little movements until a bony joint caught in the flap of his pocket. The skeleton seemed to growl and groan a bit, and before Ilya could stop it, the joint came apart. For a second, Ilya stayed perfectly still. Then the femur dropped out of the socket and clattered to the stone floor. It was the signal for a chain reaction that rippled through the skeleton and the whole thing began to disintegrate around Ilya, who sprang into action as fast as he could. It was to no avail; he was trapped in the collapsing bones of the blood-beast, as the tailbone came down hard on his head and Ilya saw stars. After a few seconds, when he could think clearly, he pushed the bony tail off of his head, and the end of it swept the lantern on to its side, shattering the glass and extinguishing the flame. Now, Ilya was in utter darkness. Again. What was that, the third time today?

Ilya sat in the bones for a moment to consider his predicament. He had been trapped in a secret wing of a house said to contain a blood-sucking monster, trapped under a pile of bones, and he'd just broken his lantern. For a second it was funny and he almost laughed at his string of bad luck. Then reality re-asserted itself. He was going to die in here and by the time anyone found him, he'd be bones, just like Leonya, who

stumbled in here. Years from now, whoever discovered this wing would sift through the massive pile of bones here and think that he had been locked in a mortal struggle with the monster until they had killed each other.

He would never rescue that kid in the swamp, he'd never figure out what was up with those creepy vultures either, and Demetri would never know what happened to him. Arsenic would die of starvation. Tabitha might miss him. Life would go on. Demetri probably wouldn't be too upset. He'd only known Ilya a few weeks. Worst of all, the Young Lord would be unchecked in his explorations of the house's mysteries. He would discover the House of Pain and drink from the fountain, gaining the powers that lay within the bloody water. What a killjoy reality could be.

He started shifting the bones off him, doing it all by feel, because he couldn't see a damn thing. It became clear that the reason the bones had not inflicted more damage on him was because the ribcage had fallen on his legs and hips, protecting him from other falling bones. He was able to slither out from the pile on the tail side, where he picked up the shattered remains of his lantern. It swished a bit and Ilya realized that some of the oil had not leaked out. If he held it carefully, he could preserve it until he found a bowl or something, and he could try to get a makeshift light going. The smell of oil was strong in the corridor now, from where the lamp had spilled.

Ilya got to his feet, careful not to tip the lantern, and decided that it wasn't so bad being in the dark, as he carefully put one foot in front of the other. He traced the wall with his left hand, to make sure he didn't miss any doorway. There was nothing he could

do about the other side right now. He would follow it on the way back. No, the dark wasn't so bad. Definitely not bad at all. It wasn't bad because it was fucking awful. A snail probably would have outpaced him as he shuffled down the hall. He couldn't pick up his feet, could he? What if the floor vanished, or there were steps down?

Ilya was becoming more intimately acquainted with the sounds and smells of the place and would be able to give a wonderful description of the texture of the brick on his fingers for years to come. If anyone ever wanted to know and Ilya lived to wax eloquently about irrelevant details in his tale. The overpowering odor of lantern oil was giving away to the dry and dusty mustiness of the place. As for sounds, Ilya's dragging gait was like knives on a chalkboard to him, drowning out any ambient noise he might hear. Really, being effectively blind was no problem whatsoever.

Ilya had traveled perhaps a dozen feet down the corridor, or a hundred, or a thousand, he had no way to tell, really, having been robbed of his perception of distance by a single swipe of a skeletal tail, when he heard the sound. He froze in place. What was it? He waited, his ears cocked toward the end of the corridor. A dripping sound, faint, like some child would make if they slowly poured a cup of juice on to the floor, their faces watching what happened with rapt attention. It seemed unlikely to Ilya that there was an apple juice equipped child ahead, so maybe there was some sort of water pipe leaking? That sounded more plausible. But the sound faded in and out, like the water pressure took a while to build up and then it slowly drained away.

Ilya resumed his slow shuffle toward the sound, and his hand slipped off the edge



into nothingness. He stopped and felt around until he was able to trace the frame of the doorway and shuffled through it. The sound was louder in here. There was a step down, or at least he assumed so, since his shuffle felt the end of the floor. He gripped the doorway for support. This whole room smelled funny, a sort of earthy and wet smell. Ilya assumed he was smelling mildew and mold from the water drip. He reached down with his foot and felt a chilly wetness encompass his shoe and seep inside it, soaking sock and skin. Good, that made everything so much better! He found the step and reached out with his other foot and climbed down to the step. Reluctantly, he let go of the door frame as he shuffled forward, looking for the end of the step, his feet causing small splashing sounds.

There was no end to the step, and the dripping sound had cycled into silence. He moved his foot forward again, and met nothing but water and floor. There were no more steps. He breathed a sigh of relief and then heard a splashing sound to his right. He froze. He was not alone in this room. He was not alone in the water. Something was coming for him. It was going to kill him. It had sounded like a snake slipping into the water. Yes, Ilya was certain of it. There were adders here, perhaps a whole nest of them and this was their watery lair from which they fed on the rats of Neimasaurus. He had disturbed them and now they were slowly coming awake in the corners of the room, heading toward the interloper in their lair. *Thank you, I will not be requiring any imagination for the rest of the day*, Ilya thought sternly to himself, though a part of him still wondered why the adders hadn't bitten him yet. No more splashing sounds came. Maybe it had just been a bit of falling mortar. Or something coming out of the water pipe to investigate the noise

Ilya had made. Like a snake.

Ilya swore under his breath. No one was here. Everything was fine, and he was not afraid of the dark at all, in any way. He shuffled forward, going further into the room. After a few more steps, his hip impacted on a table. The splashing sound came again. Something else had to be in here. He reached out with his free hand, and felt his way onto the table. No doubt a snake was curled up few feet away from him, ready to strike the moment his stupid blundering hand came into range. Or maybe just a large rat or big fat spider awaited his hand and its tentative explorations. Or maybe a blood-beast. *Shut up!*

He felt a book of some kind, definitely a pencil next to it, all covered in a thick layer of dust. The water was chilling his feet and he curled his toes squishing the water out of them. Next to the pencil was a....case? It was small and leather, with two corroded metal buckles. His hand passed over it and he sneezed at the little motes of dust that were undoubtedly surrounding him in the darkness, as his hand disturbed them. He was reminded of the time several days ago, when he had watched the dance of dust in the oriental hall, as the heavy drapes were cleaned. Sadly, his forced slavery in cleaning the floor was like a happy vision of paradise compared to now. On the other side of the case was a cup. Carefully, he traced the perimeter of it and got a feel of where it was before he attempted to pour his lantern oil into it. He got most of it in successfully. He set the remains of his own lantern on the table, but did not attempt to jury rig anything. The secret wing had been sealed almost seventy years ago, so there must have been a non-electrical means of lighting this room. All Ilya had to do was find it.

He reached out with both of his hands, feeling his way across the table, and an odd assortment of objects, some of which he could identify, others he could not. There was definitely a metal microscope bolted onto the table, and beyond that, his fingers grasped the familiar hour glass shape of a lamp. Ilya almost laughed in triumph. The oil would have been used up or dried out in this lamp, but he could use the oil he'd saved from his smashed lantern, and even the wick. Soon, he would light the darkness that he was not afraid of, so that he could explore what must be a laboratory. Carefully, he unscrewed the lamp, or rather tried to. After seventy years, it had rusted. When he eventually wrenched the metal off, he knew it would never go back on again. It would be a careful balancing act to use this lamp. But there was still a wick, bone dry, but not disintegrated. Carefully, he poured the oil from the cup into the lamp base, and set the top back on as tightly as it would go. The splashing sound came again, behind him, and Ilya froze. What the hell was it? Why couldn't it just kill him, or go away?

The squirting sound resumed as pressure from the pipe had built up. He resumed his task. He needed to let the oil diffuse into the wick for a minute or two. He had oil all over his hands from when he'd picked the lamp up. When he used his matches, he did not want his hands bursting into flames. He squatted down and rubbed his hands together in the two or three inches of water on the floor. It was kind of slimy and smelled bad. He ignored the hygiene considerations for the moment and he wiped them off on his jeans, which had gotten wet almost up to the knees when he had squatted down. He got the matches out of his pocket and struck a light, shading his face with his free hand, quickly

touching the match tip to the wick and transferring the painfully bright light to it. He shut his eyes for a few moments until he could open them a crack without pain. Then he opened his eyes and looked on a room that would be more at home in hell than anywhere else. He closed his eyes again and resisted the urge to scream like a girl, because that hadn't really helped him in the swamp. He had been much better off in darkness.

He was not standing in water. There was no water in sight. It was all blood. He had washed his hands in blood, then rubbed them on his pants, wiped them against his face to shade them from the light. He heard the dripping sound again, which took on all new and unpleasant meaning as he squished blood between his toes. He would have to look at it eventually. He opened his eyes as the squirting sound came again behind him, followed by a small splash. He ignored the sounds for now. The table was indeed from a laboratory, with a brass microscope bolted to one end and on the far side, where Ilya could not reach, was the splayed skeleton of what had once probably been a cat. Several rusty forceps lay in the dust around it, where they had once held the skin apart, which had long since gone to dust. Whatever hideous experiment had been carried out here, the cat had not survived it.

With a feeling of dread, Ilya undid the rusty clasps on the case, though he was fairly certain of what he would find inside. The case opened, and the purple felt interior untouched by time in its sealed case, reflected light beautifully, and illuminated a dozen bladed implements designed for vivisection and autopsy work. Ilya shut the case. This must have been the lab where the blood-beast was born as some sort of bizarre

experiment. Maybe the legend of the fountain was true, where the blood-beast had tried to cure the affliction he suffered from. Up on the wall, Ilya could see a dozen cages bolted there. The inhabitants were long since reduced to skeletons and dust. Ilya felt certain smugness at the mink skull sitting in one of the cages and a sense of sadness at the owl skull in another cage. Owls were neat-o. The dripping sound came again behind him, and Ilya knew the moment had arrived when he could no longer ignore it.

He took a deep breath and held it for a moment before releasing it. On the count of three, he would turn around. No, five. Ten. When he counted to ten, he would turn around. Finally, after a minute of carefully studying the table, he turned to face the other side of the room. There were more cages here, and a desk in one corner, with a shelf of dusty books, and another shelf of supplies and long since dried out liquids in glass jars. On a low wooden table in the middle of the room, sat the source of the sound. It was an exam table and something was there for examination. Ilya looked away for a moment, the urge to faint almost overcoming him. He could not do that here. He did not want to come to a half hour later on this floor. He faced reality again: the thing on the exam table was a headless dog. There. He acknowledged it. It, she, from what Ilya could see, was probably a wolf hound of some sort, the artery in its neck squirting blood onto the floor, where a large puddle of it had formed, now several inches thick over the years. Ilya watched it with a sick fascination as the body twitched and bled, her tail swishing and dragging itself through the puddle, the source of the irregular small splashing sound.

Then the dog's headless corpse grew still. The bleeding stopped. Ilya held his

breath for a moment. Then the body came back to life. The paws twitched and blood shot out of the severed artery. The tail twitched in the blood again. The creature lived for another two minutes, before it died again. There was no sign of the dog's head. How curious, Ilya thought, trying to think of anything to distract him from the grisly and hypnotic sight. Why had the head been taken? On another desk was a collection of vials, most of them full of dried blood, others containing stoppers still had blood, and other liquids of green, yellow, black, and brown. An antique syringe sat on a closed book, the remains of dried blood in the cartridge. The dog came to life again, and Ilya turned away in disgust. He almost brought his hands to his mouth, but remembered they were covered in dog's blood. Regenerating dog's blood. Was he infected now? It was a horrifying thought, that whatever had made the dog come back to life had diffused through the pores in his skin and was hard at work changing Ilya from the inside. But it wouldn't give him amazing healing properties, because it didn't work. The dog did not grow her head back, it bled out and then came back to life to bleed out again.

A horrifying vision came to Ilya: he would trip and bang his head, knocking himself unconscious, and he would bleed to death. Then he would wake up in his coffin and bleed to death again, until his coffin filled with the stuff. Then he would drown in his own blood forever. He picked his lantern up from the table and could not help but notice the book with the pencil sitting next to it. Damn him and his curiosity. He took the book and stuffed it in the back of his jeans. He would read it later. Then he slogged out of the room.

In the hall, he noticed a curious thing; the reason the room had not flooded was because a thin line of blood had overflowed the door frame, and it ran down the hallway, keeping to the wall in a minute trickle. There had to be a slight grade since the blood continued down the hallway. Ilya followed it with a sense of excitement. Maybe gravity would show him the way out. The pale light showed him another doorway at the end of the tunnel, except this door led into a room that was little more than a closet. Built into the floor was a rusted, wrought iron spiral staircase. The trickle flowed down into the blackness that the pale light of his antique lamp did not illuminate. Ilya sighed again. There was no choice for it. This little spiral staircase, or the large and rotten wooden stairs at the other end, which he had yet to see, but had to be there.

He set foot on to the stairs and they creaked. Ilya froze for a moment. What had Leonya said in his diary? Screams and red lights came from down below. He had chosen to stay upstairs with whatever had killed him, rather than go down and investigate. But what if that thing had come up the stairs to devour the man? Whatever was down there, wouldn't know anyone was up here, unless the foolish man or boy, in this instance, decided to explore below and alert the creature or creatures to his presence. He took another step down, and the steps groaned. He squatted down, holding the lamp as far below him as he could, shading his eyes against the light as he attempted to see what was below him.

“Who's...there?” The voice was a gnarled, rasping whisper. It seemed to echo up the metal stairs. Ilya knew, with certainty, where the Blood-beast lived. The man or

creature who had beheaded that dog knew Ilya was here. There came a creaking sound, and Ilya knew that it was on the stairs now, coming up to him. He had no way to escape. He was trapped up here. He ran anyway.

“Don't run away from me!” the voice screamed from out of the black hole of the spiral stairs. The voice was an angry rasping roar, almost on the point of breaking. Ilya did not stop for such a voice. He ran from the creature, clamoring over the pile of bones of whatever the thing in the tunnel was. Then he stopped dead when he realized where he was running to. The room with the filthy mattress where the man had been butchered and eaten. He had no choice; he ran to the intersection and turned toward the only exit he knew of. There was light shining in the corridor and Ilya's heart skipped a beat. He turned the last corner and he could see the door at the end of the corridor. It was open. He ran as fast as he could. He thought he heard the creaking and splintering of the wooden stairs as something large made its way up to the top level.

Ilya shot through the doorway into the sanctuary of the attic and frantically slammed the heavy iron door, turning the wheel as fast as he could and sealing hell back into its antechamber. He laughed, nearly giddy with joy at the fact he had survived the place. Never again would he be curious. He'd been tempting fate a little too much since he'd got here. He was turning over a new leaf, starting now. It would be a serious and uninteresting one, too. It was time for him to start acting like an adult, not a child. From now on, he would have little interest in anything and talk about things like mortgages and retirement. *That's just waiting for death.* All right, he wouldn't do that because he wasn't



that old.

## **CHAPTER 8: OUT OF THE FIRE AND BACK INTO THE FRYING PAN**

He should be worried about college entrance exams. That was only two years away, and once the summer was over he would be going to whatever little local school they had in the area. He wondered if Demetri would let him drive the truck to school. It was a long way to walk every day. Before he plotted out his college career, he had to do something about the dog blood that coated his hands, soaked his shoes, and, well, covered him. If anyone saw him like this they would think he'd been butchering people, or was gravely wounded. Then he would have to resist the urge to tell them that he had only been rolling in a puddle of dog blood that the local mad scientist had left lying around about seventy years ago. Yes, he knew it should have dried up, but it was a regenerating dog corpse. Then the people in white coats would come for him.

This was worse than when the minks had urinated on him. Not even God knew what was in this stuff. What the hell was he thinking? There was no God after what he saw. He couldn't leave bloody footprints through the house, so the shoes and socks had to come off. He sat down at the desk and took the shoes off, followed by the socks, which he stuffed inside them. He shuddered at how unsanitary an act it was, and rolled his pant legs up to his knees. What about the Soldier? He looked around the room and it seemed every bit as deserted and unused as when he'd arrived. Someone had closed the door on him and then, maybe the same person or someone else had re-opened the door. Other people, therefore, had been up here. He looked at the dusty foot prints on the floor, but it

was impossible to make sense of them. He'd been in and out of this room so many times, and he'd sat on the floor, when he'd been looking for the secret passage. What prints were left all looked like his own. Ilya scratched at a small itch behind his neck and froze. He shuddered at what he'd just done. He had rubbed dog's blood on his neck. He seriously had to do something about this. He could deal with who had locked him in there later. Right now, he needed a bath. A steaming, boiling, hellishly hot bath.

He picked up his shoes which still dripped with blood. And wiped his other hand on a clean spot left on his shirt, so that he could open doors without leaving bloody hand prints. Maybe he could find a bathroom downstairs somewhere. He knew there was no plumbing in the attic from earlier explorations, but a floor below that was mostly closed off rooms that hadn't been used in a while. There could be bedrooms and, by default, bathrooms. Maybe he could even find some clothes in one of them. He pulled the rope in the drawer and the panel swung shut again. He closed the drawer and exited the room. The attic was as deserted as ever, and quite dark, since he'd left his lamp behind in the study. But there was enough light to see by and, frankly, any spooky power the attic had exerted on him was thoroughly dispelled by the hour he'd spent in the secret wing.

As he neared the stairs out of the attic, a new-found sense of caution overtook him. He couldn't let anyone see him in his current state, but deaf people moved quickly and silently without any chatter to alert Ilya to their presence. He knew from his own parents that it seemed like they had eyes in the back of their head, too. The slightest movement would draw their attention. Just a drop of blood and they would see it and

probably smell it too. He had to be careful. The hallway with its creepy dome lamps was deserted and dark, just like when Ilya arrived. He crept down it, taking the passage to the right, rather than the left, which would lead him downstairs. This hall was clean, and the dome lamps that cast their pale purple glow around the hall were well too. The heavy black drapes over the windows were pulled tight though, not letting a single drop of sunlight through. He tried the handle of the first door he came too, but it was locked. It was an inside door, probably not a bedroom.

The first door on the other side was not locked. Cautiously, he opened it an inch or so and peeked in. It was dark within, so Ilya crept inside and shut the door. He stumbled across the room until he made it to the drapes and pulled them apart with his free hand. Sunlight bathed his face and he closed his eyes for a moment, soaking in the warmth. It felt nice after the subterranean gloom of the secret wing. There was a king size four poster bed in one corner, a large mahogany wardrobe against the wall, and a day bed by the window, next to a small desk, which looked like it could double as a vanity, in the corner.

There was a door to the left of him and Ilya headed over to it. The door led into a bathroom. The room was lit by a frosted glass window that filled most of the outside wall, though who would be peering through a fifth floor window? There was a sink and mirror on the wall, and a clawed tub. Ilya threw the bloody shoes and socks in the sink and crossed over to the window. He unlatched it and it swung open, letting in a warm breeze and plenty of light. There was even a shelf with shampoo and soap by the tub.

There were no towels, unfortunately, but things couldn't be perfect.

He took off his clothes, throwing them in the tub, and set about washing them with the soap, which Ilya discovered was carbolic, and smelled faintly of eucalyptus to hide the sharp scent of the phenol. When they were relatively free of blood, he wrung them out as best he could and hung them on the window frame to dry, hoping the breeze and sunshine would get it done quickly. The socks were a lost cause; they would never be white again. The boots were much easier to wash free of blood. Their dark color made it difficult to tell that they might perhaps be a shade darker than they had been. He tied the laces together and hung them on a nail outside the window to dry. He threw the socks in a small bronze trash can as a special treat for whoever had to clean this room.

Finally, he could clean the blood off himself. He got the tub full of almost scalding water and filled it liberally with soap and shampoo to make bubbles, because he still liked it, and would always take advantage of a situation that allowed him to take a bubble bath. Besides, he'd earned one today. He scrubbed himself good and hard for a full ten minutes before lying back to relax. There were several things he wanted to think about while he was relaxing in the hot water. The first was his assumption that the blood-beast would be dead because it would have had no source of food for so long. Clearly, he had not anticipated the regenerating dog and its infinite supply of blood, which had kept whoever lived on the lower levels alive. Perhaps the thing had fed on the trickle of blood that went down the stairs, because there was no evidence that anyone had been in those upper levels since Leonya Kirkuk.

Despite the voice's rasping, Ilya could tell that it was a man. Why hadn't he ever gone upstairs at all? Was the man afraid of whatever had died in the corridor? That huge skeleton with the tail, had that thing been the end of Leonya? It was too big to go down the spiral stairs. Maybe it had been afraid of the rickety nature of the wooden ones. If it had been trapped up there, why would it have died? It would have had the dog's blood to feed on. He didn't have enough information. But sitting on the little table with the soap and shampoo was the journal of Leonya Kirkuk, and a book left by the mad scientist of the secret wing. Ilya was tempted to start reading right now.

There were other things of a more timely matter that he needed to consider. Such as who had closed and opened the door? Tabitha knew he was up here, but she hadn't shut the door on him. That had been, according to Mr. Kirkuk, a nebulous "they." Leonya should have read Amaranth's journal first, then he would have known about the beloved Soldier that she had set to watch the entrance. But he would have to be at least ninety years old by now. That was the only flaw in his theory, and it was, admittedly, a fairly large one. It fit the facts, but the facts did not fit reality. It really had been foolish of him to go in there without telling Tabitha like he'd promised. His eyes were drawn to the old books sitting within easy reach. He couldn't spend all day in a bubble bath reading a diary in a guest room when he himself was a servant. Now that he thought about it, he could probably be fired for doing this.

He needed to get out of here and back to the cottage once his clothes were dry, so he could get some clean ones and dry boots. He pulled the plug on the tub and stepped

out onto the rug. He let himself drip dry as best he could, standing in the light cast by the open window. He waved his arms around a bit to dry them and shook his head like a dog. After a minute or two, the sun started exhibiting a soporific effect on him. He waved one of his legs in the air, trying to dry it a bit, when he heard the door to the exterior bedroom open. He heard the sound of something being wheeled in. Frantically he grabbed his clothes off the window and looked around for a place to hide. Then he saw his only means of escape: the ledge outside the window. He could fit onto it. It was about eighteen inches across and easy for Ilya, naked with his damp clothes balled up tightly in his hands, to make it onto the ledge.

He did his best to close the window behind him, and heard a vacuum cleaner click on in the room. He scooted along the ledge. If he could make it to the next room, he could crawl inside it and get dressed. Wait! He'd left his boots hanging on a nail outside the window. He looked down at the nail and saw that they were gone. With a sinking feeling, he looked down the five stories to the ground, and then the sinking feeling went lower, down to around his ankles, for sprawled on the ground below him was the burly figure of the Gamekeeper, a pair of tied together boots a foot or so away from him in the grass. What the hell was the Gamekeeper doing below a window? What if Ilya's shoes had killed him? He couldn't think about that right now. It was an act of God, it wasn't Ilya's fault.

He had to get off this ledge and into a room. He gripped the gray rain gutter above his head tightly as he dragged himself along the ledge. Yet again, Ilya was forced into a

situation meant for a much braver individual than himself. He came to the next room and tried the window. It was locked. He wanted to scream in frustration, and almost did, since no one would hear him. Except for the Young Lord. He had no desire to be found by him, naked and at his mercy, so Ilya pressed on. He kept his eyes on the wall and away from the ground until movement caught his eyes. On the ground, a maid had spied the Gamekeeper and had run over to him. Lovely. Now he would be caught naked on a ledge after braining someone. Why hadn't he stayed in the secret wing?

Wait, hadn't Tabitha said she would be working on the veranda after lunch? *Please let it be her*, Ilya thought. He arrived at the next window, but it too was locked. Why the hell were they locking the windows? Who did they think would break into them on the fifth floor? He saw the maid standing back and looking up at the house. Ilya thought he saw a flash of red hair. Was it her? The maid shaded her eyes, looking up at the top. Then she tilted her head. Time froze for Ilya and he considered his position. It was a bad one. Then the maid gave a little wave to him. Ilya exhaled. It was Tabitha. The maid now appeared to be shaking her head. Were her shoulders shaking? Was she laughing at him at a time like this?

He reached down with the hand that he was clutching his clothes in and covered his groin. The distant figure of Tabitha had gotten control of herself, and another maid had come running out to see what was going on. They exchanged signs and the other maid ran back into the house. Tabitha gave Ilya another wave and what he thought was a thumbs-up sign, and disappeared into the house as well. The next three windows were all



locked as well. As he neared the fourth one, he heard a scraping sound behind him. He turned to look back, and saw Tabitha, resting her head on her arms, smiling at him from an open window.

*You have a very nice ass*, she signed with one hand, as Ilya turned and headed back to the open window. She leaned back as he clamored in, almost tripping and falling as he tried to keep the wadded up clothes in front of his groin. She caught him and the clothes went fluttering to the ground. She gave the sign for laughter. *That part of you is not immature, at least*, she teased as Ilya blushed and struggled into his underwear which was still a bit damp. Tabitha bent down to pick up his pants and hand them to him. He tried to snatch them back, but she held them away to examine the stains around the ankles.

*It's nothing*, Ilya signed, *just some rusty water I fell in*. Ilya held his breath. She considered what he'd said, looking at the stains and then up at him. Then she tilted her head, her eyes traveling down his body. Ilya blushed again and struggled into his shirt.

*Try again, please*, Tabitha signed, smiling and holding the pants out to him.

Ilya wracked his brain for any lie that would work and came up with nothing. He shrugged. *That's what happened...*

*Ilya, this is blood, isn't it?* Tabitha signed.

Ilya struggled into the pants. *It's only dog blood*. As soon as the signs escaped his fingers, he knew he should not have signed it.

Tabitha looked at him carefully. *Do I want to know why?*

He would have to tell her now; it was the only way to not make her think he was a serial killer of poodles or hunting dogs. *I found the secret wing*, he signed, and paused for effect. *Everything you've ever heard about Blood Manor is true.*

*And this is where you killed a dog?*

*No, I just got the blood all over me in the dark. Someone else had already cut the dog's head off.* That had been a mistake too. He hung his head a bit. Then he remembered the books. *I can prove it.* His hands went to the back of his jeans and he cursed. The books were still sitting on the little shelf in the bathroom. *I left the books in the bathroom.*

*Bathroom?*

Impatiently, he signed the whole story of how he happened to be on the ledge. Her mouth quirked a little bit as he told.

*Wait here, I'll go get the books and we'll see what they say.*

Ilya nodded. *The last entry of Leonya Kirkuk's diary proves my story.* Tabitha smiled at him and left the room. Ilya heard the key turn in the lock and knew that she had locked him in. Of course she had. He was dangerous now. No longer was Ilya a lackadaisical but fundamentally charming young man, now he was a dangerous slaughterer of animals who attacked Gamekeepers with boots. He had to be locked away from normal people. She probably didn't like him anymore. He'd thought over the last couple days, that maybe she did, and maybe he liked her, but he wasn't sure yet. Now that was done. Would she even go look for the books, or would she go straight to Cook, or Demetri, to deal with the deranged bloodstained psycho in the upstairs bedroom, living in

a fantasy world, hurling boots at passersby. He would be put in an asylum, and the orderly on his floor would warn everyone approaching Ilya, “Be careful, or he’ll give you the boot!”

This was new territory for him. No one had ever thought of him as dangerous before. Maybe dangerous to himself, but not to others. He wanted to be back in his bedroom so he could talk to his parents. They still loved him. He sat in gloomy silence for another half hour. He looked out the window occasionally, to see what happened to the recipient of his boots, and saw Cook and two other men carry the unconscious Gamekeeper inside. Had he actually killed the man? After half an hour or so, when Ilya had decided that Tabitha had contacted a mental hospital and any moment the police and some orderlies were going to bust the door down and force him into a strait-jacket and carry his snarling and deranged self out to a waiting ambulance to take him away forever, with all the other employees of Neimasaurus watching from the windows, including his uncle Demetri who would have his hat in his hands, giving a sad little shake of the head, protesting to those around him that Ilya had *seemed normal to him*, the door opened.

Tabitha was alone, with both of the books. Ilya shuddered with relief.

*I thought you'd gone to call the police*, he signed. Tabitha smiled at him and brushed some hair away from his forehead. It fell right back into place because Ilya hadn't been able to comb it after his bath.

*You're a good person, Ilya. I'll always give you a chance.*

That proved it. She did like him. Ilya secretly gloated inside at the confirmation.

*Did you read the last entry?*

*Yes. And a little bit more. Did you find the entrance?* Tabitha looked very earnest as she signed to him.

Ilya considered lying for a moment, but knew that time was done, if she was going to support him. *Yes.*

*Show me where it is. Now.*

He couldn't just show her, what if she told people about it? The Neimasaurus family was involved in this, probably for centuries. *Promise me you won't tell anyone else about it.*

She rolled her eyes at him. *If someone is butchering animals and the Young Lord is holding someone hostage, then we need to call the police.*

*How rich do you think a family that owns a house like this is? They are the police! We'll be blamed for it, fired at least, sent to prison at worst. Do you really think the Lord and Lady of this house don't know what's going on? They didn't tell their son, and who can blame them? He's just as bad as his ancestors. If he knew about it, he would exploit all of its secrets. No one likes him as just a man, and he'll be much worse if he gets into the secret wing. You know the aristocracy still runs everything. They've bought every election we've ever had!* This stuff was so good, even Ilya was starting to buy into it.

Tabitha looked away from him, smoothing out the folds of her uniform nervously. She went over to the window and looked out of it for a moment. She looked back at Ilya and then back out the window again. She was obviously torn. Ilya considered this to be

good, because she hadn't dismissed what he'd said out of hand. Finally, she turned back to him. *The Gamekeeper will be all right. Cook says it's just a concussion. He's driving him to the hospital.*

He'd sent a man to the hospital. This was a first for Ilya, besides how he had indirectly murdered his parents. That guilt he would never surrender. *I'm sorry; I didn't mean to hurt anyone.* He'd heard that line in so many movies and books, and it was almost always a lie, but to Ilya it was the truth. He never meant to hurt anyone, because he knew the terrible guilt he would feel for every wound or injury he caused. Sometimes it was too much for him to handle, if he thought about everything he had done. So he would hide, first in his room, then in the attic, when he got to Neimasaurus. He didn't really think he would find anything. He wished that he could take back everything he had done since he came here.

*You never mean to hurt anyone, do you?*

*No.*

*The Young Lord is having a masquerade tomorrow night. Several hundred of his friends will be here for the party.*

Ilya blanched. *You can't tell them. He'll have a hunting party in there.*

*I know.* Tabitha twisted the fabric of her apron in her fists, wrinkling it terribly. *I promise not to tell anyone else about this, if it's safe.*

Ten minutes later, they stood in the attic study, and Ilya opened the drawer and reached in to grasp the ring deep inside it. Tabitha looked at the bloody footprints in the

dust on the floor, where Ilya had hopped around, taking his shoes off.

*Ready?* he signed.

Tabitha nodded, and Ilya pulled the cord. The wooden panel slid into the ceiling noiselessly, revealing the rusted iron door. Tabitha covered her mouth with her hand. Ilya had left bloodstains on the wheel, in his haste to close it. From her shocked expression, Ilya could tell that she'd not expected to find anything up in the attic, other than the proof of Ilya's overactive imagination.

*Close it,* she signed to him, looking away. He pulled the cord again and the panel slid down from the ceiling and hid the door from sight. She turned on Ilya suddenly, slapping him across the face. *You promised to tell me before you went inside, or have you forgotten?*

Ilya looked at the floor, one hand held up to his cheek. He'd wondered if she'd remember that, but she wasn't finished.

*You could have died in there, and no one would have known what happened to you. You broke your promise to me.*

*You thought I would keep it?* Ilya was actually a little pleased by that, but this was not the right moment to dwell on that fact.

*I didn't think you'd find anything. Give me your key to the attic right now.* Tabitha held out her hand expectantly.

Ilya's hand immediately covered his pocket protectively. *Why?*

*Because I am your superior and I can't trust you not to go in there and it's too*

*dangerous to let you run loose and I can't tell anyone about this because I keep my promises!*

Ilya didn't move, calling her bluff.

A vein pulsed in her right temple as she glared at him.

*I promise I won't go back in there.*

*It's too late for that. Give me the key. You have to the count of ten. One. Two.*

*Three.*

Ilya backed away from her.

*Four.*

He smiled at her nervously. *I said I promise not to come up here.*

*Five. You don't keep promises.*

*Cook said I could clean the attic.*

*Six.*

*Wait, didn't you read what I signed?*

*Seven.*

*Hey!*

*Eight.*

Ilya gave her a sour look to match his mood, and jammed his hand into his pocket.

*Nine. Don't you test me, Ilya Kollide!*

Ilya gripped the key tightly in his hand and withdrew it from his pocket.

*Ten.*

Ilya dropped the key into her hand. *What about the book I found?*

She returned his sour look with a bitter smile. *Oh, do they belong to you?*

*I found them...Come on, I gave you the key, give me something.*

She rolled her eyes. *Fine, now precede me out of the attic.* Tabitha pointed in the direction of the door and Ilya stalked by her. *Don't you give me that look! You brought this on yourself.* Tabitha marched him out of the attic, locking the door behind her. She handed him the two books without a sign.

*I'm sorry.* He tried not to overdo his puppy eyes, because they worked best when people didn't realize what he was doing.

She looked at him for a moment and shrugged. *It does no good to stay mad at you. Tomorrow, you'll have to serve at the masquerade. We're short of staff, and the Young Lord hasn't given us any warning at all about this.*

*Do I get a mask?*

Tabitha closed her eyes for a moment. *Yes, Ilya, everyone does in a masquerade.*

He was quite pleased by this. *Cool.*

*Report to the kitchen at six o'clock sharp. Now go away before I get a headache.*

Ilya retreated from Tabitha as fast as his legs would take him. Using his map, he took the back route of the servants down to the kitchen, marveling at how quickly he could now navigate the house. The kitchen was empty with Cook down in the village with the unconscious Gamekeeper. He headed out the back door, and closed the grand rusty gate behind him as he headed along the forest path to the cottages. Several figures



ran out of the woods in front of him, half naked without their shirts. They turned to look at him. They were all young and male, and around their waists were bright red sashes, tied loosely. Amongst them was the Oriental Boy, Shoji, who cocked his head at him.

“Ilya?” he said pleasantly, his chest heaving, but his speech unhurried. Before Ilya could do anything, another war party came crashing out of the trees. One of them blew a blast from a ram's horn. In the lead, next to the horn blower was the Young Lord, resplendent in a fur coat. The group of young men with him were dressed like hunters and primitive warriors. Ilya hoped it was mink fur.

“Ilya! It appears we hunt four stags instead of three tonight,” the Young Lord said, smiling at him.

## CHAPTER 9: THE SAGA OF CAT AND HUNTER

There were four Hunters and three “Stags.” With a sinking feeling that was becoming like a close friend to him today, he realized what the two groups meant. He knew what would happen when a stag was “caught” by a Hunter. They would get speared, without a metaphor in sight. Ilya had now evened out the two sides. The Young Lord slid up to him with a knife and an unpleasant smile on his handsome face. He was like a movie star, only an evil, unpleasant date-raping frat boy sort of movie star.

“Sometimes, it feels like you're avoiding me, little Ilya.”

Ilya flashed back to Giovanni's nickname for him: “little Piglet.” What was with people calling him little? He wasn't small for his age. Well, maybe slightly shorter than average, but he was beginning to think he was a dwarf.

The Young Lord reached out and took Ilya by the sleeve, holding up the cuff, with faintly visible bloodstains. “What have you done to your clothes?”

For a moment, Ilya could think of nothing to say. Then he remembered who he was and invented wildly with extraneous details: “Cook took the Gamekeeper to the hospital after someone threw a boot at him, so I had to help in the kitchen, which was as hot as an oven. I cut up a whole cow with a pretty big knife, and got blood all over myself. Which wasn't very hygienic, because there is lots of bacteria and sometimes harmful and contagious viruses in animal blood, so I'm going home to clean up.” There, if they thought he'd just killed a cow, maybe they'd decide he was too dirty for their game.

“A whole cow?” Shoji tilted his head at him and the late afternoon light made his black hair seem to shine. “It seems like a bit much.”

“It was only half a cow.” What had he been thinking? “I only did the rump.”

“Well, you've ruined this shirt,” the Young Lord said, reaching up with both hands and ripping it open in the front, causing the buttons to shoot off. “It's falling apart.”

Other hands reached out from behind him and pulled the shirt off. The Hunters and Stags laughed at him as the Young Lord looked at him in an appraising manner.

“You don't get much sun do you?”

“I get melanomas if I spend too much time in the sun. It's really quite bad for you to sun bathe. Your skin can lose its elasticity and become prematurely dry. I was reading in an artic—”

“Do we have an extra sash for our new stag?” the Young Lord interrupted Ilya's nervous babble as they rooted around in their pockets.

“I always have an extra one.” The Oriental Boy smiled at Ilya as he got a red sash out of his pocket. He paced forward to Ilya and wrapped it around his hips, loosely tying it in front, his long brown fingers resting against the skin below Ilya's belly button, the finger slipping behind the button of his jeans for a moment. “You want to be caught by Misha, he'll be gentle with you,” he whispered to Ilya, and then looked up into Ilya's orange eyes. “I hate it when he catches me.” Shoji stepped back from him.

“Nobody catch Ilya but me, all right?” the Young Lord said. There was grumbling from the other hunters at this pronouncement. “Stags, you get a five sec...” the Young

Lord looked over at Ilya's terrified face and bare feet. "Ten second head start. When the horn blows, the hunt begins!" The other Stags broke rank and ran into the woods, while the Young Lord said "One."

Ilya ran. Not after the other stags, but down the road. He had no hope of avoiding them in the woods without shoes. He could trip and break his foot in a rabbit hole, or disturb the late afternoon slumber of an adder. Besides, the other Stags looked like they were in much better shape than him. All Ilya had to do was make it back to the cottage and barricade himself inside. He thanked every god he'd ever heard of that the Young Lord had shown no interest in the books he had with him. A stitch was forming rapidly in his side and then, without warning, he heard the blast of the ram's horn signaling that the chase had begun. Seriously, he was getting a stitch after ten seconds?

There was no way he could make it. There was at least another quarter of a mile to go. This was really pathetic. He couldn't even run for a few minutes. As he ran through the deserted workman's huts, he thought about hiding in one of them. If he was found, then he'd be trapped there. He pressed on. The cottage was almost in sight. He risked a look behind him. The Young Lord was a few hundred feet behind him, at most. He had a wild smile on his face and seemed to be leaping across the ground toward Ilya, the fur coat flapping madly behind him. He didn't look winded at all. Ilya got the key out of his pocket as his whole world narrowed into a tunnel that he was running down with nothing but a beat-up cottage door at the end. It felt like his lungs were on fire as he slammed into the door and fumbled the key into the lock.

It seemed to take forever, but eventually he got inside and locked the door behind him. He sat against the door, catching his breath. A shadow passed across the windows. And Ilya sat upright as the Young Lord tried the windows. Ilya ran through the house making sure every window and the back door were locked. Then he took a knife from the kitchen and crawled beneath the dinner table and waited. A knock came at the front door and Ilya curled into a ball beneath the table.

“Ilya... You're not playing fair.” The Young Lord's voice came from the other side of the door. Behind Ilya, he heard the ram's horn sound outside the back door. The Hunters were surrounding him. He could hear knocking on the windows throughout the house. The Hunters were laughing now.

“We know you're in there.” Ilya didn't know who had said it, some Hunter he didn't know. Misha? The one with the ram's horn? Maybe one of the other two Stags with Shoji.

“Ilya, did you know there's a dead cat on your porch?” That was Shoji's voice, calm and pleasant as usual, no matter what the circumstances. Ilya looked up, fearful. His mind went to Arsenic and he crawled out from beneath the table. He peeked through the window to the back door and saw Shoji and the hunter with the Ram's horn, standing around the still body of a small black cat, unmistakably that of Arsenic. His throat had been torn open. Blood littered the deck around the corpse, as though he'd put up a fight. Ilya felt tears welling up at the sight of his cat. The Hunter with the ram's horn kicked Arsenic's head, and it flopped over so that the other whiskered cheek rested against the

deck.

“Yeah, that thing's dead all right,” the Hunter said with a look of unpleasant curiosity on his face.

Rage boiled up in Ilya and he flung the door open. “Get away from him!” he screamed, running outside and slashing the knife in front of him to keep the Hunter and Shoji away. Shoji back-pedaled, holding up his hands in surrender. The Hunter laughed and backed away.

“What did you say?” the Young Lord said, coming around the corner.

Ilya scooped up Arsenic in his free hand, carefully resting the cat's body in the crook of his arm, and backed up toward the door, brandishing the knife in case they got any ideas. He slammed the door behind him, latching it with two fingers, the knife still clutched in his hand.

Faintly, he heard the voices outside. “Leave him alone.” That was Shoji.

“I didn't kill the cat,” the Young Lord said. “Did any of you? Seriously, that’s fucked up to kill someone’s cat, you know?”

A chorus of no's greeted his inquiry as Ilya slid down the door and onto the floor. The knife clattered to the tile, and Ilya felt along Arsenic's forelimb for a pulse, just in case. He waited as his finger pressed down. The voices outside retreated and left him in peace and Ilya felt nothing on his fingertips. No heartbeat, no pulse, no life. They had killed him. He knew one of them had to be responsible. Any animals that would have done it would have eaten Arsenic. Ilya wept over his cat, the still and cold body clutched

to him, mixing cat with dog blood. Eventually, he fell asleep.

He awoke to a hand on his shoulder and Demetri's exhausted but concerned face peering down on him. *I told you this was no place for cats, Ilya.*

Ilya sat up, rubbing his cheek that had been pressed against the cold tile floor. *They killed him.*

Demetri raised an eyebrow at him. Ilya signed the whole story to him, starting with how the Young Lord had accosted him on the path and ending with the discovery of Arsenic's brutally mutilated body, which Ilya embellished a great deal too pointless effect, since the cat was still cradled in his arms. When he was finished, he folded his hands protectively around Arsenic.

*That's why you're bloody and you have no shirt, but where are your shoes?*

Ilya looked away nervously. *They took those too, so I wouldn't be able to run as fast.*

Demetri nodded. *I thought maybe you had dropped them on the Gamekeeper's head.* Demetri nodded in the direction of the table, where Ilya's boots sat, next to a black and white suit. *Maybe the Young Lord put your shoes there to frame you for a stupid accident. Maybe not.*

Once again, Ilya experienced the familiar sinking feeling. *All right, I did it!* He signed, finally fed up with apologizing to everyone today. *It was an accident; I hung them on a nail outside of a window to dry, after I got them dirty in the attic. Then they fell off.* Ilya omitted the next part of the story. Demetri didn't need to know everything and

some things were too embarrassing to share.

Demetri nodded again and sat down at the table. He indicated the chair across from him and Ilya got to his feet with Arsenic. *Don't put the cat on the table, we eat there. Leave it on the floor for now.*

Ilya laid Arsenic down on the tile lovingly, stroking a stiff ear. Arsenic was much more affectionate, now that he was dead. He sat down at the table and looked at the formal wear draped across it with a passing interest.

*I was quite mad with you when I saw the boots lying where the Gamekeeper had been hit. But when I came in the house, I thought for one moment that you were dead.*

There was an uncomfortable second in which Ilya shifted in his chair awkwardly. This sounded like the beginning of a guilt trip. Ilya knew the warning signs. His father had tried this on him.

*Sorry, he signed, I should have known better than to fall asleep with a bloody cat corpse next to the kitchen door. Especially with the tile that cold.* He was trying to break Demetri's chain of thought with extraneous details.

Demetri held up his hands. *I'm not going to punish you, Ilya. Not now. But I want you to promise me that if you hurt someone, that you'll go get help, and not just leave them there.*

Ilya heaved an inward sigh of relief. So that was what Demetri had been mad about. *I will always check on people I hurt and get help from now on.*

Demetri looked down at the suit on the table. *This is for you, for the party*



*tomorrow. You know you're supposed to be up at the kitchen at six?*

*Yes.* Ilya reached out to touch the sleeve of the suit.

*Don't touch it till you've washed the dead cat off yourself.* Demetri got up and rummaged in the cupboard under the sink. While his back was turned, Ilya poked the sleeve, feeling a thrill of rebellion. Demetri turned with a garbage bag in his hand and an expectant look.

*What's that for?* And then Ilya understood. He got to his feet. *He needs a coffin.* Ilya took ages to sign each word, his legs spread slightly in an aggressive manner.

Demetri looked up at the ceiling for a moment. *No.*

*I have money saved up, I can buy him one.*

*No.*

*You can't just keep saying no, you've got to give me something to work with.*

*All right, there's a shoebox in my room we can put the carcass in after we bag him.* Demetri walked over to Arsenic and looked down at the stiff black body. *And we're burying him, too.*

Ilya tilted his head at Demetri. *Yes, next to his mother. What did you think I wanted?*

*Nothing. Put the cat in, okay?*

Ilya reached down and picked up Arsenic one last time and moved to place him in the trash bag.

*Wait.* Demetri peered down at Arsenic's throat, and examined the wound that had

ended the cat's life. He wrinkled his nose in distaste as he reached down with one hand to part the fur. Demetri held the wound into the light and Ilya looked away. *This is a slash, Ilya.*

*So?*

*So, that means a knife or something else was used. It's not a bite or claw wound.*

Bitter satisfaction rippled through his heart. *I knew it! I told you they did it!* Ilya signed furiously, with one hand. He braved a look at Arsenic's neck and saw the almost surgical incision made across the cat's throat. *One of them had a hunting knife. The Young Lord had one, when I met him on the road.* He placed the cat in the bag and Demetri rolled Arsenic up and tied the end in a knot.

*We don't know it was them, anyone could have done it.*

Ilya rolled his eyes, and signed contemptuously: *Sure. It was probably the Archivist, or Cook, or Tabitha. Yeah, there are a whole lot of suspects that could sneak over to our cottage and slit my cat's throat right on the back porch. Maybe the Gamekeeper did it, and I threw my boots at him in revenge.* Ilya paced the kitchen, his arms folded across his naked chest still stained with cat's blood. He had made up his mind. It had to be them. Probably the Young Lord himself. He'd been the first on the scene. He'd circled around to the back door to try and get in and discovered Arsenic, who had probably bounded out of the woods, playfully, with the thought of "Hey mister, got any food? You must be a friend of Ilya's." Then the Young Lord had cut his throat when Arsenic jumped into his arms for a cuddle, because that cat was ... Never doing things

like that. He would have ran and hid from a stranger, wouldn't he? He shook his head. It didn't matter; there was no one else with any kind of motive. Therefore, whatever evidence, no matter how improbable, was the truth. That was Sherlock Holmes, and Ilya was quite sure he had the meaning correct.

*Go wash up. I'll put the cat—*

*Arsenic.*

*I'll put Arsenic in the shoebox and set it out in the garage. We can bury him after supper.*

Ilya's mind flashed back to an earlier thought. He stopped pacing and looked over at his uncle. *What did you think I wanted to do with him? Remember? You signed and we're burying him too,* Ilya signed it in a perfect imitation of Demetri. *Like you thought I wanted something else.*

*It was about five minutes ago. I remember.* Demetri's left eye twitched a bit as he set the bundle of Arsenic on the floor. *I thought maybe you'd want to cremate him and set the ashes in a little cup next to your parents.*

Ilya reconsidered his uncle in an altogether new and flattering light. *That's a wonderful idea!* How could he not have thought of it? Of course, he would have to dig up Arsenic's mother and cremate her too, so they could all be together.

*No.*

*Well wait, it's not so imp—*

*No.*

*But—*

*No.*

*Fine.* Ilya threw up his hands in defeat and stalked down the hall to wash the cat bits off himself in the shower. And give another good scrub on the parts of his body that had been marinated in regenerating dog's blood. He had to develop a tactic against his uncle's flat “No” routine, because he'd been bested by it twice. It took him nearly an hour in the shower until he felt satisfactory cleaned of dead animal. Dinner was a subdued affair of kippers, which Ilya slathered in sour cream, and some sautéed potatoes with mushrooms. Arsenic love kippers. Well, he would have, if he'd lived long enough to try them. Ilya ate ravenously, having missed lunch while trapped in the little pocket of hell in the attic. Then a thought occurred to him.

*Didn't we have this for breakfast?*

*That was potato pancakes. These are pan-seared.*

*Oh.* Ilya exaggerated the sign and rolled his eyes.

*You're welcome to cook whenever you want.*

*I make a mean sashlik. I can make my mom's pirog, too.*

Demetri raised his eyebrow at him. *You can make Leyana's meat pie?*

Ilya nodded, as though he were some wise sage who possessed culinary depths Demetri could only dream of one day possessing. There was no need to mention that those were the only two dishes he did well. He chewed on a salty and sour kipper, perhaps a little smugly.

*What does she put in her pie?*

*Lamb, pork, hard-boiled egg, onion, parsley, dill, sour cream, mushrooms, butter, black pepper, salt, and...* Ilya smiled at Demetri for a moment. *Some other stuff*, he signed mysteriously.

Demetri looked suitably impressed. *Next week, when we go to the store, we'll see how well you can make Leyana's pies.*

Ilya shrugged as though it were no problem, while racking his brain for every half-forgotten trick his mother had taught him. Was it a tablespoon spicy brown mustard she added? No, it was yellow mustard, and beef broth infused with the essence of bay leaves. That was the trick, to simmer the broth on the stove for an hour with the bay leaves and some minced garlic. He had this. He was ready to make this pie. The crust was the easy part. His mother had taught him the secret: the more butter and sour cream you put in, the better it tastes.

When they were finished eating, Demetri went out into the garage and returned with a lantern, a shovel, and his shotgun. He handed the shovel to Ilya, and headed toward the door. Ilya picked up the dark gray shoebox that contained the garbage bag wrapped body of Arsenic and hurried after his uncle, who was outside the back door, examining the blood stains on the porch.

*I'll have to clean this tomorrow. It'll probably stain anyway.* They pressed on, down the steps and along the little path into the abandoned cottages where Ilya had found Arsenic and his mother on his first night time exploration of the grounds. It was a cloudy

and moonless night. The light from the lantern Demetri carried illuminated the shotgun he had slung over his other shoulder.

*Why did you bring a shotgun?*

Demetri looked over at him and transferred the lantern to his other hand. *In case we come across the Young Lord. So I can ventilate his chest a bit.*

Ilya had quite forgotten about the Hunters. He was glad Demetri had the gun, but what he really wanted was for his uncle not to have to use it. He had worked here for years without any problems, until Ilya came along. He had to figure out what to do about this himself. Not make Demetri commit murder on his behalf. Hopefully, the Hunters were with what they were doing when they caught their stags...

It only took a few minutes to reach the spot where he had buried the mother. He found the little wooden cross he'd marked the grave with a week ago. He set the shoebox down on the ground, and Demetri set the lantern on a stump. He un-slung the gun and looked expectantly at Ilya.

*Get digging.*

*Aren't you going to help?*

*Oh no. It's your cat. This is good character-building stuff.* Demetri got a flask from his pocket and unscrewed the cap. The strong smell of alcohol wafted from it to where Ilya stood, shovel in hand. He was slightly nauseated at the smell, and just a little disappointed in his uncle.

*Is that how you're going to build your character?*

Demetri's eye twitched again. He held it out to Ilya after taking a long sip. *Want some?*

Ilya recoiled as though Demetri had offered him a drink of hemlock, Arsenic, and mandrake, finished off with a swirl of sparkling cyanide. *No thank you. Do you know what hard liquor like that does to your body? It—*

*Please don't tell me, I want to die in ignorance.* Demetri took another long sip and screwed the cap back on.

Ilya shook his head sadly and started digging. It only took a few minutes before the hole was big enough for the shoebox to fit in with a good eighteen inches of topsoil to cover it. Ilya looked away and gave a little shake of his head every time Demetri took a sip. To his chagrin, Demetri seemed completely unfazed by the routine.

Once the grave was filled, Ilya smacked the shovel down on it to compact the earth as best he could. Demetri turned to pick up the lantern.

*Wait! I have to give the eulogy.* Ilya stuck the shovel in the ground and got his breath back. Demetri reached into his pocket for the flask again. Ilya cracked his knuckles and began to sign. *Arsenic, you were a good cat, or at least you would have grown into one if you had not crossed paths with an evil and despicable man who killed you just to hurt me. In a way, meeting me was the beginning of the end for you, I suppose. That's a sad thought.*

Demetri picked the lantern up and turned to go.

*I still remember the first day I met you, when I came upon your dead mother right*

*here in this very spot, and I've buried you next to her. I know that it won't be too long until I bury my uncle Demetri as well, because of his addiction to spirits and hard liquor. His liver is not long for this world, so neither is he. I don't know how long his higher brain functions will last, either. Of course, I could die at any time as well, with my asthma becoming much worse by being forced to work in a dusty old house, or perhaps a fatal bout of anaphylactic shock will do me in from a sting or some other minor ailment for normal and healthy young men. Anyway, I guess what I'm trying to say is that we're all dying, all the time. So congratulations on living as long as you did. It was a good run.*

Demetri made the sign for applause and picked the lantern up again and started to turn.

*I know you would one day have been a good, affectionate cat, if our relationship had been allowed to grow beyond the paranoid distrust of strangers society had beaten into us. We were two lonely souls cast adrift in the night after the death of our parents, though I guess your dad might be alive somewhere. He was just a dead beat. All cat fathers are, which is kind of sad when you think about it... I guess you probably would have knocked some girl up and been a deadbeat, too. Now that won't happen, which is good. But those other cats won't be born now, will they? Ilya shook his head sadly.*

Demetri walked into the darkness with the lantern.

*But we both found new families, didn't we? I found my Uncle who I know loves me, and I would never sign this if I hadn't driven him away with my earlier blathering so that his back was turned, and it took me awhile to realize that I think I can have as much*



*of a relationship with him as I had with my parents.*

Demetri looked over his shoulder at Ilya, who immediately dropped his hands to his sides and did his best to not look guilty of something. *Wrap it up.*

*And you found me and realized I would take care of you, so you came back to the cottage with me, and for a week or two, we were both happy. I will miss you.* Ilya hurried to catch up with Demetri, who had resumed his stroll into the darkness. Ilya wiped at his cheek. He looked over at Demetri. *I want another cat.*

*Why not a dog?*

*They're noisy and sometimes attack people. Cats are cooler. Also, dogs don't bury their shit.*

*Dogs can be useful.* Demetri replied.

*Pets aren't supposed to be useful; they're supposed to be nurturing and affectionate.* Ilya wasn't particularly useful, so why should a pet be? He might get shown up by a dog if it were a particularly intelligent one.

*Dogs are affectionate. Cats just tolerate people.*

*I'm allergic to dog dander,* Ilya signed triumphantly.

*It doesn't matter, I'll be dead soon, remember? Then you can have all the cats you want.*

## CHAPTER 10: PLIGHT OF THE SIBERIAN SNOW LEOPARD

Sleep came quickly for Ilya that night, despite the long nap he'd taken on the kitchen floor. He did spend about half an hour telling his parents about the awful day he'd had. When he dreamed that night, he had vague images of black vultures, their long necks glistening with blood, standing around a body, their black pin-prick eyes staring at Ilya. He could not see who the body belonged to for the vultures obscured it with their wings. Then Arsenic had come into the frame and declared in a loud and clear voice that the vultures should eat him and gain his knowledge, only then would they know who had killed him and who their nemesis was. Then they had eaten Arsenic.

One of the vultures, massive with white highlights to some of his feathers, looked over at him and said, "Ilya, it's time to get up. It does not do to dwell in dreams too long."

Ilya had awoken slightly queasy but rested. He was seized with the desire to go to Arsenic's grave and see if anything had dug him up. But what would it prove? It was awful to Ilya, but it was the natural order of things. It didn't mean that a pack of vultures had eaten Arsenic to gain knowledge of their foe. Since when did vultures have a nemesis, anyway? Ilya stretched and looked around at his room. It was still dark outside, being only five thirty. Had he set his alarm? He looked over at the blurry red numbers in the dark. It had not beeped. It seemed like a minor miracle that he had awoken on time. As a matter of fact, it might be a first. He should thank his vulture alarm. That would be pretty handy if that fellow was going to awaken him whenever Ilya had something to do.

No, this was silly. Why would a mysterious and mystical Vulture make sure he got up in time to serve at a fancy dress party? That bird wanted him to do something. Ilya supposed birds weren't very direct creatures. But the more he thought of the one who had turned to him and spoken, the more it looked like the one who had led him out of the swamp, with the white tips to his feathers that made him look like an old man. He needed to give this bird a name, if he was going to keep popping up in Ilya's life. It needed to be mysterious and vaguely prophet-like. Orryn. That was a fantastic name for a big, black, mystical carrion eater.

“Thanks Orryn,” he said out loud. Now, he had to figure out what he or she, Ilya really had no way of telling with vultures, wanted from him. He didn't think Orryn was doing him good turns because he was a nice guy. Ilya got the feeling that Orryn had a plan and Ilya was a part of it. He got out of bed and had a feeling of unease as he looked around. Someone had been in his room. Books were on the floor, his clothing had been gone through. His eyes went to the headboard, where he kept his parent's ashes. The silver urn was untouched, but next to it, where he kept Amaranth's diary and where he'd set the books he'd taken from the secret wing, there was now only empty space. He had been robbed, and not by some random kleptomaniac. He'd been the victim of someone who knew he had these books. Nemesis. Well, well, things were becoming clear to Ilya now.

The individual who had locked Ilya into the secret wing had come to his house at some point in the night. The room had not been ransacked when he went to bed, which

meant it had happened while he slept. This equaled one suspect in Ilya's mind; Amaranth's Soldier, who would watch the secret wing forever. Soldier had pity for Ilya, because he had let Ilya out after closing him up in the secret wing. Apparently, Ilya was not to be trusted to carry objects out of said place, nor to take books from Soldier's mistress. Now he had no journals and no key to the attic. Ilya dived across the bed and rifled through the pockets of the ratty bloodstained pants. He withdrew the map from the back pocket triumphantly. He was not completely without tools to continue his investigation. But first, he had to do some actual work. He would worry about what Orryn wanted of him later. Maybe he would fulfill whatever destiny Orryn had prepared for him by doing what he was supposed to do.

The masquerade began at seven o'clock in the evening and was planned to last until at least midnight. With an estimated four hundred guests, a good portion would be staying the night and possibly the weekend. They would be arriving throughout the day, which meant Ilya did not have one second free the next morning to get himself into trouble with his map looking for a new entrance outside of the attic. It was maddening to have gone through such a terrible ordeal yesterday and then be worked to the bone today without anyone realizing what he'd been through. It was for the best, though. If only Tabitha knew what had happened, then the knowledge was safe.

Only he understood these things. If the Young Lord ransacked it, who knows what he might find? Ilya had no doubt that he was looking for the House of Pain. He just didn't have the leads Ilya did, or had, before his books had been stolen. No, he would

have to keep it secret, for the sake of the child trapped in the Bleeding Swamp. The Young Lord didn't want to help the child; he wanted eternal life, no matter what the cost of it was to him.

By five-forty-five, he was showered. By six o'clock, he'd managed to struggle into the ridiculous suit Demetri had brought home with him for serving at the masquerade. Apparently, it wouldn't do for ladies of any age to serve at dinner or be seen at the masquerade itself. No, apparently only men were fit to bus drinks and carry around little silver trays with vodka on them. Yes, it was good to be a man in the servant industry. While Ilya was prancing about giving vodka to revelers in some cool-looking mask, Tabitha would be slaving away washing dishes and preparing more food. Because if there was one thing Russians did at a celebration, it was eat. Every bit of alcohol would have to be paired with some tender morsel as well. Ilya knew that the kitchen would probably be open past midnight fulfilling endless requests for Pelmeni at the after-hours drinking parties that would start up in guests' rooms.

It was a shame, really, that Ilya was only a servant here. He would have liked to attend the masquerade. The idea of the anonymity of masks appealed to him and emboldened him to take actions he might not normally have the courage to do. He picked up the mask that had come with the suit and walked into the bathroom. He slipped the simple bone white cover over the top part of his face. Did it make him look a bit like the Phantom of the Opera? All of his excitement drained out of him as he looked at his reflection. Staring back at him were his jack-o-lantern eyes. He would have no anonymity

behind a mask, ever. He might as well go without his mask, except... It was required for the ball, wasn't it?

With a sigh, he put the mask in the inside pocket of his jacket and headed up to the big house. The kitchen was bustling with silent activity. There were at least a dozen women in the kitchen already preparing food for the feast. Cook immediately shooed him out and signed *Go to the front; they need you to take guests bags!*

Ilya meandered through the house until he got to the grand foyer. He checked his map once, to make sure he was on the right track. Had he ever been here before? It really was quite impressive. The room was at least a hundred feet across and the vaulted ceiling was at least three stories high. A grand staircase ran down either side of the room, with teams of servants unfurling vermillion carpeting on the white marble steps. The room was lit by two huge crystal chandeliers which looked like they had at least a hundred lights apiece on them. They shined like suns made of diamond down upon the hall and the large eight foot tall oaken double doors that lay wide open between the staircases, leading into another massive room that Ilya peeked into.

It was a ballroom that made the auxiliary ballroom look like the dump that it, apparently, was. A dozen maids were on their hands and knees polishing the wooden floors that were made of an exquisite shade of cherry wood. Other maids were at work on the walls, fluffing and laying out enormous silken drapes. Surprisingly, the three sides of the ballroom facing away from the grand foyer were all open windows, looking into a garden that was clearly built around the ballroom with the other buildings of

Neimasaurus in the background. How had Ilya never noticed the large garden in the middle of the house? How much of this place had he never seen? He tore his eyes away from the brilliant chrysanthemum drapes being pinned back in front of large French windows with delicate filigreed golden edges and walked toward the twelve foot tall oaken front doors of Neimasaurus itself.

What did the builders expect, giants? It might have been funny if his mind hadn't flashed back on a certain multi-limbed hunched over skeleton that barely fit in a five-foot tall passage and probably could have stood a little over seven feet when erect. Ilya shivered slightly. He still wasn't convinced that was the blood-beast, but it certainly was a good contender for the title. The butler was standing by the door and motioned him over.

*Are you Ilya?* the man signed. He was in his early forties, dressed in an impeccable suit with what was left of his receding hair methodically groomed.

He nodded and smiled.

*I'm the Butler. I was away with the mistress and master. Now that I have returned from Moscow, I will be your employer.* The man paused for a moment, looking Ilya in the eyes. *Those eyes are interesting, aren't they?*

*I have ceritikonus,* Ilya signed back. He did not add "It ruins the masquerade for me utterly."

*Does it affect your vision at all?*

*Only at long distances, then my depth perception is off.*

The Butler nodded. *My name is Elem Ivanovich. Do you have any training as a*

*footmen?*

*No. Not really.* Ilya smiled at the man. He stopped his chest from swelling too much. Today he was no longer Ilya the Attic Cleaning Embarrassment. Now he was Ilya the Footman. Whatever that meant.

*In that case, you will bus drinks and carry bags only, until you can be properly trained. Tell me, do you have any unusual skills?*

*I can play the violin, and the viola.* Ilya signed instantly, without even thinking about it. Damn it! Never reveal your skills, it only means more work.

Elem quirked an eyebrow at him. *I shall remember that, if it becomes relevant. With most of the staff deaf, it becomes a bit difficult to fill out certain skills, and music is one of them.*

*The guests aren't deaf tonight?*

*Of course not, only the staff is. We bring in special servants to interact with the guests who can hear.*

*I can hear,* Ilya signed, again without thinking.

*Really? The family almost never allows anyone with hearing to work for them full-time, who is not a Neimasaurus.*

*My parents died and I had to come live with my uncle, who works here. His name is Demetri. My parents are in an urn back at the cottage, so it's not so bad.* Please don't give me more to do now that you know I can hear. He left that last sentence unsigned, really more as a prayer than anything else. He hoped by adding that last bit at the end,



that Elem would think he was a little nuts, and not trust him with too much work.

*Since you can hear, I'm afraid I'll have to plunge you into the thick of things.*

*Especially since you're fluent in sign language too!* Elem smiled at him.

Ilya was reminded of the old Tatar proverb: Smiles conceal knives. Just so in this case, just so. *Thanks.*

*I'm going to have someone give you a crash course, as I'm too busy today. Let me see...Klimov, yes, he can show you.*

After that, it took a few minutes to run down Klimov, and then Ilya did not have a single moment free until he collapsed into his bed at two a.m., that night. Klimov was a merciless mountain of a man who would beat him for misplacing a goblet, or serving on the left, or pairing white wine with beef. Well, not literally beat Ilya. But he had this little head shake he would do if Ilya did something wrong. As Ilya got the little shake of the head throughout the day, it slowly became more and more like a punch in the gut to him. Did he put the small fork on the inside? A little shake of the head. Did he offer soup to someone's right? A little shake of the head. If Ilya learned one thing from Klimov in his crash course in being a footman, it was that he was irrevocably doomed. There was no way a boy could remember all of this in one day of training, no way at all.

Eventually, Klimov came to the same realization and concentrated on Ilya's ability to pour wine and water in a formal table setting. He would also be expected to carry around drinks to people on little silver trays, rather than busing them. He would have to take their orders and then remember them all the way to the bar. Maybe he could do that,

but it still seemed fraught with disaster.

*That was a crème de menthe, two shots of vodka, and an absinthe?*

A little shake of the head.

*That was two absinthe with sugar cubes, a Riesling red wine, and a peach schnapps with ice?*

A little shake of the head. Damn it!

*That was two pale ales, two crème de menthes, and a mint vodka?*

Klimov nodded to him. Yes! That was one order in three. He was practically ready to go. Why couldn't people just drink water at a masquerade? It would be so much simpler. In altogether too short a time, his training wheels had to come off.

At four o'clock, Klimov pronounced his training at an end, and Elem reclaimed him for the foyer. There he became a glorified bellboy, albeit a slow one, because it took him forever to find where to deliver the bags, and would have been a completely hopeless task, without his map. Also, unlike a bellboy at a hotel, he received no tips. The guests were a fairly predictable assortment of attractive young men of predominantly Russian ethnicity, with some Central Asian and Tatar men joining in, and even a small contingent of new wealth Chinese, who felt the need to stop and take pictures of everything in the house. Ilya supposed that they were tourists as much as guests, what with the frosty relations between Moscow and Beijing, which never thawed no matter how hot the summer, permanently limiting the visas granted to Chinese, so he told them about all the wonderful sights of aristocratic decay they could record. They showed some interest in

the Oriental hall, so Ilya detoured over there to show them along with the Auxiliary Ballroom with its moldering mountain of books. Too bad he couldn't show them the attic and the secret wing. They would have loved it. Especially the headless dog. They probably didn't have too many of those in China. He imagined each of them wading through the blood for their own, personal picture with the bitch.

Their rooms were intimately familiar to Ilya, as he now knew why his secret retreat by the attic had been violated by maids. That whole hall was now teeming with guests. Ilya just hoped that the maids had got rid of the bloody socks in the trashcan. After he had them settled in, they wanted pictures with him because of his eyes. Afterward, he headed back down to see if anyone else had arrived. He was turning a corner when he came face to face with Shoji, now fully dressed in a black suit.

“Ilya, how are you?” he said pleasantly.

Ilya plastered a smile on his face. “Good afternoon, sir, I am well.” My God, that sounded rehearsed even to Ilya. “How are you?” he added suddenly, thinking he should say something else, while really wishing he had not encountered the man at all. He always made Ilya feel flustered and awkward.

“Fine. I hope we didn't frighten you too much last night.”

“No, it was just a game!” Ilya smiled brightly at him and moved down the hall, in order to resist the urge to punch him in the face. Shoji reached out with one delicate, long-fingered hand and caught Ilya's wrist.

“We didn't hurt the cat. I asked everyone, and they said it was already dead when

they got there.” Of course, Shoji seemed sincere, compassionate, and understanding. He always did.

“Fine.” Ilya said quietly, trying to pull his arm out of the Oriental Boy's grip.

“Just do what he wants once, and do a terrible job of it, then he'll leave you alone. If you keep on avoiding him, he'll only come after you more and more.” Shoji smiled at him again. “Or you could just become his friend and enjoy all of the rewards that entails.” He released Ilya's wrist, and kissed him on the cheek.

Ilya flinched away, but Shoji only smiled back. If his feelings were hurt, they didn't show.

“Who are you talking to?” The Young Lord came striding down the corridor. “Ilya, you little cheat! I heard you were waving knives around last night and accusing us of killing your cat.”

Ilya turned and walked the other way and Shoji shook his head.

“Wait! I need you to carry this up to my room.”

Ilya stopped and turned around, silently fuming. So the cat killer needed some help, did he? Whatever he carried for the asshole would be beat to hell by the time Ilya was done with it.

The Young Lord stood in the hallway with a fairly large case clutched in one hand, which he held out to Ilya with his false smile, the one that never made it to his eyes.

“Didn't Shoji tell you? None of us touched your cat.”

“His throat was slit. It wasn't a bite or claw wound,” Ilya said quietly, taking the

case from him. It wasn't all that heavy, whatever it was, but it was ungainly to carry. "It was a knife that did it."

"Interesting, someone is running around the property slitting the throats of cats. I wonder if they use boots on Gamekeepers as well. Did you hear about that, Ilya?"

Ilya couldn't tell if he was toying with him or not. "Yes, my uncle told me about it."

"I see." The Young Lord pulled a loose hair off his jacket. It was long and black, matching Shoji's almost perfectly. "I seem to remember that when we encountered you last night, you were barefoot." He tilted his head at Ilya, his blond hair falling almost to his shoulder.

"My feet got hot."

Shoji laughed. The Young Lord did not. He turned and walked down the corridor. Shoji and Ilya hurried to catch up with the taller man.

"Tell me, Ilya, does it ever get so hot that you take all your clothes off?" the Young Lord asked, as he began climbing a flight of stairs to the fourth floor.

"I don't know. I've only been here a week and it's only June."

Shoji looked at him out of the corner of his eye and sighed.

It took only two minutes and they were at the north tower, where the Young Lord resided. "Take the case up to Shoji's room. He's got the mirror we need," the Young Lord said, pointing to the door on the left. Shoji moved forward silently to open it for Ilya. The room within was impeccably neat and decorated in black, silver, and purple. It seemed to

fit Ilya's opinion of Shoji, especially the black four poster bed in the corner with wispy black curtains drawn. Ilya knew that no one could be as happy and pleasant as the Oriental Boy pretended to be. There was evil there somewhere, or why would he hang out with a known cat killer? As Ilya set foot in the room, he set the case down and backed out, but the Young Lord was quicker. He grabbed Ilya by the hand and yanked him into the room, forcibly throwing him onto the bed. The Young Lord closed the door and locked it, removing the key and placing it in his pocket.

“I don't know why you're so suspicious of me!” he said with a chuckle.

“Aleksander...” Shoji warned.

So that was his name, Ilya thought.

“I don't know what you think I plan to do with you,” the Young Lord said, leaning down to undo the latches on the case. “Now take off your clothes.”

Ilya got up off the bed and started backing into a corner; he wasn't going down without a fight. But Shoji stepped in front of him.

“You can't do this right now, and not like this,” he said, holding his hands up in a placating gesture toward the Young Lord.

Aleksander sighed and opened the case to reveal a costume as white as snow, with highlights as black and glossy as onyx. “I only want him to model my costume for this evening. I swear, you two have the dirtiest minds imaginable. Besides, it's rather hot and stuffy in here, isn't it? Ilya probably wants to be naked.”

“We should open the door or window so it's not so stuffy in here,” Ilya said

nonchalantly.

The Young Lord smiled at him for a moment. He unfolded a long robe of white silk and beneath it was a jacket of black velvet and matching pants. Long slits on the sides of the silk allowed the velvet to be seen beneath it in a striking black stripe pattern. He laid it out on a chair and next withdrew the mask. It was a porcelain white affair, with black tears running like blood from the eye holes, and a long, almost snout-like protrusion over the mouth, filled with crystalline jeweled teeth.

“You see? I am a snow leopard; I am the White Death of the Masquerade.” He seemed a little crestfallen at Ilya's lack of excitement.

Shoji applauded politely. “It's lovely.”

“Now put it on, Ilya. I want to see how it looks, and you're about my height.”

Other than the fact that Aleksander was about four inches taller and forty pounds heavier, why, they were practically identical!

Shoji walked over to Ilya and started to carefully undo the buttons of his jacket.

“He just wants to see what it looks like, and that's all.” The Oriental Boy smiled at Ilya.

It was a smile he was coming to loathe as much as minks. Ilya knew that there was a hidden mink in the demeanor of Shoji that no amount of pleasantness could ever hide. At some point, Shoji would bare his fangs. The Young Lord withdrew a pair of black gloves with sterling silver tips that ended in little pointed claws. Probably to keep with the Snow Leopard theme. What had he called himself? White Death. It seemed kind of stupid to Ilya. He would have picked to be a goat or rabbit. Maybe a bat.

It was over in a few minutes. He stood in front of them like a mannequin, as Shoji tied the mask on behind his head. Then Shoji walked over to the Young Lord who was eying Ilya carefully.

“What do you think?” he asked, turning to Shoji.

The Oriental Boy shrugged. “I don't know. Ilya, walk around in it for a moment.”

Ilya walked back and forth across the room. He was mindful not to trip over anything, since the mask was difficult to see out of.

“His eyes make the mask interesting, don't they?” Shoji said. He took the Young Lord's arm and entwined his own around it.

“But do you like it? You know I need your approval.” The Young Lord ran his other hand through Shoji's long, black hair before pulling the other boy's head back and kissing him roughly. Ilya shifted uncomfortably. He stared at the ceiling, wishing he could be anywhere else in the world.

“I need to see it up close.”

The Young Lord pushed Shoji away and sat down in a black wooden chair by the desk. He flung his legs over the arm on one side and rested his head on his hand, while the elbow rested on the desk.

“Ilya, come over here, he wants to see it up close.”

With a bit of teeth grinding, Ilya stalked over to Shoji who was leaning against the desk. The Young Lord followed his progress across the room, until he was about a foot from them. What was next? *Ilya, pirouette around the room. He needs to see the cloak*



*twirling about in the air as though it were a movie.*

“I don't know. It might be too much to invoke passion in me. You can overdo it... sometimes,” Shoji said, looking away after his careful study of Ilya.

“Ilya, run those claws down his cheek. See if it evokes anything in him.”

Shoji looked over at Ilya expectantly. He raised his gloved hand that ended in the silver tips, and carefully brushed his hand down the Oriental Boy's cheek, who shivered slightly at the cold metal touch. It left little white marks which faded against the tanned skin.

“How is that?” the Young Lord asked, his head still tilted at an angle. He kicked his feet back and forth idly.

“Do you think that is all it takes to awaken my passion?” Shoji asked, sounding bored and staring listlessly out the window. Ilya dropped his hand to his side awkwardly. He considered rushing the door. Could he knock it down with one good shove? No, that was a terrible plan. He was dressed in a ridiculous get-up that was probably worth more roubles than he would see in a year of paychecks.

“Ilya, cut the buttons holding his jacket together.” The Young Lord did his best to seem every bit as bored as Shoji. It was a game of chicken, only Ilya was the one rushing at someone.

Ilya rolled his eyes and reached out to him. He followed the edge of the coat down to where two black buttons held it together over his stomach. He inserted one finger in between the folds and found the threads of the button. He rubbed the tip of his finger

back and forth. Without warning, the button popped off and fell to the floor. Shoji looked down at the button and then up at Ilya, still bored. The second button came off and the folds of the jacket came open, revealing the purple silk shirt beneath it.

“You never act like it's difficult in bed,” the Young Lord said, staring at the shirt.

“It's easy to fool you. You never feel passion's keen sting.”

“I do the stinging.” The Young Lord smiled at Shoji and then looked over at Ilya.

“Slip the jacket over his shoulders.”

Ilya reached up with a slight tremor in his hands. This was getting out of hand. He wanted out of this room, but he couldn't see any out. He slipped the jacket over Shoji's shoulders and it fell down to his elbows. The Oriental Boy made no effort to remove it all the way. He tilted his head at Ilya curiously, seemingly content to allow his body be a passive object to the Young Lord.

“I think we're talking about different things,” Shoji said, looking over at the Young Lord. “But I'm not averse to one little sting before lunch.”

“I already stung you twice this morning.” The Young Lord looked over at Ilya who stood stupidly in front of Shoji, studiously examining the floor, the drapes, anything but the other young men in the room. “Ilya, cut the buttons off that shirt for me. I don't feel like getting up.”

“Did you? Was it twice? I barely felt it...” Shoji said, his voice trailing off into silence as Ilya slipped one finger beneath the collar of the topmost smoky gray button. It came off and clattered noisily on the desk. The next button dropped silently onto the

carpeted floor and the flawless hollow of Shoji's throat was revealed.

“But you have to be able to walk for the party tonight.”

Ilya's finger continued the downward movement, cutting away two more buttons and revealing the Oriental Boy's smooth chest and brown nipples. The word flawless came to Ilya's mind again and again. There was something unreal about him and how he stood there, like a doll, as Ilya was forced to undress him. He didn't seem to like or dislike what was happening at all.

“I don't think I'm in any danger,” Shoji said, finally looking back at the Young Lord who was avidly watching the path of Ilya's finger as more buttons came free.

“Then maybe I should call the other bees in and we can all have a go at your flower.”

Flower? What Flower? The sexual innuendo was beginning to fly over Ilya's head as he cut away the last button on the shirt, finally revealing a delicate dusting of fine black hairs that led down to Shoji's.... place that Ilya did not wish to contemplate.

Shoji rolled his eyes before responding. “You're mixing your metaphors.” He went back to staring out the window with a little sigh that made his chest heave slightly. Ilya hated that he was close enough to notice these details.

“What?” A frown crossed the Young Lord's features. “Ilya, pull the shirt over his shoulders.”

Ilya complied, accidentally grazing one of Shoji's shoulders with a claw, but the Oriental Boy did not react. He left it to hang around his elbows, like the jacket.

“Bees don't sting flowers, they suckle their nectar. Unless you're referring to a cliché of romance literature,” Shoji said, finally looking Ilya in the face. He smiled at him, as if to say that everything was all right.

But it wasn't. There was only so much farther this game could be taken before it was in forbidden territory for Ilya. Actually, besides the blood the Young Lord had licked from his head the first day Ilya arrived here, that had been the closest he'd come to a kiss, let alone stripping someone. At least it was Shoji and not the Young Lord. *What?* No, he didn't want either of them. There were so many nice maids he could have been removing the clothes of.

“Ilya, run those claws over his nipples,” the Young Lord said, before getting up from the chair and walking around to the other side of Shoji.

Ilya, his hand shaking quite badly now, ran a finger around one smooth brown nipple, delicately crossing over it once. Shoji finally shivered, showing a reaction.

The Young Lord leaned into the Oriental Boy's ear and whispered: “Shall I gently peel back the delicate petals of your flower to reveal the pink bud within and tease endless pleasure from you with my ethereal yet firm touch? How's that for romantic literature.”

Ilya almost burst out laughing. Even a virgin like him could recognize terrible romance clichés.

“I prefer to be stung,” Shoji said, looking down at the progress of Ilya's finger on his nipple. He looked up into Ilya's eyes and said “Cut me.”

Ilya's finger froze. The Young Lord's hand pushed Ilya's frozen digits away. He backed away from Shoji as the Young Lord pushed Shoji over on the desk so that he was on his back, his head lolling over the side.

“What about the other bees?” the Oriental Boy said, his green eyes watching as the Young Lord took off his own jacket.

“Tonight there will be hundreds of bees for you.”

Ilya started frantically taking the gloves off as the Young Lord walked over to the side of the desk that Shoji's head hung off. He backed away toward the door and threw the gloves on the bed.

“And hundreds who relish their sting.” Shoji turned to look at Ilya. The Young Lord forced two of his fingers into the Oriental Boy's mouth. Ilya turned away from what they were doing and struggled out of the mask.

“Do you really think I would invite anyone more beautiful than you?” the Young Lord said, as Ilya struggled out of the white silk overcoat.

“Soon you won't be able to invite anyone to a party.”

The rest of the black suit came off in record time. But to Ilya's distress, he heard a zipper being undone behind him. Ilya shot over to his own pile of clothes by the chair and gathered them up.

“You're not old. Where does this madness come from?” the Young Lord said, but from the other sounds Ilya was hearing, he doubted Shoji was in any position to answer. A key was flung onto the carpet next to Ilya, who snatched it up. “Go away, unless you

want to join us,” Aleksander said over his shoulder.

Get out, get out, get out! Ilya was reminded dimly of a movie he had seen; as alien hordes descended upon a small squad of soldiers, the leader turned to his troops and said:

“Marines, we are leaving!” He had the door unlocked and he was out in the hallway in his underwear, in five seconds flat. He dressed quickly, ignoring all other sounds that he heard coming from the room. He made his way back to the foyer without a word to anyone about what had happened. After a quick snack, Ilya continued running baggage around for another several hours, until nearly six o'clock, when Elem called everyone together in the ballroom.

*In a few minutes, the guests will begin making their way down from their rooms, dressed in their costumes, and enjoy a banquet and a masquerade.* Elem had an overturned bucket he was standing on, so that everyone could see him as he signed. A woman in her late fifties stood next to him, translating everything for those amongst the staff who had been brought in for the party, and were not deaf. Ilya ignored the sour-faced woman and watched Elem's hands.

*Today, we earn our keep. Without the staff's ability to act like a well-oiled machine, parties such as this could never be anything less than a disaster. With our assistance, it will be a party that the Young Lord Neimasaurus will be proud of.* Elem's hand movements were sharp, jagged, and almost dictator-like in their precision. *We've had very little time to prepare for this party, and no matter what happens tonight, you have all done beautifully in preparing for his engagement.*

Ilya looked around at the servants around him, the men all dressed in identical bone-white masquerade masks and black suits, with golden tassels on their right shoulders, and the women in their regular uniforms. Tabitha waved to him from farther down the line, and he waved back. Stupid orange eyes. She could tell which one was him from twenty feet away.

*In a few moments, when these doors behind me open, Elem gestured toward the eight foot tall mahogany doors that connected the ballroom to the foyer. The Masquerade will officially commence. No matter what happens, do not leave your posts; do not speak unless spoken to by a guest, except to ask if they require something. Do not make eye contact with the guests! They will spread out into the garden, but do not let them wander into other areas of the house, besides the foyer, the stairs, their rooms, this ballroom, and the garden. Keep all other doors locked. Are we ready?*

All around Ilya the other servants gave the yes sign and Ilya followed suit. Elem nodded to the two men by the doors, and they pulled them open. The servants scattered to their posts, the women and Cook scurrying back to the kitchens, some of the men lining up on either side of the doors waiting to serve, and Ilya took his place among them. Klimov picked up a small golden hammer and rang a gong against the wall. The harsh metallic sound rang through the house and the waiting guests above began their descent.

## CHAPTER 11: THE ECHO OF A GECKO

The guests wasted no time in coming downstairs. From their costumes, Ilya could see that the Lord Neimasaurus's snow leopard costume had not been chosen at random. All of the party goers were dressed as animals; some came as rabbits, sheep, deer, or songbirds, while others came as tigers, wolves, cobras, and birds of prey. The analogy of hawks and sparrows was spread out before him as the guests mingled, showing off their costumes to one another. There was a small number of female guests among the revelers as well, perhaps a dozen or so. They congregated in certain cliques, and Ilya hurried around the ballroom taking drink orders as fast as he could. He had no idea if he was getting the right drinks to the correct people, because it seemed like the young men would pretty much take anything.

Ilya had resolved to avoid Lord Neimasaurus, as Elem had instructed everyone to call the Young Lord for the duration of the masquerade, or his friend, Shoji. There had been no sign of them thus far in the party, and Ilya would consider it a minor miracle if they left him alone. It didn't take long before one of the revelers, dressed to resemble a hyena, with a grotesque grin painted on to the mud-brown mask, to notice Ilya's eyes.

“Would you look at that!” The Hyena grabbed Ilya by the shoulder and pushed him into the circle of friends he was talking to, including a Hawk, Ocelot, and a very drunk Sparrow. “This servant has colored contact lenses!”



“They look so real,” the Hawk said, grabbing Ilya's face by the jaw to turn his eyes toward him. “Where did you get them?”

“Sir, it's natural.”

“No,” said the Hyena, looking shocked. “I've never heard of such a thing.” It was as though Ilya had revealed he had three legs, or was a superhero.

Fortunately, the Ocelot was more concerned with his tipsy Sparrow, and was paying very little attention to Ilya. It was difficult to make out too many details of the Sparrow, from the feathered robe that he wore.

Ilya gently disengaged himself from the Hawk as the Hyena leaned on his shoulder to get a better look. “It's a genetic disorder called ceritikonus.”

“You're genetically defective?” The Hyena threw his head back and laughed.

“Welcome to the club,” the Hawk said.

Ilya greatly disliked the way the bird of prey was looking at him, as though he were some plump mouse. He slipped between the Hyena and the occupied Ocelot, to freedom. The Sparrow buried his masked face in the crook of the Ocelot's neck, while his hand explored his friend's lower back. Ilya thought he heard the Sparrow whisper “bite my wings off.” It was an effeminate sounding voice.

Ilya made a note to himself to avoid them as well. The gong sounded again and Ilya looked toward the door as did everyone else. Striding in was the White Death with his

companion, a Phoenix. Shoji quite possibly outshone the Young Lord. His mask was made of some sort of orange reflective material that shone like fire in the light of the ballroom. The nose ended in a wickedly curved beak that was slightly translucent, while his cloak was made from the red feathers of cardinals and went all the way to the ground. The black suit he wore beneath it seemed to be glossy in look, making him appear to almost glow. He had red gloves ending in the golden talons of a bird of prey, and his usually well maintained black hair hung loose over his shoulders in a mad and wild style, crowding around the edges of the golden mask like a fringe of feathers.

The voices died down around Ilya, and the animals looked expectantly at the White Death.

“My friends,” the Lord of Neimasaurus began, “thank you for coming on such short notice. As you know, I like to play games. Tonight is no exception. I've taken my inspiration from the Edgar Alan Poe story, “The Masque of the Red Death.” If you aren't familiar with it, you should acquaint yourself with someone who is.” The White Death smiled at his guests. “The front doors have been sealed, to keep the plague ridden riffraff out of the house. All of the windows are barred and there is no way to escape the house without one of thirteen golden keys, which have been hidden throughout the mansion. You will never find them by simple searching.” The White Death took a goblet of wine from a passing server and took a sip before continuing. “Listen well, my carnivores, I have given every herbivore here a clue that will help lead you to one of the keys, even if they don't know what it is. It doesn't matter how you get the clue, either

pleasure or pain, but if you bring one to my friend,” The White Death wrapped an arm around his Phoenix, “then he will reward you.”

There were hoots and cat calls from the carnivores and an enthusiastic round of applause. Then the Phoenix spoke, in a voice every bit as enchanting as the costume. “And for those herbivores so inclined, bring the White Death a golden key, and you will receive his reward.”

The herbivores gave out their own hoots and cat calls and rounds of applause. The Hyena called out: “What if we want both?”

“Then bring two keys,” the White Death said, to laughter through the hall, including the Hyena.

It figures the Hyena would ask that. They seemed the type. Ilya made his way toward the back of the hall as the guests crowded around their hosts to ask more questions about the game. A small part of Ilya wanted to find one of the golden keys, just for the thrill of the hunt. He didn't want whatever reward they were offering and he had a suspicion he knew what it was. It really wasn't a suspicion. It was quite obvious. He dodged a loose-fingered Crocodile on his way back to the bar.

*What do you need?* one of the bartenders signed to him, a man Ilya didn't know at all, but he'd heard the man speaking to the guests earlier, so he must be a special hire.

“It doesn't matter, just put stuff on the tray and they'll take it.” Ilya set the tray down on the marble counter, and the bartender shrugged and started pouring a dozen shots of vodka.

“Excuse me.”

There came a gentle tugging on Ilya's sleeve, and he turned around, a false smile on his face. “Yes sir?”

The boy looked perhaps fourteen years old, far too young for this party. He had his gecko mask in his hands, with a pair of bright green and silly looking gloves on, miming the three digits of the eponymous amphibian. “I came here with my older brother, Kiril, I can't find him and I want to go back to my room. Have you seen him?” The boy's voice was quiet and hesitant.

“Sir, if you could tell me what he is dressed as?” Ilya said, his mind racing. This kid shouldn't be here. At least he had the good sense to realize it.

“He's dressed as an Ocelot.”

Ilya's eye twitched a bit. He doubted the Ocelot and the Sparrow were still here. “Which room are you staying in?”

“I don't know. It was in a hallway with these purple lamps and black curtains. I'm the fourth door on the right.”

Ilya shifted uncomfortably. “Sir, I believe your brother is indisposed with a Sparrow.”

The boy looked confused for a moment. “Oh.”

“I can show you the way back to your room, if you would like, sir.”

The boy nodded to him and smiled shyly, twisting the gecko mask in his hands. Ilya led the way across the ballroom, keeping a wary eye out for the White Death and the Phoenix. The

party had spilled out of the ballroom and into the foyer as carnivores courted or coerced herbivores for clues. Ilya took the boy, who kept close to him, up the back stairs, which were quite dark at this time of night and thoroughly deserted.

“I haven't seen this part of the house before,” the boy said, wide-eyed as they walked down a rather large and imposing corridor, with heavy golden-framed paintings adorning the sides. A sense of Deja vu was slowly creeping upon Ilya as he led the frightened but fascinated boy through the dark and deserted corridors, He reminded Ilya of when he had first arrived at the house. But Ilya couldn't shake the feeling that something was terribly wrong with the boy being here. His initial estimate of the boy's age being around fourteen now seemed a bit off. At most, with the way the boy was practically holding his hand, he was twelve.

“Sir, if you could tell me your name, I believe I never asked it,” Ilya said.

“Sacha Muromets.”

“Like the Hero?” Ilya asked with a smile. Every Russian knew the story of the folk hero Ilya Muromets, who did battle with all manner of foreign invaders, when not slaying monsters.

Sacha laughed. “You have his first name, and I have his last name. I didn't think of it until now!”

They headed up the last back staircase that would lead them into the top level, below the attic. “Are you from Murom?” Ilya asked, to make conversation, since the name Muromets meant from the city of Murom.

“No, but my grandparents were.”

“During the Red Rebellion?”

“What's that?” Sacha looked confused.

Ilya looked back at the boy with a sigh. What were they teaching children these days?

“When the communists revolted and the White Army crushed them, they fled to the Crimea and the awaiting tragedy of Stavropol.”

“Your eyes look funny,” Sacha said, noticing in the relative darkness of the corridor. Their unusual color was quite bright.

Ilya looked away, and marched up the stairs. “It's caused by Ceritikonus.”

“They look neat, like you're some kind of monster.”

“Thanks.” Ilya opened the door at the top of the stairs, and was bathed in the pale purple light of the corridor.

Sacha followed him down the corridor and was silent for a few moments. “What happened at Stavropol?”

“The Red Army had their path of retreat to the Crimea cut off and was surrounded. The city was under siege by the White Army for over a year. When the people of Stavropol began to starve, they started rebelling against the Red Army and a lot of them were massacred. Outside the city, The White Army was tearing itself apart. It had dissolved into a bunch of factions, such as those wanting democracy, republicans, liberals, land owners, and conservatives. They were all

fighting over the future of the nation. Eventually, the Pro-monarchists won out. When they turned the might of the White Army on Stavropol, most of The Reds were already dead. The White Army made sure the rest of them were. The Monarchists tried any citizen of Stavropol who had supported a Red Soldier. The drumhead trials continued for months and thousands were sentenced to death each week. That's the tragedy of Stavropol."

Ilya looked back at Sacha, and the boy seemed solemn. How had he gone through life not knowing this? Ilya had the evils of Communism, Socialism, and Liberalism drummed into his head every year. Maybe the children of aristocracy had the less pleasant bits of history swept under the carpet by their tutors. After all, why would they teach their children the parts that made them look like monsters? And there were a lot of moments in Russian history that the aristocracy would need to hide. Now that he thought about it, the Aristocracy probably didn't want their children knowing anything about Russian history.

As they passed by the doorway to the attic, Ilya noticed that the door was open. He paused for a moment and then continued on down the hall. Once Sacha was safely in his room, he would come back to the attic. Such an open door was a wonderful opportunity for Ilya, but with so many guests in the house, it needed to be closed for everyone's safety. What if there were party revelers already in the attic? What if in their quest for golden keys, the secret wing was opened? There would be deaths again, just like seventy years ago. Ilya laughed. He sounded like the crazy old man in American horror films, warning the teenagers not to go in the woods, because... *It's got a death curse!* Ilya smiled to himself.

“What room did you say you were in again?” Ilya turned to look back at Sacha, but the hallway behind him was deserted. “Sacha?” Ilya sighed. The only open door they'd passed in this corridor had been the antechamber to the attic. Damn it. Ilya backtracked to the open door.

He peered up the dark steps. Beyond the fourth step they disappeared into darkness. There was no electricity up there. He rooted around on the little shelf with his cleaning supplies and found an electric torch. He flicked it on and shined the cone of light up the stairs. It didn't normally seem this scary, did it? “Sacha!” he called out once more, vainly hoping the boy's face would suddenly appear out of the darkness at the top of the stairs, where the beam of light barely stretched. He was ambivalent about the boy's disappearance. Slowly, he walked up the steps, one at a time.

Every pile of junk in the first room of the attic took on all new meaning to Ilya as he stalked around, shining the light on the refuse and castoffs, looking for any tell-tale shifting, in case the boy was playing some sort of prank and hiding, ready to pop out and surprise Ilya at any moment. Though, even Ilya had to admit, Sacha hardly seemed the type for such behavior. It was always the person stumbling around in the dark looking for someone who died horribly. It was like a situation from some awful slasher flick where everyone had the IQ of lemmings. Ilya was the dumbass stumbling around in the dark thinking the person stalking him was their friends getting ready to jump out and say “Boo!” Ilya resisted the urge to yell: *The jokes over, you guys, now come out already. This isn't funny!* And indeed it wasn't. Ilya really ought to just leave and lock the attic door behind him.



If Sacha was in here, he could trap the boy in here for who knows how long. Damn it! He wasn't the sort of person to be able to do that. Should he check the entrance to the secret wing and make sure it was closed? And if it were open, what would he do? Pass out from fright? He sighed. What he should do is go get help. Tabitha would realize what a serious situation this was. And how long would it take him to go all the way down to the kitchens and find her, and then how long would it take her to wrangle help with the party raging in the ballroom and who knows where else in the house by now?

*Come on, you guys!* Ilya fished a metal rod from an old and rusty bed frame free from a pile. He would do one quick circuit of the attic, and then he would leave and lock the door behind him. Except he couldn't lock the door. It was an old school lock and you had to have a key to lock it from either side. Damn Tabitha and her paranoia about his safety. Now he couldn't lock the attic up without going down to the kitchen to get her. Why was he put in this position? He should just walk away right now and let whatever it was that was going on just happen without his attempt to interfere with it. So what if some kid got eaten by a blood-beast? The little brat shouldn't have come up here. It wasn't Ilya's problem.

“Sacha!” he called out. Stupid conscience. He stalked across the room toward the hall and checked the doors as he went. They were all locked as usual. He felt better with the metal rod in his hands, as though he could smack a blood-beast into submission. The secret weakness of these creatures was, of course, two foot long iron rods for beds. He wandered the dark hall, following the square path of the attic, trying every door he came to. They were all locked. Hadn't some of

them been open? Distantly, Ilya heard the sound of cicadas outside the walls. It had been a long time since he'd heard them. Hadn't it been the first day he'd arrived here? The Young Lord had hired exterminators, and someone had told him they were breeding in the walls. He remembered a voice out of memory, something he'd thought had been his imagination: *"I told you the exterminators would be required on a weekly basis!"*

That day... Tabitha's friend had told him something about the Young Lord. He hadn't really paid much attention to everything she'd said. Yaisha had known unsavory things about Aleksander Neimasaurus. He needed to talk to her again. But first, the voice calling for the exterminators, it had been linked to the bugs that even now, Ilya could hear faintly coming from the walls. The man who had shouted... the timber of his voice had been very much like the man who had shouted at him in the secret wing. Not the same voice, but the same type. The same rasping metallic timber. The man from the first day Ilya had arrived here, he was the one who had opened the attic. Somehow, he'd gotten away from the Young Lord and during the distraction of the masquerade, he had come up to the attic... To free his friend, or for some other reason?

Lovely. Now Sacha was up here. Would the boy end up like the other visitors the Young Lord had brought to the locked room in the west wing, who arrived, but no one ever saw leave? Wouldn't Ilya end up like that, too? He should just carry the antique pistol with him whenever he entered this house. It would do wonders for his blood pressure and his life expectancy. As he continued the exploration, the buzzing of the cicadas grew louder. He shined his light down the

wood paneled hallway as he moved along to each door, trying the handle. The buzzing seemed to be reaching a fever pitch, and every instinct in Ilya screamed at him to run. As he shined his light at a door handle, from the corner of his eye, across the way, he saw light beneath one of the doors, pale and flickering. Ilya froze. He could hear nothing beyond the buzz of the cicadas. With that familiar sinking feeling, he knew where that door led; into the study of Amaranth Neimasaurus, and the entrance of the Secret wing.

He switched the electric torch off and stuffed it in a back pocket. Gripping the rod tightly in one hand, he crossed the hall. Should he knock? No, he would surprise the creature in the act of trying to get into the secret wing and bludgeon it to death with his metal stick. Somehow, for some reason, this plan seemed ill-advised. He gripped the door handle in his hand and recoiled. It was hot to the touch. Not enough to burn him, but enough to shock Ilya. He felt the door with the back of his hand, to check for fire, but it was cool, as was the door frame. Only the brass handle was hot. What did it mean? Slowly he turned the hot handle and the door opened. Over the raging of the cicadas, the sound was completely masked.

He pushed it open a crack and looked through. The room was completely different: from what he could see, floral wallpaper adorned the far wall and two large plants sat beneath the window in copper pots. None of this had been there a few days ago. He could see shadows moving against the wall, from the glare of an unseen lamp. He pushed the door open a little bit more, and a bed came into view in the corner of the room, where the desk had sat. Next to it, the secret panel lay open.

The body of a young man, naked, except for a mask resembling an Ocelot, lay on the bed. Blood came from the eye sockets of the mask and his throat had been slashed. He was dead. Half pushed off the bed was a partially dressed woman, her feathered dress still pulled up for her liaison with an Ocelot, the mask still in place, and her throat slit. Beside her was a scalpel, next to a bony long fingered hand in some sort of surgical glove, with the fingers pulled tight against the unnatural length. On the tips of the fingers, coming through the bloody white material, were thick and pointed yellow nails. The hand belonged to a figure in a hooded black cloak crouched over the Sparrow's slit neck, a long black tongue coming out of the hood, and lapping at her neck noisily. Nothing else could be seen of the creature's face from Ilya's vantage point, except that the way the blood-beast lay on the ground was almost serpentine, and the figure had to be at least six and half feet tall when standing. The pipe dropped from Ilya's fingers and the tongue shot back into the hood and the hand grabbed the scalpel from the ground.

“Don't look at me!” the beast screamed, in a hollow and rasping metallic tone. The scalpel slashed downward into the eye sockets of the sparrow mask and the woman's body jerked slightly. Before Ilya could react, another voice came from the hallway:

“Kiril? Are you up here? I don't want to stay at the party anymore!”

A tapping sound could be heard on the glass, as the beast's head shot up, looking toward the door and Ilya, and then toward the glass. Insects were impacting on the glass, in a huge and swarming cloud of grey, with black membranous wings. The creature recoiled from the sight, the hood still hiding his features from Ilya, who turned to run and saw Sacha at the end of the

hallway, the gecko mask clutched awkwardly in his hands, faintly lit by the moonlight from a window. The boy peered fearfully down the hallway.

“Run!” Ilya screamed at the boy, turning to pick up his pipe, and saw the black robed figure rushing toward him. He recoiled in horror, flinging himself against the wall on the other side of the corridor, but he wasn't quick enough, and the beast caught him in mid jump. Then the creature passed through Ilya, as though he were insubstantial. Ilya's head cracked painfully against the wood paneled wall behind him and he saw stars for a moment, and heard Sacha scream, a high-pitched shrill sound, as the beast rushed toward the boy. Ilya stumbled to his feet, shaking his head and saw Sacha turn to run, as the beast caught the boy, the Gecko mask flying from his fingers and landing in a pile of junk, as the beast's hand closed around the boy's neck, lifting him off the ground.

“Don't look at me!” the beast roared, and the scalpel flashed across Sacha's eyes, as his hands, still in the awkward gecko gloves, tried to free himself from the iron grip.

Sacha screamed and blood poured from his mutilated sockets. The boy's hands went up to his eyes and he continued to scream. Across the hall from Ilya cracks had begun to form in the glass, from the sheer weight of insects pressing against it. The blood-beast stalked back down the hall, Sacha thrashing under one arm, again passing through Ilya, along with Sacha. Ilya reached out to the flailing Sacha, but his fingers passed though the boy's feet. The cracks in the glass were now large enough that some of the insects were forcing their long slender bodies through and buzzing into the room. The beast roared in frustration, as the insects made a beeline for him,

launching themselves at the black robed figure. Small cuts appeared in the cloak where they passed by.

The beast lashed out with the scalpel, but did not catch any of them. One of the panes of glass in the window shattered, and the bugs forced themselves through the hole four or five at a time. Their attacks increased against the beast, drawing blood where they slashed him with their wings. The creature howled and retreated through the open panel with Sacha still thrashing and blood flying from his eye sockets around the room. The creatures flooded toward the panel in the wall, even as it slid shut.

Other panes in the window shattered and the insects swarmed the room, covering Kiril and his female companion. Then, before Ilya's very eyes, the scene faded away until the attic room resembled the familiar sight he was used to. It was dark, so Ilya got the electric torch out of his pocket and clicked it on. The desk was back in its place, the bed was gone, and the window was whole again. Ghosts. That's what he'd seen. Wasn't it? Maybe it was some sort of echo of the past. He sat down at the desk and ran through what had happened in his mind, making a list of unexplained things. First, Sacha had been down at the party with everyone else, so how could he be a ghost? Second, He'd seen Kiril and the woman in the sparrow costume there, too, even if he had mistaken the Sparrow for a boy. However, the more he thought about those two facts, he realized that he had not seen anyone else interacting with any of them.

He had assumed the Ocelot and Sparrow were a part of the group with the Hyena and Hawk, but they hadn't said anything, just been standing there fooling around with each other.

Sacha had practically lured Ilya up to the attic, to what? Witness his own death? The third and most severe problem Ilya could come up with: Who had unlocked the attic? The ghosts passed through him, so Ilya felt it was safe to assume that they could not handle material objects. But hadn't Sacha tugged on his sleeve at the party? No, Ilya hadn't seen him do it, he'd assumed that the boy had and turned to see what he wanted. He'd held his hand, but Ilya really hadn't felt it because of the white gloves he wore as part of his uniform. Someone else had opened that door.

Who? The theory he'd developed earlier was good, but now he heard no insects, and there was no one here trying to get into the secret wing. He needed to investigate the history of this house to see what he could find out about anyone who had died here. Especially a pair of brothers named Kiril and Sacha. The mask. Sacha's gecko mask had been flung away from him when the beast attacked. What if it had been sitting here, buried in junk for all these years? He got up from the desk and walked back down the hallway to where the attack had occurred, if it ever had. The piles of junk were at least twice as tall now as they had been in the dream.

The mask had been flung toward the corner, by the window, so Ilya waded through the piles to the back, nearly tripping over an antique toy Soldier, about a foot tall. He kicked it out of the way, and moved a decrepit shelf from his path. The back pile was still quite large, but he knew what to look for: a mix of bright green and glassy, reflective chrome eyes. He spent a few minutes sifting through the junk, moving aside old books, a mattress, and a tarnished silver serving platter. Something fell behind him and Ilya whirled around. The room was deserted and dark. He scanned the piles carefully with the beam of light from the electric torch. He couldn't

tell anything amiss in such chaos, so he went back to digging. He was becoming a little fed up with the work when something green caught his eye. He reached down in between a kaleidoscope and a bag full of clothing and pulled the object free.

His heart sank as he shined the flashlight on it. It was a child sized mask of a gecko, the chrome eyes shattered by the weight of junk pressing down on them, and the once bright green fabric faded to a dingy swamp-colored tone by decades of dust and mold. It was Sacha's. Damn it. Even the eyes were broken, just as the boy's had been ruined by the scalpel. Ilya brushed an errant tear away from his cheek. Sacha had been murdered by the blood-beast, and no one had probably ever found his body. It was probably somewhere in the secret wing, reduced to nothing but bones by now. More tears came, and Ilya wiped them away on a dusty sleeve, not worrying about his dust allergies for the moment. Somebody should have done something about this. But Ilya knew what had happened; the Neimasaurus family had covered up the triple homicide that occurred under their roof, probably pretending the dead guests had left early. How many servants had colluded in the scheme? If the horrible truth had been revealed, then the whole business would have been finished seventy years ago.

But now, Ilya was left to deal with it. He picked up a large piece of the shattered eye from Sacha's mask. One thing bothered him though, why had only he seen these ghosts down at the party? The fragment of chrome, though dingy with dust and time, reflected Ilya's cheek back at him. He twisted the chrome in his hand, the reflection going up his face, to the bone white masquerade mask he still wore, and his left eye. He brought the piece of chrome in close and



examined his eye, which seemed to be glowing slightly in the darkness, but it was just reflected light from the electric torch. Maybe his freak eyes were good for something after all.

But the masquerade mask on his face had reminded him. He dropped the chrome back into the pile. He had a job to do downstairs, and Elem was short-staffed for such an event. If his absence was noticed, he would be in trouble. He got to his feet and hurried from the attic, hoping he spied no more ghosts, because he had a feeling that the dead had nothing happy to show him, being dead and all. He closed the attic door behind him, even though he couldn't lock it, and hurried downstairs. He still had no idea who had opened it, though. Tonight, he was a footman, not an investigator of supernatural mysteries.

## CHAPTER 12: THE MASQUERADE OF VICIOUS ANIMALS

The party was still in full swing as Ilya hurried back into the ballroom. Where had he set his tray? The bar, he'd asked for all those shots of vodka and then wandered off with a ghost up into the attic and watched a bunch of bugs attack a blood-beast. Sometimes Ilya's life got a little far-fetched, even for him. His tray was not waiting for him as he skirted the edge of the party over to the harassed bartenders.

“Where's my tray?” he asked, looking around the bar for it. The man behind the counter shrugged and moved on to preparing half a dozen mint flavored vodka shots. Ilya slumped his shoulders and took to watching the bar like a hawk for some other unsuspecting waiter to set their tray down. Then it would be Ilya's shiny new tray. A finger tapped him on the shoulder and he turned around with a pleasant smile. The pleasantries died on his lips as he saw who it was. He was standing face to face with a Phoenix.

“Hi, Ilya,” Shoji said warmly. His costume was truly ostentatious up close, with all the details lost on him from across the ballroom. The golden mask was inlaid with small gems and a carved pattern of feathers, as were the gold of his gloves.

“Good evening, sir, how can I help you?” Ilya said, looking down at the floor and not making eye contact, just as Elem had instructed, even if that wasn't what he'd meant.

“I've been looking for you all evening, to introduce you to my friends.”

*Yay.* Being blinded and dragged into hell by a monster that wants to eat my flesh and drink my blood doesn't seem so bad, Ilya thought. From his vantage point looking down at the cherry wood floor, he saw a red gloved hand, with the fingers ending in golden filigreed talons, reach out and take Ilya's elbow. His lower lip curled in what could have been disgust or any ugly smile. “Sir, I have to work.”

“Please, call me Shoji.” The gloved hand pulled him into the reveling animals of the masquerade. “And you know what Aleksander wants, he gets. Right now he wants to show everyone your eyes. Unfortunately for you, they look a little too striking in these wonderful masks we all have right now. Just imagine how you'd look as a phoenix with flaming eyes?”

If only he'd had a tray, then he would have had an excuse to flee from him. Stupid ghosts. They passed a Hedgehog and Porcupine, who were whispering to each other loudly about why the Phoenix was leading a servant by the arm. The talons were uncomfortably sharp on his forearm, the points piercing his jacket and sleeve. As he was marched through the animals, Ilya noticed a curious thing; none

of the revelers were wearing their jackets or shoes any more. The guests were barefoot and stripped down to their shirts.

A brave Tiger Shark broke ranks with the Dolphin and Bat, and approached the Phoenix.

“Hello!” Shoji said brightly, not breaking his stride, the other boy's half-mumbled words dying on his lips as the Phoenix feather cloak smacked him in the face as Shoji passed. His friends laughed at him, and Ilya gave a thumbs up to the excellent costume of the young man dressed as a Bat. Though from the exaggerated fangs and general evilness of the costume, Ilya supposed it was meant to be more a vampire bat. Ilya had pictured himself as more of an awkward and goofy looking fruit bat, with oversized ears and a bunch of grapes in one hand, or maybe a pomegranate.

“Victor's always hitting on me, but his penis is so small that it's not worth the effort. Aleksander only invites him because they go to school together. I don't know why he insists on dressing as a predator.” The Oriental Boy had a pleasant expression on his face as he whispered to Ilya. “Are you familiar with the hawks and sparrows?”

“Of course,” Ilya said, having no idea what specific significance those two birds had beyond the obvious.

“Which are you?”

“I’m more of an owl. I just hang out in my tree and do my own thing.”

Shoji chuckled and Ilya felt the talons dig into the skin of his arm. “Still, if you had to choose between the two...”

Ilya's eyes began to water a bit at the pain in his arm, but he said nothing.

Shoji leaned in close and whispered into his ear: “I think you're a sparrow.”

The sound of the metal gong echoed through the room and everyone called out “Ten o'clock!” The pain in his arm ceased as The Phoenix withdrew the talons. Cries of “Shirts!” rippled through the revelers.

“Ilya, hold these for a moment.” Shoji slipped out of the talons and passed them to him. Then he pushed the red feather cloak over his shoulders and began unbuttoning his shirt. With his old friend, Sinking Feeling, snuggling up to him, Ilya looked around the room and saw all of the young men at the party doing the same. The shirt was untucked and Shoji had it off in no time. He passed it to Ilya and took back the gloves.

“Make sure that doesn't get wrinkly,” Shoji said, slipping the gloves back on and fluffing out his cloak. Ilya carefully folded the shirt, noticing the solid gold diamond studded cufflinks left on the sleeves. Ilya made a mental note to himself to clear the room before eleven rolled around and the trousers came off. Other

servants were going around the room collecting shirts and one came to relieve Ilya of his burden of white silk before he could throw it in the trash at the first opportunity, after urinating on it. Then Ilya noticed something that was, in his opinion, extraordinarily unfair. The girls were not stripping an article of clothing away, every hour on the hour. They were all fully dressed, their beautiful, long gowns still fully laced and buttoned. The unfairness of that hit Ilya right in the gut. Not only was he being forced to stay at the party of slutty rich kids, but the only people he wanted to see naked were the only ones still dressed. They were spread out in two or three cliques in the room, laughing and whispering to each other as they pointed at various men around the room. Would it kill fate to let Ilya see a breast or two? Maybe a little bit more...

Then Aleksander came into view, resplendent in The White Death, the light of the chandeliers reflecting off the crystal maw of teeth making the light seem to shimmer around him. He was holding forth on some probably inane subject, which Ilya had no interest in and made him seem like the bullying raping cat-killing dickhead he was. He was, of course, shirtless as were his court of carnivores around him.

“Ilya, why are you still dressed?” he called out when he saw the Phoenix approaching with Ilya.

Shoji leaned over and whispered to him: “Remember what I said the other day. Just be terrible once and he'll leave you alone.” Then he turned to The White Death with a pleasant smile on his face. “I found him by the bar, standing around.”

“Not working? Well, if you don't want to work, then you'll have to be a guest!”

“Sir, I was trying to work, but someone stole my drink tray!” Ilya was utterly indignant at this accusation, because just this once, he had actually been trying to do his job. Was he to be held accountable for ghosts luring him up to the attic? “Now would anyone like anything to drink?”

“Everyone is fine,” Aleksander said loudly, before several hopeful carnivores could place orders and give Ilya just cause to flee the scene.

Like hell he would have returned with their orders. Sadly, Aleksander apparently knew that and had stopped him cold. But Ilya had other tricks up his sleeve. He would follow part of Shoji's advice. Ilya intended to be terrible. He had been looking forward to poisoning their livers. It was their choice...

“Now, there is something very unusual about Ilya Kollide. Do you all see it?”

A heavy set Lion leaned in, pushing aside a slender Eagle, while a pair of extremely tall matching King Cobras tilted their heads up and down taking Ilya in.

“I know!” the Hyena with the annoying laugh from earlier said, still with the rather dour Hawk and a new rather short Mouse. “I noticed it earlier this evening.”

For a moment, Ilya was struck by the bizarre sight of the Hawk wrapping his arms around the mouse. It seemed appropriate and wrong at the same time.

“The eyes?” The Lion leaned in and tilted Ilya's head into the light. “I thought it was just a trick of light.”

“He told me that it's some sort of disease,” the Hawk said, leaning down and nipping the mouse on the back of the neck. “What did you call it?”

“Ceritikonus.”

The King Cobras nodded in unison. “We've seen it before at our father's hospital.” Their eyes slid over to the Mouse in the Hawk's embrace before sliding back over to Ilya. They tilted their heads to one side and continued to stare.

The Eagle pushed the Lion out of the way for a closer look. “Do you see normally?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, not bothering to elaborate.



“No you don't,” the King Cobras said. “You don't see well at distance because the rods in your eyes are malformed.”

“I think they're quite beautiful,” Shoji said, looking at the King Cobras with a small smile on his face, which Ilya correctly identified as distaste. It had taken him awhile to figure out his expressions, but once you cut through the fake pleasantries, then a small smile like that meant something negative, whereas a full smile meant boredom. It was impossible by this logic to determine when Shoji was actually happy.

“Let's test his vision out,” the Hyena said with a nasty smile and chuckle.

There was a commotion at one of the garden doors and a jubilant starfish came through the door, grinning from ear to ear, a golden key held aloft in his hands. “I've got one!” the fool said, heading toward the Phoenix and White Death. A dog pile ensued as an Elephant, Dingo, Gila Monster, and Cheetah all attempted to grab the key at once. Aleksander laughed. Shoji smiled indulgently. It was a full smile, so he was bored.

“What a fool!” the Hyena said, his brown eyes avidly following the brawl. “He waved the key around.”

“The real fools are the ones trying to steal the key from him,” the Phoenix said quietly. All eyes turned toward him. Aleksander wrapped his hand around the Bird's slender neck and pulled him close.

“You promised not to tell,” the White Death whispered into Shoji's ear, biting on the lobe gently with his teeth.

“I'm a liar. Does that surprise you?” Shoji reached up with a taloned hand and gripped Alexander's arm. Little pin-pricks of blood appeared in the white silk. He smiled pleasantly at Aleksander.

“Cats have claws too...” Aleksander reached out with his free hand and placed a gloved hand with silver tipped claws on the Phoenix's chest. Blood beaded up beneath the silver and they smiled at each other.

Ilya took the opportunity presented by their sadistic game of innuendo and ducked out of the circle of animals, The King Cobras followed him with their eyes, turning their necks to see him retreat. They were a creepy pair, for sure. Ilya ducked behind a large Hippopotamus dancing with a dark skinned, cross-eyed Water Snake half his size, though they seemed quite enamored of each other. This party was getting too weird for Ilya and getting worse by the minute. He looked away quickly as the Hippo put his hand down the Water Snake's pants.

“Get a feel for it,” the Snake breathed in the Hippo's ear. Ilya made a beeline for the door, noticing around him that there were very few servants left in the room now, with most guests going directly to the bar for drinks. The room was not as full as it had been, either. There were at least a hundred guests missing. Perhaps they were on key quests, or otherwise engaged. The foyer was nearly

deserted as Ilya stepped out into it. There were two other servers frantically signing to one another at the other end. Ilya hurried over to them and joined their conference in progress.

*Where is everybody?* Ilya signed.

*We're pulling out, things are getting too crazy in there,* an older man signed, looking disgusted as he glanced back at the ballroom. *The Bartenders are the last line, and they've been told to retreat at eleven.*

*We're all holing up in the kitchen,* the younger man of the pair signed. *They'll have to ring the bells in their rooms if they want service now. One of them felt my ass, can you believe it?*

Ilya had very little difficulty believing it, and felt better knowing that other servants had been harassed, too.

*Once they're drunk enough, even you look appetizing!* the old servant signed, his shoulders shaking silently with laughter.

The sound of footsteps echoed on the marble behind him and Ilya turned to see the twin Cobras coming toward him. He turned back toward the servants to see them retreating down a side passage and out of sight. *Shit.* Ilya turned back around with a pleasant smile on his face as the Cobras slid up to him. In the relative darkness of the foyer, since the lights of the chandeliers had been

switched off leaving on only a few of the wall mounted lights, the cobras were menacing. Their black scaled masks had exaggerated ivory-carved fangs that almost obscured their mouth slits, making them look positively evil. They had snake skin cloaks as well, with their naked pale chests naturally aping the underbelly of cobras. Fortunately, since their animals had no claws, the twins did not have clawed or taloned gloves. They did their best to keep their hands folded behind their backs to mimic a snake.

Then they both spoke at once: “We like people with unusual features.”

Ilya's eye twitched behind the mask, what the hell was he supposed to say to that? “Thanks,” he mumbled. He was beginning to understand how he made other people feel when he said weird off the cuff remarks. He would try not to do that anymore. He would fail, but it was better to try than to not try at all. He'd read that somewhere. “Can I help you?”

“We believe so,” the Cobras said in unison.

How were they doing that? How could they say everything in unison? They couldn't possibly have planned it out. For a second, Ilya was jealous of them and the fact that he did not have a twin bother to speak in unison with. He grew slightly melancholy for a moment. If he'd had a twin brother, there would be someone else in the world that understood him and was going through the same things he was. “What do you need?” Ilya said, still distracted by the fantasy

unfurling in his mind of a twin brother and how it would have changed every instance of his life for the better, without any possible negatives.

“We like to fuck virgins,” the Cobras said in monotone that made it seem like they'd said *we like fish*, or *we're vegetarians*, a normal everyday tone of voice. The effect was slightly comical and menacing at the same time. “We think you're a virgin.”

Ilya's twin brother fantasy came to a crashing halt in his mind. “Sorry, no, I'm not a virgin. A lot of people get that opinion but I've really slept with a lot of women. The first one was when I was thirteen...” *Thirteen? You were reading comic books in class and refusing to make eye contact with the girl sitting next to you...* “After that it was a steady stream of girlfriends for me. So I guess you can't break me in. Sorry to disappoint you. In fact, I'm going out with one of the maids here...” Ilya was babbling now, he needed specifics to convince them, as the Cobras looked on at his speechifying with polite interest. “I mainly like their vaginas, but their breasts are nice too. I like to play with them in my hands. I also enjoy penetration frequently with my girlfriend.”

That perked up the interest of the Cobras. “Vaginal or anal?”

“Both?” Ilya had no idea if women did that sort of thing, having never been with one. Was he the sort of guy who would like that sort of thing with a girl? He didn't think so. It seemed frighteningly unsanitary to him. There was no

telling what sort of bacteria and who knows what else he would get on himself trying such a thing. Plus, it just seemed a little disrespectful.

“It sounds to us like you're still a virgin.”

“But I have a girlfriend!”

The Cobras looked at each other and then back at Ilya, their heads tilted slightly. “But you haven't been fucked yet.”

“What?” Ilya was flummoxed for a moment.

“You can fuck all the girls you like. Until you're on the receiving end, you're a virgin.” The Cobras moved in close to him. “We won't hurt you. Unless you want us to. You might be surprised at what you want when you're on all fours.”

Ilya looked at them for a moment, weighing his options. Then he turned and ran as fast as he could. He headed down a side corridor, with no idea where it went, and turned back to see the Cobras chasing after him, their snake skin cloaks billowing out behind them, smiles on their mouths and laughter in their eyes.

“We want you to run so we can chase you,” they said.

Ilya ducked down a side corridor, which was utterly unfamiliar, and lined with pale blue drapes and a white marble floor. A series of flickering gas lamps lit the corridor, except they weren't gas lamps. They just had flickering bulbs to give

the effect, which seemed odd to Ilya. This wasn't the time to dwell on light bulbs. There was a large door at the end which Ilya flung open and ran inside. He closed the door and turned the latch, before taking note of his surroundings. The room was dark, but a window with drapes pinned back let in silvery moonlight. It was a music room. There was a black grand piano with ivory keys, a wood-paneled harpsichord with inlaid gold, a full size freestanding bronze harp, and a large shelf to the right with a dozen large black cases against the wall. Ilya flashed back to his band class last summer and recognized violins, flutes, cellos, and an accordion. There were half a dozen chairs spread around the room, and the far wall had a couch running the length of it as well.

The room had an air of neglect to it, with a thin layer of dust on everything, with only the piano showing any signs of use, or cleaning. A knock came at the door, and someone turned the handle.

“Hello?” the Cobras said, their voices traveling easily through the door. “We know you're in there. Open the door, and we'll have some fun.”

Ilya froze in place and said nothing. Another knock came, then silence for a few moments. Then came furious hammering and the door lurched precariously as one of the Cobras threw his weight against it.

“Open the fucking door, you little shit, and we won't make you bleed too much when we get in there.” It was as much a scream as a hiss, and it sent chills

down Ilya's spine. He found himself fondly remembering being chased barefoot, down the road by the Young Lord a day or two ago. He just didn't know when he had it good, did he? Ilya dragged one of the chairs over and propped it under the door. He'd seen people do this in movies, but had no idea if he'd done it right, or how it was supposed to work. Silence came from the other side after the assault.

“Brother, go and fetch the White Death,” one of the Cobras said, and the voice was weaker, almost effeminate sounding. “He will have a key to the door. I will wait and make sure the prey does not escape.”

“But brother, the White Death will take our prey from us, or make us share.” The other Cobra's voice sound younger and more timid than the first voice.

“Why would he? The White Death can have the Phoenix whenever he wants.”

“True. Besides the eyes, there's not much of value on the servant.”

“Precisely, though I am looking forward to staring into those eyes as we take him, brother.”

“As am I, brother.”

“I wonder, would the White Death let us keep them as a souvenir?”

“I don't think he would. The Phoenix would forbid it.”



Footsteps retreated down the corridor. Ilya headed over to the window, to see if he could get out that way. Outside the window, the garden was spread out in front of him, with its hedgerows, fountains, and benches. Across from him, he could see through the open French windows of the ballroom and the revelers within. At some point, the eleven o'clock gong had sounded, because no one had any pants on over there. Fortunately, they still had their underwear on along with their masks and bits of costume. Though for some of them, that was very little. Ilya was about to open the window when he saw below him the Tiger Shark, which the Phoenix had said possessed a small penis, right below the window on the ground, with his legs spread, and another youth laying on the ground, his head bobbing up and down in the Shark's lap. Ilya thought maybe he saw some bunny ears on the youth's head as the Shark ran his hands through his blond hair.

Ilya jerked backwards and quickly pulled the drapes shut, the bronze pins keeping it in place snapping and flying across the room. There would be no escape that way. The second they were done, Ilya was going out that window. Ilya turned a lamp on over by the couch and sat down. The golden glow illuminated the room thoroughly to Ilya's darkness adjusted eyes. He sighed and curled up on the couch for a few minutes, trying his best not to think uncharitable thoughts toward gay men. He'd faced a similar dilemma when his parents had been killed. Just because two Tatar boys had been to blame didn't mean they were all bad. Ilya had attended one of the executions when he'd been in Petrograd, before the social

services had shipped him to Altai and his new life with his uncle. It had been a cold spring morning and Ilya, along with a dozen other witnesses and his social worker, had gathered in the yard of Plesheyev Prison.

They'd waited a few minutes, while a prison guard strung out a black hose near the small tile square against a wooden wall, with a small drain in the middle of it. Two guards emerged from a battered red door, with the murderer between them. He couldn't have been more than a year or two older than Ilya, his shaggy black hair hanging wild about him, his shirt sleeve ripped, and his hands cuffed behind his back. They got halfway across the square before the boy started to struggle again, and the guards gripped him by the arms as he flailed his legs in the air, and his hair whipped around his head.

The boy screamed "No!" over and over again as they carried his flailing body over to the tile square, where two white-dressed orderlies were wheeling up a gurney with a black plastic bag on it. A doctor in a white coat was with them, a cigarette in his hand, which had made Ilya frown. But he was far enough away to be protected from the fumes. What was going to happen didn't seem to sink in for Ilya at all. He didn't know what he thought was going to happen. As they dragged the boy over to the tile, Ilya could see that he was crying. One of the guards slapped him across the face, hard, and they forced him down on to his knees on

the tile. The doctor flicked his cigarette down onto the pavement and crushed it under his foot. The guard with the hose leaned against the wall and looked bored.

“Look forward, please,” One of the guards said in a monotone to the boy.

“Wha...” the boy began to say through his tears, when the other guard stepped forward and placed a pistol to the back of the boy’s head and fired once. The bullet and blood sprayed against the wooden wall and the boy fell over onto the tile, dead. The doctor stepped forward and leaned down. He checked the boy for a pulse while the orderlies unfolded the vinyl bag between them.

“He's dead,” the doctor said after a few moments, and the orderlies moved forward smoothly to pick the corpse up and placed it in the black bag, which went onto the gurney.

The guard with the hose stepped forward and started rinsing the blood from the wood and tiles, the water flowing down the drain. The guard who'd fired the shot holstered the pistol and peered at the wood. The gurney squeaked as the orderlies pushed it away and back through the red door they had emerged from. The hose was wound up and put away, and the executioner picked his bullet out of the wall with a gloved hand.

“Hey kid, you want this?” the guard asked, holding the bullet out to Ilya as the social worker shepherded him outside. Ilya shook his head emphatically to both the bullet and what had happened. He hadn't wanted that at all. Whatever

justice felt like, this awfulness in the pit of his stomach wasn't it. At least he hoped that there was more to it than that. Everyone spoke so highly of it. But all Ilya had seen was retribution and punishment. When the boy's accomplice was shot the next day, Ilya had not attended the execution. In fact, he had written a letter to the judge and begged him to reconsider the death sentence for the second boy. The execution had been carried out as scheduled. Ilya wondered if the judge had even cared or bothered to read the letter.

A week later, the Judge's response had arrived. In the letter, Judge Ivanko, whom Ilya remembered as a stern silver-haired man with a fairly absurd mustache, had explained that such a plea cannot be considered after a sentence is handed down. If Ilya had made a statement during the trial, he would have considered it before sentencing. Ivanko had praised Ilya's compassion in begging leniency for his parents' murderers and wished that things had not turned out the way they had. It had been a nice gesture by the judge. But the facts remained: Ilya had been too afraid to speak up during the trial with everyone looking at him, and now four people were dead instead of two. Because he had been shy.

He got up off the couch. Why had he suddenly thought of that? It had been months ago. He wandered over to the window and peeked behind the curtain and quickly withdrew. The Bunny and Shark had started an all new activity. Damn them. There wasn't just resentment at them for keeping him in this room because

he was too embarrassed to climb over them, but jealousy too. They'd known each other all of five minutes and were having sex, while Ilya had never so much as kissed a girl. Ilya wandered over to the shelf of instrument cases. It had been months since he'd last played a violin. His parents never had the money to get him his own, so he'd played school instruments. He wasn't a prodigy by any definition, but he wasn't bad at it either. He took the violin case off the shelf and sat down in one of the chairs to open it. The locks were a little rusty. It had probably been years since anyone had played it. The case squeaked as he opened it. Ilya sneezed at all the dust and worried about his allergies for a moment. The violin within was still in good condition, and playable after a bit of tuning.

It took him a few minutes before he could start playing. The bow was a little brittle but still worked. He would have to be careful with the strings too, they could snap if he got too vigorous. He picked out the violin line from the silentium movement of the *Tabula Rasa* by Arvo Part. It suited his rather depressed and anticipatory mood. It was a long piece and Ilya improvised a bit as he played, since he couldn't remember all fifteen minutes of the song by heart. At the end, he did his best to replicate the slowly fading cycle of sound, but it was difficult as a solo. Polite clapping came from behind him. Ilya whirled around, getting up so fast he knocked the chair over.

“It loses something without the other violins, doesn't it?” Aleksander said, his mask resting on the piano, along with the pointed gloves, dressed only in white silk cloak and a small pair of black boxer-briefs. The door was closed behind him and there was no sign of any Cobras. “But still, it was nice.”

Ilya backed away from him, clutching the violin like a weapon. Though, if he were honest with himself, he was slightly relieved to see him instead of the Cobras.

“It's alright, I distracted the Dolokov brothers with a sheep and a zebra. They were just trying to scare you anyway. They like creeping people out.”

Ilya lowered the violin, letting some of the tension drain away from him.

“I have to admit that I've become a little infatuated with you. At first, I just wanted to mess with you a bit, because you're so socially awkward that you never catch on, but I find the way you start babbling under pressure to be rather charming. I like the way your mind seems to wander in a conversation, and I like how intelligent you are. While most of your knowledge is useless, even I can admit, you seem to know quite a bit about everything. I'm sure if asked you about the conservation efforts of the Siberian Snow Leopard, you could tell me plenty.” Aleksander was taking slow and measured steps toward him and Ilya was taking equally measured steps backwards.

Ilya bit his tongue before he could start babbling about the doomed efforts to preserve the Snow Leopard, taken since 1980. Only a population of a few hundred were left in the wild and soon, scientists feared there would not be enough genetic diversity in the remaining stock for the species to be viable, so conservationists had been taking genetic materials from specimens caught and tagged for the last five years. It had been in an article in some magazine he had read. Human hunting was blamed for the near-extinction of the Snow Leopard.

“I’m not going to rape you in here. I’m not that sort of person. I’m going to give you a choice. It’s simple really, come to my room tomorrow at midnight, and do anything I wish.” Aleksander had backed him into the corner of the room, near the window, where soft groaning and moaning could still be heard. Aleksander looked behind the curtain for a few moments and smiled. “Huh, it is small.”

Any relief Ilya had felt at his arrival vanished at Aleksander’s words. He thought about kicking him in the crotch and running, but where would he go?

Aleksander tore himself away from the curtains and looked back at him. His smile was gone. “If you don’t, I will fire you, and your uncle Demetri. I’ll do everything I can to make sure he never finds employment with another aristocratic family or their business interests again.” Aleksander reached out and ran the tip of his finger down Ilya’s nose. “It’s you or your uncle. I’ll let you decide.” The hand moved down to cup Ilya’s chin. “If you choose me, I won’t hurt you, I’ll make it

enjoyable.” Without warning, Aleksander leaned down and kissed Ilya on the mouth.

Ilya broke away from him, pressing himself against the wall. He looked down at the ground and said nothing. His mind was blank with shock.

“I’m quite good at giving pleasure.” Aleksander turned away from him, picked the mask up off the piano, and put it back on. “Normally, I would say something like, it will be better than you could possibly imagine. But I would never say that to someone as creative and possessing such a vivid imagination as you.” Then he was gone from the music room, leaving Ilya with a horrible decision.



## CHAPTER 13: THE MANY CHOICES OF ONE WITH NO OPTIONS

Ilya was not going to give in to Aleksander's demands, not ever. It was a matter of principle. Like when his mother had tried to give him the shrimp, he would turn the other cheek and ignore reality. He did have to tell Demetri though, now that Ilya was about to cost him his job and his life. Demetri had been here almost fifteen years and it had taken Ilya one week to wreck it all by merely existing. Why would Demetri choose Ilya over his job, his friends, and his life? Sacrificing Ilya would seem like a small penance to him. What had he done to endear his uncle to him?

Ilya had been nothing but trouble for the man since he arrived. Ilya could be Aleksander's toy and continue to be a thorn in his uncle's side... Or he could kill himself. Was he brave enough to do that? Is that what he really had to do? Wasn't there another way out? Something else he could do? Another question he could ask himself? He could run away, but he'd tried that the first day here and Demetri had dragged him back. So he couldn't escape. If he told Demetri, the man would loathe him. But what if he didn't? Ilya remembered the shotgun he had carried around when they'd buried Arsenic to, as Demetri put it, "Ventilate the Young Lord." What if Demetri actually killed Aleksander? The image of the Tatar boy's brain splattering against the wood and tile of the execution yard flashed across Ilya's mind. He didn't want to see his uncle's remains washed down a drain after becoming a murderer on Ilya's behalf. Now Aleksander's brain water being hosed away was a much more pleasing image.

He could walk into the secret wing and give himself to whatever was still alive in there. Ilya shuddered at the thought. He could let all the minks loose, but Aleksander had been wearing a fur coat the day he assassinated Arsenic. Perhaps the minks had already met their end. Ilya tried to suppress a smile at the thought.

He could still hear the sounds of the party outside his window. He should have gone back to work after the confrontation with Aleksander, but nothing could make him go back in there. He'd fled back to his uncle's cottage and went to bed. He rolled onto his side and pulled the blanket up over his head. He wouldn't live much longer than the minks. That was a depressing thought. There wouldn't even be a fur coat to show that he existed. He could slit his wrists. He shivered at the thought of using a knife on himself. He still fainted at the sight of his own blood. The last thing he wanted was to get the job half done and then fall unconscious and have Demetri discover him in the bathroom and rush him to the hospital. He didn't want to make anyone feel guilty.

He could get in the bathtub and turn the tap on until the tub was full and then drop a clock radio or hair dryer in. He didn't have either of those things. He could get the toaster from the kitchen, but the cord wasn't very long so he'd have to get an extension cord from the garage. He would have to wear his clothes in the bath because it would be too embarrassing to be found naked in a tub of water with a toaster in his lap. Was there enough current in an outlet to kill him though? He couldn't be sure, so that method was out. He wasn't risking his life on a method that wasn't one hundred percent fatal.

How about hanging himself? It seemed like it would be too painful if he used a belt and a door. He would have to get a rope from the garage, though fortunately, he'd read about how to make a noose in some book. Maybe that was more unfortunate. He could hang himself from one of the branches of a nearby tree. But swamp trees weren't that big, or tough. What if the branch snapped and he fell to the ground and broke his leg? Then he would be stuck there with a noose around his neck calling for help. Whoever found him would undoubtedly give him a judgmental stare, too. And then say things like "What were you thinking?" or, "How could you be so stupid?" and the old chestnut; "Do you want to talk about it?" No, Ilya did not. That method was out.

He could shoot himself in the head with Demetri's rifle. That would be too difficult to do because Ilya had short arms and probably wouldn't be able to get the barrel into his mouth and be able to pull the trigger, so that was out. He could go into the swamp and volunteer himself as dinner to the cannibals. He could go back to the ballroom and get a nice bottle of red wine to pair with himself, in case the Italians were discriminating in their consumption of human flesh. Humans were red meat, weren't they? Italians had white wine with chicken, and red with beef, so Ilya should be properly served with red. He'd have to get the boat and get captured and then get dismembered and that seemed too scary, so that was out.

He could take some pills and write a suicide note about how no one understood him, but that might make his uncle feel bad. He didn't have any pills, either. He could

drown himself in the Bleeding Swamp. No, that sounded very un-hygienic. He wouldn't be able to pull that off. Suicide was hard stuff. No wonder more people didn't do it. He needed a book to read about it, some sort of how-to manual on offing one's self. He could throw himself down the grand stairs of the foyer in Neimasaurus. No doubt the blood from his cracked skull would spill artfully onto the white marble and the party goers would gather around him and feel sorry about what they'd done to Ilya, especially the Young Lord, who would know that he was to blame.

Aleksander would feel guilt about it for the rest of his life and probably open up Neimasaurus as a home for unwanted teenage boys in Ilya's memory. But then he would probably start abusing them, because Aleksander was an evil raping-cat-killing-son-of-a-bitch, and a bunch more suicides would follow as the other boys came to the same conclusion Ilya had. He couldn't throw himself down the stairs. He would be responsible for a horrifying chain of events if he did. Besides, he might just be paralyzed from the neck down by the fall, and what if Aleksander volunteered to take care of him?

Then a theory crystallized in his mind. What if he wrote a note explaining to his uncle that he was tired of being a burden to him and had run away to seek his fortunes in China? He picked China because he'd liked the guests from the party and always wanted to see the Forbidden City and the Great Wall. Then, he would take the antique pistol and go to the secret wing, because the attic was probably still unlocked, and go to the foot of the rickety wooden stairs. Then he would shoot himself in the head with the pistol as he

flung himself over the edge. In case the pistol didn't work, the fall should break his neck, and if it didn't kill him, it would at least knock him unconscious and the blood-beast would do the rest. It was perfect. Damn it. Now he had to kill himself.

He sat up, pulling the blanket off his head. He got the urn off the shelf. He would have to sign to them what he was doing and hope that they would understand. It took him a while to explain everything. He told them what had happened to him tonight and what he had decided to do about it. *I'm sorry*, he signed at the end, because he didn't know what else to say. His mother wanted him to sleep on it and see if he still wanted to die in the morning. He acquiesced and kissed the urn. His father was mad at him. He wanted Ilya to tell Demetri.

Ilya was a mama's boy, so he slept on it. He didn't really sleep though. He just sat in bed waiting for the dawn. The sounds of the masquerade died down around 2 a.m., while Demetri came in at three o'clock. Ilya heard him pattering about in the kitchen for a bit. Then a knock came at his door. He did not answer. He would pretend that he was asleep. Demetri went down the hall to his own room and Ilya heard the shower switch on. His father glared at him from the urn, reminding him of his advice. Ilya turned onto his side and ignored him. The shower turned off and Ilya heard Demetri climb into bed. Ilya closed his eyes and waited.

Finally, dawn started to peek through the curtains and Ilya got out of bed. He dressed slowly, feeling a significant amount of trepidation at his task. Maybe he should

just run away? No, he didn't have any money for a train ticket and he wasn't going to steal. He sat down at the little wooden desk in his room and got out a piece of paper. It took him a few moments to decide what to say, but then inspiration struck:

*Dear Uncle Demetri,*

*I've decided that I am too much trouble for you and that it is unfair to expect you to shoulder the burden of caring for me. To this end, I have decided to run away and become a hobo. I will live off the charity of Christians and get a nice cardboard box to live in at the Moscow subway system. Don't look for me, either! I'll just run away from you.*

*Thanks for everything,*

*Ilya Kollide.*

*P.S. The secret ingredient in Leonya's meat pie is two tablespoons of yellow mustard and beef stock boiled with several bay leaves for about an hour, in case you try to make the pies, since Hobos don't make enough money for me to ever make one myself, ever again. Which is kind of sad, when you think about it.*

*P.P.S. I'm leaving my parent's ashes with you because Hobos don't have anywhere to put an urn and somebody might steal it.*

He put the pen down and looked over what he'd written. Had he leaned on the whole hobo angle a little too hard? He liked the idea of being one, but not the reality. He enjoyed the no responsibility part, but not the freeze to death in winter part. Hobo... Maybe he just liked the sound of the word. He could see himself in some patchwork trousers and boots with holes in them, in a giant fur hat and crazy beard sitting by the side of a road complaining to passersby that his teeth itched as he swigged from a bottle of vodka to keep warm, with a little tin can in front of him to collect donations for his next bottle.

He left the note on the kitchen table and patted the antique pistol in his pocket reassuringly. He took a deep breath and stepped outside. It was the first step in his own march to Golgotha. Or was the walk to Neimasaurus more like his own passing through Gethsemane? He really didn't know enough about religion to make such a decision. But he did know that since he wasn't baptized, he would go to purgatory, rather than hell, for committing suicide. Ilya supposed that was a good thing.

He closed the door behind him and looked up into the early morning dawn. The sun wasn't in sight yet, but it would only be minutes. He needed to get to the secret wing before anyone was awake to see him. He looked down and saw a cage in front of him.

The top of it was white, and the lower half was red. A note was taped to the front of it.

Ilya leaned down and read what it said:

*Help! I'm an indoors cat! Please take care of me and don't let me outside where it's dangerous!*

The note had been taped in front of metal bars in what Ilya now knew, was a cat carrier. He lifted the note up and was met with a pair of blue eyes staring back at him. A faint meow came from within. Ilya squatted down in front of it and saw a big gray cat looking up at him, a faint splash of white fur on the face

“Where did you come from?”

The cat got up and pushed its face against the bars, sniffing at Ilya.

“Are you hungry? I think we've still got the kibble I bought.”

“Meow?”

Ilya picked the cage up and carried it inside the house, setting it on the floor in the kitchen. He got out a small bowl and poured some kibble into it.

“Here you go, boy,” Ilya said. He opened the metal door and the cat gingerly stepped out of it. This one was considerably bigger than Arsenic but much more friendly. Ilya squatted down and the cat moved forward, tail held high in the air. Before the cat ate,



he made his way around the room investigating, circling Ilya a bit, before approaching the bowl of kibble suspiciously, then all pretenses vanished from the creature and the gray cat began to feed voraciously.

Ilya wasn't going to make the same mistake as last time. He circled behind the cat and got down on his hands and knees and peered between the back legs of the animal.

“You're a girl, huh?”

She looked over her shoulder at Ilya for a moment, the white on her muzzle making it look like she was wearing a mask. She returned to her kibble. Ilya checked the note and the carrier for any sign of her name. There was nothing. The sound of Demetri's snores could be heard from the end of the hall. He tapped his foot for a moment. He couldn't kill himself now, who would take care of her? He filled a small bowl with water from the sink and set it down next to the food. She took a few licks of water and ate the last of the kibble. Ilya leaned against the counter to watch her.

“I guess you need a name.”

Blue eyes swiveled in his direction, and for a moment they seemed to sparkle in the light, before she resumed her careful exploration of the kitchen, and waltzed into the living room for examination. He could call her Sparkling Cyanide. Just Sparkles for short. Maybe he shouldn't pick a deadly poison to name her after. That hadn't worked out so well for Arsenic. The cat came strutting back toward him from the darkness of the

living room, and the first Ilya saw of her was the blue of her eyes and the white fur on her muzzle. It was like she was wearing a mask.

“I’m going to call you Masque.” He regretted it as soon as he said it. Would he forever associate her with the masquerade, and every time he saw her, would he remember that night? Careful, measured steps took Masque right up to Ilya where she sat on her haunches and looked up at him.

“Mrow?”

“What?” Ilya thought it seemed like she wanted something. What did she need? There was food and water. What else was there? Then it dawned on him. “Do you need to pee?”

“Meow.”

Ilya took that as an affirmative and knew now with certainty that he could not do himself in. If he did, then Masque would pee all over the floor and Demetri would throw her out and then she would end up like Arsenic and his mother. He had to live to find her a litter box. What to use? He went out to the garage and looked around, finding a bucket, and the shovel he'd used to bury Arsenic. He could use that... He imagined Masque trying to jump into the bucket full of sand and how it would tip over and spill the sand on her. Then her blue eyes would peer up at him from the pile, looking reproachful, and maybe just a little disappointed that he couldn't arrange a better system for her to relieve herself.

No, it needed to be shallower and have a flat bottom. After a bit of searching, he found an old videocassette recorder box which was perfect.

Wait a minute, there was no VCR in the house, just a TV. Why did Demetri have an empty box for one? He would have to ask his uncle about that. Masque had followed him into the garage and was sniffing around, so Ilya left the door open as he carried the box, shovel, and bucket into the kitchen. He set the box on the ground. He needed sand for his temporary litter box, not dirt. But where would he get that? There was dirt everywhere that he could think of. The banks of the lake. That was the most logical place to find sand. It was also the most logical place where cannibals would eat him alive, too. If he was just on the bank, then he wouldn't technically be *in* the swamp, so he should be okay.

Masque was sniffing around the VCR box now, so Ilya figured he needed that sand quick. He closed the garage door and headed out toward the swamp. It was an unusually happy morning, cloudless, with a bright sun burning away the morning dew. The light felt warm on his face, and Ilya wondered how long the hot summer would last, before he was wading through five feet of snow to go anywhere. Movies had shown him that Siberia was a frozen wasteland, so eventually it had to snow at some point, right? At some point, things had to get more miserable here. What a happy thought.

It took a few minutes to walk down to the lake. He walked along the reed-laden banks, which deprived him of sand, for several minutes, until he came to a break in the

reeds. The break was only about six feet across, but there was ugly blackish-red sand there, so Ilya set the bucket down and sunk his shovel into the sand. It struck rock about a foot down. But there would be more than enough top soil for Ilya here. It was weird though. Ilya had not seen any rocks bigger than his fist here. Was that what prevented the reed from growing, some sort of boulder in his spot? He had his bucket filled fairly quickly. The sun rose high enough into the sky that it shown down on the water now, and Ilya thought he could see rock beneath the hazy waters. He stood at the edge of the water and sunk his shovel into the small, lapping reddish-black tinged waves. About two feet into the water, he hit rock. He dragged the shovel across the rock all the way to the edge where the reeds grew. The rock ended there. He repeated the process on the other side. The stone ended where the reeds began. The formation seemed almost man-made in its precision.

Behind him a sudden *caw* came. Ilya jumped about a foot into the air, but managed to keep a hold of the shovel. He slowly turned, one hand over his heart, breathing heavily. The *caw* came again and Ilya managed to control his fright. About six feet above him, on a scraggly black-limbed tree branch, which looked dead and depressing no matter how splendid the weather was, sat Orryn. The vulture looked down on Ilya with what was unmistakably a condescending smile. As if to say, *Yes, you idiot mammal, there's something there. Isn't that exciting!* More caws came from Orryn's maw.

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak vulturese.” He smiled slightly, looking up at the large vulture over his head. The tree had a certain decomposing look to it, as though it were consuming itself. Orryn hopped further along the branch, until he reached the end.

“Caw.”

Ilya nodded. “Okay.” He had no idea what the crazy bird wanted.

Orryn launched himself off the tree branch and Ilya waved goodbye to the bird, who angled out over the reeds. Ilya turned to leave with the bucket and shovel. He’d gone about a half dozen paces when Orryn flashed right across him, one of his wings grazing Ilya’s cheek, cawing his head off.

“What?” Ilya turned around to glare at the bird, who was circling over a spot in the reeds about six feet away from the rock channel, glaring right back at him. Ilya looked away first. Because milky-white soulless looking vulture eyes were creepy. Was there something Orryn wanted him to see? Ilya set the bucket and shovel down and walked over to the banks where Orryn circled, peering into the reeds. The bird landed on a branch behind Ilya and glared at him with beady white eyes. *Nemesis*. The word came unbidden to Ilya’s mind, from his dream the night before. He peered into the reeds and thought that perhaps he saw a space deep within them where they did not grow, a small clearing of some sort, but he couldn’t be certain at this distance.

He looked down at the brackish waters mere inches from his shoes. It looked extremely questionable to Ilya. Never mind the crawlies living in there, but the bacteria

and amoebas alone made it a no go zone for Ilya. Couldn't they crawl into the brain via the ear and kill you? No, he could not walk into the reeds and examine what was in there. He turned back to Orryn, an apology on his lips. The bird glared down at him and his apology died an early death. Orryn cawed harshly and jerked his beak in the direction of the reeds and flexed his wings menacingly at Ilya. *That had to be at least a five foot wingspan*, Ilya's subconscious babbled to him.

Nervously, he turned away from the bird and stepped into the waters, his lips curling in distaste. The water sloshed into his sneakers almost immediately. He should have worn boots. Another sharp caw came from behind him. With a long suffering sigh, he walked into the reeds. Despite the summer heat, the water was a little chilly and a slightly-rotten smell greeted his nose. Wasn't rotten egg smell supposed to be a warning for sulfur? He pushed the brownish-green reeds aside as he forced his way through them. Mud sucked at his feet with each step and he fretted about losing a sneaker and having to walk back in just a sock. One of the reeds he pushed out of the way whipped back and caught him across the face.

“Ow!” he mumbled, rubbing at his cheek, slapping at an itch on his shoulder that could be a mosquito giving him encephalitis. He wanted to complain about every little thing, because he hated this. He wasn't some crazy swamp man like Giovanni. He was Ilya Kollide, an indoors kind of guy, who didn't even like dust that much. He stumbled over some sort of root, nearly falling over, clutching great handfuls of the reeds for

support. Orryn gave out a short series of caws. Was the buzzard laughing at him now? Was he being humiliated by an animal that liked to eat dead rodents and raccoons? He pushed through the reeds and his foot banged painfully against stone. He poked his head through the reeds and saw what was responsible for the small clearing.

It was a raised area of stone about four feet across with a large and rusty set of metal double doors built into the surface. All around the edge was a series of metal stops around the door that could be pushed around to allow the door to open, but at the handles was a very large and rusty chain linking the bars together. An ancient combination padlock at least a foot long held the door shut. Ilya reached out and pushed one of the stops into the open position. It squeaked terribly, and his hand came away rusty, but it moved. Where could those doors go? Was there some sort of underground chamber? Is that what he'd found on the banks? Did this somehow connect to it? Clearly no one wanted it open. If it hadn't been for Orryn, he never would have found it, so it seemed reasonable that no one else knew about it, especially given how rusty the door had become. That chain wasn't going to last much longer, either. If he wanted in, he would need a combination for that lock, or a really big pair of bolt cutters.

Did he want to get inside? He'd had some unpleasant surprises venturing into forbidden areas on the Neimasaurus estate before. What if what was behind this door was even more dangerous than whatever lurked in the secret wing? That place housed an immortal lunatic fond of blinding people and then drinking their blood and eating their

flesh, when not performing horrifying experiments on animals. Off the top of his head, Ilya really couldn't think of anything worse than that.

Ilya made another miserable slog through the reeds to shore, and with a certain relief, he noticed that Orryn was gone. Good. Ilya had discovered what the bird wanted from him. He picked up his bucket and shovel and headed back to the house, hoping Masque hadn't become desperate to pee, after Ilya's little side expedition.

He had to find out what that grate and rock by the lake were, he had to unravel the mystery of the cicadas in the walls of Neimasaurus, he had to find out who was in the secret wing, he had to get his key to the attic back, he had to see who was kept locked in the west wing, he had to find out who had locked him in the secret wing and then let him out and then stolen his books from his room while he slept, he should probably find out who gave him Masque, he needed to find the Weeping Cathedral and rescue the boy inside it, he had to find out what the hell the crazy vulture wanted from him, and he had to do all of this while avoiding Aleksander and the entire Calviarri clan in the swamp, which reminded him that he needed to figure out what the little lighthouses in the swamp meant, too. How could he have thought about suicide? He didn't have the time for it.

Who knows what he'd already forgotten about? He hadn't remembered the cicadas, until the ghosts in the attic reminded him. Which reminded him, he should figure out what was up with ghost boy and the eye-hating blood-beast. Were those creepy snake twins still at the house? He had no idea what they looked like out of their costumes, but



the doing everything together and speaking in unison would probably be a pretty big tip off to Ilya, which would make them easy enough to avoid. Damn it. At some point he had to do his job while doing all of this investigating and avoiding, too. How could he have actually thought about killing himself, with so much work to do? On second thought, maybe it would save him a lot of trouble...

He kicked his shoes off and stepped on the ends of his sock with the other foot and pulled it off his foot, repeating the process with the other sock, before going inside. Masque greeted him in the kitchen with a soft meow. He waved to the cat and set the bucket and shovel down on the floor next to the VCR box and rooted around in the junk drawer for some tape. He found some after jabbing his finger on a pencil. He bent up the side flaps and the back flap of the box facing the wall, and taped them together. That should stop some of the sand from being flung all over the place. He poured the bucket of sand slowly into the VCR box until it was about half full, then he went out to the garage and found some old rags and stuffed them beneath the flap of the box facing away from the wall and taped them to each other.

“There. Now you have a little ramp to walk up when you need to pee,” Ilya said, looking down at Masque, who peered into the box suspiciously, almost pressing her little black button into the sand as she sniffed it. “I’ll get you some regular cat litter when we go to the store on Demetri’s next day off.”

Masque placed one paw gingerly onto the flap, sinking the tips of her claws into it for support, before reaching up with the other paw. She looked over at Ilya.

“Mrow?”

“I’ll leave you to your business.” Ilya stood up hastily and went into the living room. That was one problem solved. Now what to do about his impending rape? Ilya decided it was time to remember the story of the shrimp, and do absolutely nothing. He would call Aleksander's bluff. He should change out of his wet jeans and wash his feet. They were a little itchy after his jaunt in the lake. He took off his jeans, while peering around the corner to see if Masque was done with her business. She was still moving around in the box, sniffing. Then Ilya was confronted by a sleepy eyed Demetri, who had walked down the hallway.

*Hi*, Ilya signed, holding his jeans in one hand stupidly, wishing he'd waited until he was in his room to take them off.

Demetri looked him up and down. *Do you know what's on your legs?*

*Feet?* Ilya started to look down, but Demetri caught his attention with his hands.

*Look up at me, please.* The older man signed calmly.

*Why?* Ilya signed nervously, the slight itchiness of his legs magnifying a thousand fold.

*I don't want to alarm you, but I don't think you can handle this sort of thing.*

*What?* Ilya's trepidation was increasing by the second.

*You have leeches on your legs.* Demetri signed, as though Ilya had a bit of food in his teeth, or some crumbs on his pants. As though Ilya weren't having the very life essence of his body drained away by the filthy bacteria-rich suckers of large parasitic creatures which had dug their heads into his legs to suck away until their bodies were three times their normal size and Ilya died from blood loss, before the bacteria could give him a staph infection, or he could succumb to septicemia. They were killing him.

*What?* Ilya's eyes had the sort of crazed look a moth had as it began its deadly dance with a candle, his head inching downward by minute degrees. His mind starting to go in circles as well. *What?*

*I'm going to burn them off, alright? Just let me get a lighter.*

*What?* Ilya's head continued its inevitable journey downward, though the eyes stayed pointing straight ahead.

*Burning them makes them detach and try to run away. Don't worry, it won't hurt you.*

*What?*

*You're starting to sound a little hys—*

*What?*

—*terical*. Demetri looked around in a kitchen drawer and emerged with a gun-metal black lighter. *Hey, were did this cat come from?*

*What?* Ilya looked down at the nearly twenty or so leeches infesting his legs up to the knees and promptly passed out.

Ilya awoke to someone patting him on the face. He opened his eyes blearily, to discover that he was lying on a couch in the living room. He studiously ignored his legs. Everything was fine, so there was no reason to look at them. There were no little sucker marks on his legs. Absolutely not. He smelled rubbing alcohol and shuddered in relief. Demetri had disinfected the bites at least.

*What's this?* Demetri signed, frowning as he held up the note Ilya had written, pretending that he'd run away and become a hobo.

*A joke?* Ilya signed back, smiling at his uncle.

*Now see, whenever you smile at me, I know you're hiding something.* Demetri sat down in a chair opposite the small brown couch.

The smile vanished from Ilya's face. Damn it. *Like when you frown at me and I know you're hiding your true feelings behind mock anger?* That was true wasn't it? Demetri was always frowning at him to hide vulnerability. It had just occurred to him after what Demetri said about Ilya's I'm-a-liar-and-I'm-sorry-about-it smile.

Demetri's left eye twitched and his frown deepened. *I don't do that.*

*Then it shouldn't upset you, should it?* Ilya smiled back at him from the couch.

*Are the leeches gone?*

*I put them in this can.* Demetri picked up an open tin can from the floor, the faded label advertising salted smelts on the side with a grinning fish giving a thumbs up on the logo, nearly faded now. *Do you want to see?*

*No!* Ilya wondered if leeches were the same size as smelts. If so, nearly a dozen could fit in that can. And they could have sucked nearly a can's worth of blood from his veins. He felt another wave of nausea. *I think I should go to the doctor for an injection of antibiotics.*

Demetri shrugged. *We'll see what Cook says.* He got up from the chair and took the can into the kitchen. Ilya heard the garbage disposal click on and felt his gorge rising and covered his mouth. Masque sauntered into the living room and looked up at him for a moment.

“Hi b-girl,” Ilya said.

As though it were an invitation, Masque leaped onto the couch and climbed onto Ilya's chest. Then she started to purr. Ilya smiled at the cat, amazed at how much more trusting and affectionate she was than Arsenic. Ilya guess that was what a life on the streets would do to a boy. Thankfully, he hadn't become a hobo and been forced to act

like that. Tentatively, Ilya reached up and scratched behind Masque's ear. She turned her head into his hand and purred louder.

Emboldened, Ilya scratched behind the other ear and Masque adjusted her head until Ilya's fingers scratched just the spot she wanted. Then she settled down on the couch next to him, her warm body vibrating slightly against Ilya's stomach with the force of her purrs. Things really weren't so bad for him. Sure, his to do list was a little long but he was basically healthy and leech free, so long as no more controlling vultures forced him to walk into a swamp again.

Demetri came into the living room drying his hands on a dish towel. *Ready for breakfast?*

Ilya thought of the pureed leech and his stomach did a metaphoric swan dive into an empty pool, snapping its spine and killing itself instantly, taking Ilya's hunger with it. *I'm not hungry.*

Demetri shrugged again. *I saw the note for the cat, too. Did someone leave him outside?*

Ilya still hadn't figured out who sent it. *Yes. Isn't it wonderful? Someone gave me a gift.* Had Demetri done it?

*Yeah, it's great.* Demetri walked back into the kitchen. After a minute or two, Ilya could hear and then smell pork sausage frying. Masque raised her head from the couch

and sniffed the air. She looked over at Ilya and meowed loudly, her big blue eyes staring into his soul, seeming to say, *I have a primordial need for food.*

“That does smell good, doesn't it?” He scratched her behind the ear again. “Let's go!”

He got up from the couch and headed toward the kitchen. Then remembered he was in his underwear and detoured toward his bedroom. Masque hesitated in the hall and then made her choice. She abandoned her best friend for a bit of pork and trotted into the kitchen, meowing loudly. But the joke was on her, Ilya thought, because Demetri couldn't hear a damn thing. She would figure it out eventually.

Half an hour later, his stomach packed with pork sausage, along with Masque's, which he had to conspiratorially feed beneath the table to avoid Demetri's judgmental look, he was dressed in his formal footman's suit, since the guests were still here, and heading toward the kitchen. Cook would no doubt take one look at the horrific mauling his legs had received from the leeches and rush him to doctor Zdansky and his shrew of a nurse immediately. Ilya thought about adding a slight limp to his walk, because they did hurt. Really, they did. The kitchen was teeming with activity when he arrived, half a dozen women and Cook hard at work on breakfast. He fought his way through to Cook and explained the circumstances of his leech mauling and Cook rolled his eyes.

*You're as good as you'll get. Now take that tray of fried smelts into the ballroom.*

Cook shook a ladle in the direction of a large silver platter and went back to stirring a

large pot of kasha which smelled pretty damn good to Ilya. As for the smelts, Ilya immediately flashed back on a certain can full of parasitic bloodsuckers giving him a thumbs up, their bellies filled with his blood, and he feared that smelts would forever be ruined for him. Gingerly, he picked up the tray and headed in the direction of the ballroom. He almost spilled them twice, and may have lost one or two at some point, but there were still at least a hundred fifty on the tray. He should have brought Masque with him. She would have been more than happy to take care of any smelts that hit the ground.

There were only about thirty guests in the ballroom for breakfast this early and Ilya had no idea how many would even come down for breakfast after what he assumed had entailed very little sleeping. He didn't care to dwell on the specifics. He'd seen and nearly experienced enough of them last night to squelch any curiosity he might have had. He snatched a fancy looking French pastry from a nearby platter as he set the smelts down in an available spot close to them on the buffet table, and then retreated back into the servant's corridors before anyone noticed. Ilya practically inhaled the pastry, which made it difficult to say how it tasted, but he was leaning toward fantastic.

He ferried a few more platters from the kitchen and took some empty ones away before the slow trickle of breakfasters died away and Cook began frantically preparing for what he feared would be a massive lunch rush around noon. Ilya was assigned to clean-up duty for two hours, until lunch service began, so in no time flat, he found himself righting chairs and straightening curtains in odd spots around Neimasaurus, a



wary eye over his shoulder each time he set foot in a new room, ever mindful of Cobras, Leopards, and Phoenixes. Two servants were walking around the gardens picking up various articles of clothing with rubber gloves, stuffing them into large trash bags and moving on.

Ilya moved along a hallway righting pots and end tables as he went, armed with a spray bottle of cleaner and a sponge, in case he came across spilled drinks or something else. He caught a flash of movement through a dark doorway into an empty room with heavy purple drapes pulled tight.

“Hello?” He reached up and felt around for a light switch and turned it on. Pale white light flooded the room. Upholstered couches and chairs were scattered on the white marble floor in what was obviously a sitting room, with a variety of landscape and portrait oil paintings on the walls. One of the couches had the cushions pushed off it and there were unmistakably red wine stains on them. Damn it. Ilya walked over to the couch and started spraying the cleanser liberally on the stains. The whole area smelled like sex too, so he sprayed the rest of the couch too. He sprayed the floor around it and started scrubbing.

Something was shoved down in the back of the couch and he pulled the fabric out to reveal a pair of revealing white briefs decorated with fire trucks and firemen. He threw them over to the side and sprayed some of the cleanser on his hands. *Yucky*. The wine stains really weren't coming out at all. He would need something stronger to clean

up this love nest. Then the lights in the room clicked off, leaving Ilya in relative darkness. He whirled around. The light from the hall shined through the open doorway, revealing no one by the switch.

“Hello?” Silence followed his entreaty. Ilya got to his feet. The door slammed shut all by itself, plunging the room into darkness. Ilya was still for a moment. Then he ran for the door. He'd gone ten steps when he tripped over something and went sprawling onto the marble, banging his head. He was disoriented for a few seconds. A lamp clicked on over by a sofa. Ilya rolled onto his back, holding his head with both his hands. There was no sign of what he'd tripped over, or who had turned on the light.

“Sacha? Kiril?” Perhaps the ghosts had returned. Then a figure dropped onto his chest. It was a toy Soldier, perhaps a foot tall, made of painted wood, with brown pants, black boots, and a red overcoat. A tall fur hat graced his head. The little Soldier held a very cold, very sharp, very metal toy sword against Ilya's throat. The face, the eyes, all of it was painted unmoving wood, with a perpetual smile and rosy cheeks painted on. The head moved up and down, studying Ilya with unmistakable intelligence. The animated toy's spare hand began to move in the unmistakable patterns of sign language.

*Who are you?*

Ilya slowly raised one of his hands up above his head, and the toy Soldier's head swiveled up toward it and blade pressed deeper into his neck. *My name is Ilya Kollide*, he signed.

*I can understand spoken Russian.*

“Oh, I thought maybe you were a deaf puppet because you were signing,” Ilya said, holding his hand above his head.

*Put your hand down!* The toy signed with sharp, jagged rhythms.

Ilya dropped his hand to the floor and smiled weakly up at the Soldier.

*My name is Soldier. I have been watching you for the last several days. You know why, because you stole Amaranth's diary. I should have let you die in the secret wing. I let you out, and you stole from it! You made me go out of the house and sunlight damages me.*

“But how did you go to my house before dark, if you can't go out in the sun?” Ilya asked, deflecting Soldier's attention from the books. Besides, why was sunlight dangerous to him?

*Ever heard of an umbrella?*

“Oh.” Ilya thought for a moment. “Do they make umbrellas your size?”

*Yes, for girl's dolls. Besides, it was cloudy that afternoon.*

“Did you see who killed Arsenic?”

The wooden head swiveled away from Ilya for a second. *I was attacked by the cat. I didn't know it was a pet. He was lurking around the cottage all day. I had to defend*

*myself*. Soldier lowered his sword and jumped down from Ilya's chest, making a tiny clicking sound as his wooden painted black boots impacted on the marble.

Ilya tried to be mad at the Soldier, but it all seemed so logical. Of course Arsenic would have attacked someone that size. It was just how things were. A bad coincidence and not Soldier's fault. He'd shown mercy and let Ilya out of the secret wing. He wasn't a bad guy. If Soldier could have avoided killing Arsenic, he would have. Probably. Ilya shrugged. Soldier was a cat-killing-son-of-a-bitch, but so what?

“It wasn't your fault, it was his nature. I have a new cat now, but she stays inside, so don't break into the cottage again. But she's kind of lazy, a little fat, and much friendlier than Arsenic, so she might not attack.”

Soldier tilted his head at Ilya for a moment, in thought. Perhaps he was deciding if Ilya was an idiot, or just kind of spacey. *On to more serious matters, Ilya Kollide. I expect thorough and honest answers. Why did you enter the secret wing?*

## CHAPTER 14: THE TAIL END OF THE GAME

Soldier grilled Ilya mercilessly for almost an hour, covering nearly everything about the secret wing, how Ilya had discovered it, why he was looking for it, and what Ilya wanted from it. The toy also wanted to know what exactly he had seen in there, as it became clear that Soldier had never in fact, entered the wing. Though it wasn't always clear to Ilya what the toy was signing, because the little wooden fingers were difficult to see in the poor light of the lamp. He had to continue to resist the urge to sign back. Soldier was slowly taking steps backward toward a grate in the wall, probably for heat. Somebody that small probably got cold easily, Ilya supposed. Without warning, the little painted hand reached out and pulled the grate open, the wooden fingers easily fitting between the filigreed golden ivy patterns of the little door.

*Until later, Ilya.* Soldier stepped into the grate and closed it behind him, almost in one smooth motion. He was gone in the next second, down into the heating system. Ilya rolled onto his side, propping up his head in his hand, while resting on his elbow. Had that really happened? Something about the toy seemed altogether farfetched, and just a little silly. Maybe he was hallucinating because of the loss of blood from the leeches. So it didn't happen. If that were the case, then he would reach up to his neck and feel nothing. No drop of blood or tiny wound where the Soldier had pressed its bayonet, just smooth skin, no matter how much Ilya would like to have to shave. He reached up and felt around his neck, feeling a slight stinging sensation and wetness. When he looked at

his hand, there was a little smear of congealing blood in his palm.

He felt slightly nauseated at the sight of his own blood, and quickly wiped the blood off in his pocket where it wouldn't stain anything on his livery. He got to his feet. Fine. It had happened, but that didn't mean there was a magical toy Soldier around. It was some sort of hoax. Then the theory crystallized in his mind. The Soldier's question about the west wing and the books, all of it, was so obvious. It was a toy, in particular, a radio-controlled toy. Ilya had read about this in a science journal about a year ago.

There had been an article on radio-frequency controlled devices that were increasingly being used by the military and the Imperial Security Bureau for surveillance purposes. Sure, the models that had been discussed in the article hadn't been anywhere as advanced as the toy Soldier, but they wouldn't show off their state of the art spyware in an article, would they? Besides, it had been a year ago. They could easily have a toy Soldier model, to try and pump the children of important government officials in Europe for any information they might have overheard from their parents. The I.S.B. was insidious and devious beyond calculation, that much Ilya was certain of, because everyone always said as much.

Somehow, the Young Lord had gotten a hold of an experimental I.S.B. Security device in his attempt to see what Ilya knew about the supposed immortality offered by the blood fountain in the Gdanski Marshlands. It seemed almost as farfetched as a magical toy Soldier. But Aleksander was an aristocrat and everyone knew they had special privileges within the government no matter how much federal institutions pretended to

democratic values. Ilya hurried from the room. Damn it, he had answered the device truthfully. Now Aleksander knew almost as much as Ilya and whatever the prisoner in the west room knew. He left the cleaning solution and his rag back in the room, forgotten.

He couldn't waste time working, not when there was important stuff to be done. Like what? He had a big list, but what was a priority? Damn it. He made his decision. He'd go to the garage, which must be somewhere, get a pair of bolt cutters and electric torch, and see where that door in the swamp went. Leeches. Damn it, he couldn't risk that again. He'd only barely survived his first encounter with the blood sucking monsters, and who knows what sort of undiagnosed diseases were already percolating in his body thanks to their greedy suckers. Why was everything after his blood in this place? Leeches, blood-beasts, cannibals, it was a hard task to keep one's self topped off. But as a first priority, he had to get out of this stupid livery and stop pretending he was an actual worker when everyone knew what a lazy sort he was.

He exited a side passage into the grand foyer, and disaster struck. Alexander and Shoji, both dressed in what Ilya assumed were pajamas of the rich, made from black and white silk respectively, were in signed conversation with Elem. Ilya stopped in mid-step. He was like a squirrel in front of an oncoming car. Should he cross the road, or run back to his tree? Just like a squirrel, his hesitation damned him. Green eyes swiveled in his direction. Shoji smiled at him as Ilya made his decision too late and began to back away.

“Ilya, Elem has some work for you.”

Elem and Aleksander looked over at him and he froze. Shit. *How can I help you,*

*sir?* he signed to Aleksander, looking carefully away from Elem, who was, technically speaking, his boss.

*I was just telling Elem, there's a mess that needs cleaning up in my room. Things got pretty out of control last night.*

*It would be my pleasure to clean up after you, sir.* All the way to hell, after I've murdered you, preferably with something that wouldn't be too messy, because I am a little squeamish about blood. Poison would nice, or maybe a good, clean shove from the roof, if Sir prefers? If only Ilya had the nerve to sign it.

*Good!* Elem signed, quite pleased with Ilya. *We're short of hands with the preparations for lunch and I didn't know where you were.*

*Just cleaning.* Being interrogated by toys, too, but I don't really believe it happened, so how can I expect you to? Ilya smiled broadly.

Elem narrowed his eyes. Damn it, the old man was on to his tricks already. He really had to stop doing that. *The Master will show you what to do. Just go up to his room with him.*

*I would love to go to the master's room.*

Elem raised an eyebrow at him, and Aleksander laughed before Elem could sign anything.

*It's a joke from a few days ago.*

Elem shrugged and bowed before departing toward the passage that led to the kitchens, a fabled land of freedom where Aleksander and his friends never went for fear



of having to make their own food. Ilya had almost made it. It had been like a mad dash between trenches in World War I, but he'd been caught by a sort of friendly fire. He was like a rabbit caught in a snare, like a bear with a foot caught in the trap of the same name, like a—Aleksander tweaked his nose suddenly.

“Are you listening to me, or are you daydreaming?”

“Umm...Listening?” Ilya said tentatively. “But you should repeat your orders for the sake of clarity, sir.”

The corner of Aleksander's mouth quirked, before he spoke: “I was saying that I don't want you to clean my room—”

“Really?” Ilya's joy was a little too apparent, and Shoji laughed.

“I don't want you to see my room until tonight.”

Shoji looked between the two of them, sensing the sudden chilling of relations, and his eyes narrowed at Aleksander. “What are you talking about?”

The Young Lord seemed slightly surprised that Shoji was there. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

“I wasn't.” Shoji tilted his head at him, and reached out to caress the cheek of the Young Lord. “Are you being a bully again?”

“No.” Aleksander slapped the hand away, as though it were an annoying gnat.

“Hitting me doesn't disprove what I've said, does it?” Shoji glanced at Ilya, who by this point, had made nearly half a dozen measured steps backwards toward the passage he'd come from, in the what was now vain hope, that the fight between them would go on

long enough for him to flee. “Are you leaving so soon?”

“No, just giving you some privacy, sirs,” Ilya said mechanically with false cheer.

“Well, stay right there,” Aleksander snapped. “It's impossible to find anyone in this house.”

Ilya looked away diffidently. “I would have thought with your family's connection to the I.S.B., that you'd have all kinds of surveillance devices at your disposal.”

Aleksander was speechless. He looked at Ilya as though truly seeing him for the first time, and realizing just how mad he was. He shook his head slightly.

“Do you?” Shoji asked, with idle curiosity. “You should have told me.”

Aleksander stared between the two of them. “No... Dare I ask why you think so?”

“Oh... No reason.” Ilya was not fooled for a second. “You know what they say about the gentry having government connections and all that.”

“This is Siberia; it's the ass end of nowhere. My family has connections with the president of the Altai Republic, the local farmers unions, the mining union, the police, and the Yakutia governor. Sorry to disappoint you.”

Ilya shrugged. “You could have gotten some when you were in Petrograd. Some sort of small mobile intelligence gathering device... Maybe?”

“Your parents do spend most of their time in Moscow and Petrograd, Aleks.”

Shoji added. He examined his hand. “Look, you gave me a red mark where you abused me, you thug.”

“The teeth marks on my shoulder are a bit more impressive though, aren't they?”

Aleksander grabbed the hand and kissed it.

“I like it when you're a bully, but only to me.”

Ilya used the opportunity to add another three steps distance between them, until Aleksander noticed and laughed, shaking his head slightly.

Ilya gave him a cold, antiseptic smile. “Did you know that the I.S.B. is experimenting with radio-frequency controlled electronic surveillance devices? I read about it in a magazine.”

“Then it must be true.” Shoji laughed. “Let him go. We don't have anything else to talk to him about, or do we?”

Aleksander gritted his teeth. “Are we back to that? It's none of your business.”

“You better be careful, or Ilya'll give you the boot!” the Oriental boy said cheerfully.

Ilya smiled fondly at the thought of kicking Aleksander in the head so hard that he had a concussion.

The Young Lord looked away from Shoji and grabbed Ilya's face, forcing Ilya to look him in the eyes. “I. Do. Not. Possess. Any. Radio-frequency. Controlled. Toys.” Aleksander spoke in slow, deafeningly loud tones, the hands on the sides of Ilya's face pressing a little too tightly. “Do you understand?”

Ilya nodded, but the effect was blunted by the hands holding his head in place.

“Use words.”

“Yes. I. Believe. You.” Ilya replied in loud, deafening tones. He knew that

Aleksander was lying. It was a simple fact.

Aleksander leaned in close, his own blue eyes looming large in Ilya's vision. "I don't mean to make you uncomfortable, but your eyes look especially otherworldly and quite lovely today." Aleksander ruffled his hair.

Ilya supposed that Aleksander thought it was an affectionate act. However, he was mistaken. Now Ilya would have to go to a bathroom, get his hands wet and carefully restore the balance to the part to his hair. *Thanks*, he thought sarcastically, but said nothing.

"Will I be seeing you later tonight?" Aleksander asked, still believing that he was charming Ilya.

"You'll have to wait and see." What the hell was Ilya doing, building up anticipation?

"I think you'll be waiting quite some time, Aleks," Shoji said helpfully, only not really helping at all.

Aleksander ignored his lover's jibe. "Remember, it's midnight, no later."

"Why is that? Will you turn into a pumpkin once midnight chimes?" Shoji asked sarcastically.

"What if I get lost on the way to your room and I'm fifteen minutes late?"

"Then you'll have to work extra hard to make it up to me."

"What if I would rather get raped, filleted, and eaten by a bunch of crazy backwoods cannibals in the swamp, than have anything to do with you?" Did he actually

say that out loud?

Shoji laughed. “Wouldn't we all?” He gave Ilya a pleasant smile, which most definitely concealed knives. “Have you been to the swamp before?”

Ilya pretended to not hear him.

Aleksander smiled indulgently. “I like it when you forget to censor yourself. It's cute.” He pinned Ilya to the wall by his hands. Ilya tried to push him away, but without hands it was just flailing legs and bucking hips. Then he stood perfectly still, since slamming his hips against Aleksander's groin probably wasn't the best way to get rid of the man. Ilya was quite certain that this could be classified as sexual harassment, even if governmental codes didn't directly address harassment of the same sex. There had been a debate on amending the code in the Duma months ago. The Young Lord leaned forward and chastely kissed Ilya on the cheek. “Until tonight.” The man could make anything sleazy and unpleasant. He let Ilya go.

Ilya ran out of the room, the voices fading rapidly behind him.

“I don't know why you like him so much if it...” Shoji's voice faded away before Ilya could hear the end of it. He didn't care to hear what he had to say anyway. If only Ilya could be a fly on the wall at midnight when the bastard was sitting there, waiting for Ilya, and midnight came and went. Ilya would like to see the smug self-assuredness slip away from his features. Oh well, sacrifices had to be made. He didn't have I.S.B. surveillance equipment at his disposal.

In less than two minutes, he was in the kitchen, which was alive with the bustle of

lunch preparations, which apparently involved a dozen fish pies and two whole roast suckling pigs, along with thousands of pelmeni dumplings being carried out from the walk-in freezer in large bags. It was like a war zone in there, with Cook giving instructions to a dozen helpers at once. Elem stood to one side, signing to two footmen, and a curious thought flashed in Ilya's mind. Aleksander had covered for Ilya earlier, when he'd said how he'd love to see his room. Aleksander didn't want Elem to know about what was going on. Ilya made a snap decision and headed across the kitchen toward the old man.

His luck continued its downward trend, from abysmal to non-existent, to truly wretched, as Tabitha appeared in front of him. *What are you doing?*

*Working.* Ilya supposed if signs could be sullen, then that one had been. It was a lie, but he could tell that she would make it come true.

*Really? What are you doing?*

*Stuff...* he signed weakly, drawing a blank, and cursing slightly as Elem followed the two footmen from the kitchen. Damn her.

*Well, drop what you're doing and carry this up to her ladyship's room.* Tabitha thrust a silver tray laden with a bowl of steaming kasha and a little silver pot of hot tea into his hands.

*Who?* Ilya looked confused. Who the hell was her ladyship? The only Lord that he was aware of was Aleksander.

*The Lady Neimasaurus, of course. Her apartments are in the western tower.*

*Aleksander's mother is here?* All of a sudden things were looking up. He could tell the Young Lord's mother on him. We'll see how he likes that, Ilya thought.

*No, his grandmother, the Lady Alina Neimasaurus. Don't you know her?* Tabitha looked confused, as though something didn't quite add up in her mind.

*No, why would I?*

*Because she asked for you by name, to deliver her breakfast.* She smoothed out the wrinkles in her apron nervously. *I thought you knew her. Now I'll have to show you the way. Follow me,* she turned and swept out of the kitchen, taking the servant's stairs that they used whenever she was going to the attic. Without warning, she whirled on him. *Don't spill a single drop of tea on that tray, either. She hates that.* Then her back was to him, and Ilya proceeded, with a noticeable shaking of his hands, as though Tabitha's forbiddance had, in fact, engineered just what she hadn't wanted. Fortunately, she could not hear the little pot or the china cup rattling on their saucers, as he nervously made his way up the stairs with excruciating slowness.

She disappeared around a corner ahead of him, and he resisted the urge to hurry and spill the tea and probably get beaten with an iron rod for ruining her Ladyship's breakfast. Tabitha's head appeared around the corner, the reddish locks almost black in the relative darkness of the place. She was about to sign something, when she saw how carefully he held the tray. She couldn't hear the rattle, but no doubt she could detect the movement with her keen vision. There was an awkward sound in the back of her throat, which might have surprised some people, but not Ilya, since he had deaf parents. It was

just something that happened. They didn't hear it, so how could they stop themselves?

*All right back there?* she signed. *Do you want me to carry the tray?*

*No, I've got this.* He wanted to slow her down, much like Christ carrying his cross to Golgotha behind impatient Roman executioners, who would probably beat Christ with iron rods for making them walk at such a ponderous pace. Ilya wondered why he kept dreaming about himself and others getting beaten by iron rods. It seemed an odd choice, since they would be quite heavy for the wielder. At least Ilya could wish lower back pain on his and Christ's abusers.

Ilya carried the silver tray to the eastern tower apartments behind an impatient Tabitha. They traveled through increasingly disused portions of the house. On the fifth floor, directly below the attic, they reached a hallway where all the paintings were covered in white cloths to protect them from dust. Only the light fixtures showed signs of being cleaned, along with the deep red carpet. Eventually, Tabitha stopped in front of a set of large, wooden doors, inlaid with brass around the edges, and with the outline of an oak tree etched into the facade, with meticulous care. Tabitha opened the doors and Ilya was hit by a gust of warm afternoon air, along with brilliant streams of sunlight.

Ilya stepped out gingerly onto the stone walkway. It was almost like being on the battlements of a castle. It was short distance, perhaps about ten feet of stone work, before they reached the tower offset from the corner of the house. There was a tower in each corner, and Ilya had assumed they were attached to the house. He had been mistaken.

When they got to the tower doors, Tabitha got a key from her apron and unlocked



the matching set of doors, just like the ones to the house complete with brass and etchings. She turned, and signed to Ilya, *If you come here again, make sure you lock the door when you leave.*

*She's locked in?* Ilya asked, his curiosity piqued.

Tabitha nodded. *She's got dementia. It comes and goes. When she's herself, its fine. But when she has one of her spells, its best that she's locked up.*

*If she's locked up, how did she ever find out about me?*

Tabitha shrugged and unlocked the door. She opened the doors into dim light. Ilya smelled the scent of decay and bitter odor of mothballs. He wrinkled his nose at the smell and followed Tabitha through the threshold. The room was lit by one stained glass lamp. There were large windows all along the walls, covered by heavy drapes, belted shut tightly, allowing no light through. A couch, a day bed, an antique cherry wood desk and table, along with a small black and white television, decorated the room. The television was on, but the sound was turned down. It was showing nothing but static, giving the illusion of gray scale snow on the far wall of what appeared to be an iron bar and brass elevator door. Huh, there's those iron bars again, Ilya thought.

*This is her sitting room. If she's not in here, it means that she's upstairs in bed.*

Tabitha switched the television off. Ilya heard something scuttling in the walls but it stopped suddenly. A soft buzzing came from the windows. Ilya reached out to pull the curtains back, and as his fingers touched the black felt, the sound ceased. Ilya's hand froze, leaving him uncertain of whether or not he wanted to see the other side. Images of

the insects hurling their razor sharp bodies against the blood-beast were fresh in his mind.

Tabitha walked over to the elevator door and turned the brass handle to the down position. A slow grinding of gears began, and Ilya deserted the curtains. He passed an unused fireplace, with the iron shutters closed on it, and a small electric heater, unused at the moment, sitting beside it.

*It's too dangerous for her to have a fire.* Tabitha didn't elaborate, and Ilya wasn't inclined to ask questions, instead recalling a certain character from Jane Eyre, and shivering slightly. The tray tilted precariously in his hands, but he quickly righted it. Tabitha gave him a sharp look as the black elevator platform slowly descended from above.

*How come the rest of the house doesn't have elevators?*

*What do you mean? There's a cargo elevator at the main house.*

*Really? I haven't seen it.* Ilya wondered where it was. How many things were there still for him to discover about this house?

*It's behind a pair of double doors in the hall by the kitchen. You can't tell unless you open them.*

Ilya nodded, and Tabitha reached out and unlatched the elevator door, pulling it open. She motioned for Ilya to enter. He stepped onto the musty platform and turned back to ask Tabitha if there were matching towers in the other three corners, when he saw her closing the grate, leaving Ilya alone in the elevator.

*You aren't coming up?* He did his best to keep his hand steady as he signed it, to

hide his unease, and not spill anything on the tray. It was a precarious situation. He could hear the buzzing again, now that the gears were silent.

*No, she wants you to deliver her food.*

*But I don't know where to set the tray. What do I do?*

Tabitha turned the brass handle up and Ilya started to rise into the ceiling. *There's a little table by her bed. Set it there. I'm leaving the key on the hook by the door. Make sure to lock up when you're through!*

*Are you leaving? Shouldn't you wait for me?* Whatever response she made, Ilya could not read as she disappeared from view. “Help me, you Bitch!” he whispered fiercely, hoping that the old woman upstairs didn’t hear. Slowly, her ladyship's bedroom came into view. The same heavy drapes blocked out the sun, except for one window facing a canopied bed. There, the drapes were parted an inch or two, letting the sunlight in. The bed was monstrously large, and all in white, from the white frame, to the white silk sheets, and the gauzy, translucent fabric of the curtains around it. As the elevator continued its ascent, Ilya became aware of the buzzing sound all around him, growing louder and louder, overcoming the squealing of the oiled gears of the elevator.

As the elevator stopped, the buzzing ceased entirely. But they were still here. Ilya could feel them. They might sing like cicadas, but Ilya knew they weren't. Cautiously, he opened the elevator door. It was impossibly loud to his ears in the total silence of the room. But he could still hear scuttling in the walls around him as he pulled the door open all the way. The Insects stopped moving as soon as the door was open. Ilya stepped out

into the gloomy room. The smell of decay and mothballs was overpowering up here. This was the source. Odd, the mothballs apparently didn't work on whatever cicada-like creatures infested the place.

He couldn't make out anything but the parted curtain and the bed, with a little side table, where he was supposed to set the tray. He walked toward it, his eyes straining in the darkness to make out the other details of the room. Dolls watched him with black eyes on high shelves through the room. Thick green carpet masked the sound of his footfalls as he set the tray down on the painted white end table. He turned to go, trying not to stare at the wispy material of the curtains.

“I knew it was you... I saw you from the window.” It was a faint whisper, thin and hoarse, almost as if the voice was used to screaming and shouting but hadn't whispered in years.

Ilya swallowed nervously. Did she want him to say something? What should he call her? Your ladyship? Mademoiselle? “I'm Ilya, Madame.”

Something moved behind the curtains, shifting. “Come forward and stand in the light. Let me see your eyes.”

Ilya took a step forward so that he stood in a beam of light, tilting his head so it shined on his face, blinding him. The buzzing from the curtains came again for a few seconds, and then grew still.

The voice whispered from beyond the curtains, as if the old woman were afraid of being overheard. “Sacha told me about you. As soon as that boy mentioned your eyes, I

knew. My friends knew, too. But they can't talk like you and me, can they?"

Again, he wasn't certain he should answer. What did she mean by friends? The bugs? Ilya shivered slightly, his feelings of anxiety amplified. "No, I guess they can't."

Harsh laughter came from behind the thin curtains, and Ilya turned to look, sensing movement. The tray was gone from the table. He stepped out of the beam of light, suddenly feeling vulnerable within it.

"They want to kill you, you know." The old woman was back to whispering. "You've had the blood now. I told them you didn't mean to drink it, but it's difficult to communicate with them."

"W-What blood?" Ilya said nervously.

"*The Blood*. His blood, you know what I'm talking about. They say you had it after you left the secret wing. They want inside it, but you probably know that."

The dog. That was what the old woman was talking about. He remembered now, he'd gotten it all over his hands before he knew what it was, stumbling around in the dark. Some of it must have gotten in his mouth. His eyes widened. Was he already infected, like the story of those who drank from the fountain and became monsters? "That was an accident, I got it on my hands. I didn't mean to drink any of it. It came from a dog, not the blood-beast."

Harsh laughter, followed by slurping sounds as the old woman fed. As his eyes got used to the darkness, he could make out movement all around the room, on the walls, the floor, and the ceiling. If he concentrated on one spot, the dark-bodied insects moved

further into the shadows. Now he could see them through the wispy curtains. They walked along the inside of it, the outlines of their three inch long bodies clinging on the fabric as they slid around. Sometimes their legs would stick and they would pull themselves free with a little snapping sound.

“I've seen you before, you know, in a dream. The work crews, they found the statue in the sealed space in the chapel, after Amaranth hid it. Ask the Archivist about it, if you live that long.”

Before Ilya could figure out something to say about the woman's ravings, a figure stepped out of the shadows. He recognized the hands first. The green gecko gloves gave the boy away. Sacha, just as he'd looked the night before, mouthed words to him. He was standing in the shadows, trying to keep himself hidden from her Ladyship. What was he saying? It was the same thing over and over again. Ilya tried not to stare at him too much, lest he give the boy's position away. “I-I hope I do,” he said awkwardly.

“Don't listen to the vultures. They're tainted by the blood. Unnatural freaks, they've grown beyond old and become twisted. The snakes are just as bad. Do you understand what your eyes actually do? My friends told me, but you've only begun to guess.”

Sacha was becoming more and more agitated. Ilya didn't know what to say. And then a thought occurred to him.

“Are your eyes like mine? Is that how you can see ghosts?”

Harsh laughter came from the bed. “They do more than that. But to answer your

question, no, I don't have the gift. I had to take the eyes of one who did. It was a rather messy ordeal for the child.”

It occurred to him what Sacha was mouthing. Two words: *Run away.*

“Do you know what I did? I ate some eyes like yours and they let me see the most amazing things. I could see my friends with my new eyes, but if I closed them, they were gone. But that was a long time ago, and their gifts are fading.”

Ilya slowly backed up toward the elevator. “I've got work to do.”

“Oh no, the blind cannot work, little Ilya. You see, I need to renew my gift.”

Ilya turned toward the elevator, as the sound of the curtains parting whirred behind him. The room was alive with buzzing. Ilya ran to the elevator. Sacha ran up to him, as the insects swarmed around Ilya. He pulled the door shut as fast as he could, looking back into the room. The bed curtains were open, and the bed was empty. Then the insects were upon him, swarming through the bars, crawling on his flesh, and cutting him all over. Ilya screamed, trying to brush them away. The voice came at his ear.

“Close your eyes, Ilya,” Sacha whispered. “Then they can't see you.”

Ilya obeyed. The pain on his skin ceased and he groped in his darkness, for the knob on the wall.

“It's to your left, about a foot,” Sacha whispered.

Sounds came from the room, metal on wood, and then metal on metal. He reached where the boy said, and twisted the knob, hearing the gears start to turn and the floor descend.

“She's coming to the elevator door and she has a knife. Don't open your eyes!”

Ilya heard the door slowly opening.

“Go away, hag!” Sacha shouted.

Ilya heard the hacking laughter of the old woman. “I thought I saw you in the corner.”

“Stand against the back of the elevator. She can't reach you there, and she's too old to jump down.”

Ilya backed away, hearing something slicing through the air in front of him.

Finally, the elevator reached the bottom.

“They're all over you, Ilya, don't open your eyes,” Sacha whispered, terrified.

Ilya fumbled around in the elevator for the latch and slid it open. As he stepped out, he heard the gears grind to life again, and the elevator began its ascent. He shut the door behind him.

“Ilya, can you see me?” the old woman called down.

Ilya almost looked up at her, but caught himself in time.

“They can't go out in the sun,” Sacha shouted in his ear. “Get out of here before she comes down!”

He stumbled into the room, feeling in front of him, trying to remember the layout. It was too late. He tripped over the desk chair and went crashing to the floor. He banged his head on the corner of the desk and cried out. He held it in his hands as a wave of dizziness rocked him.



“Ilya! You have to get up,” Sacha said, pulling at his hand.

Ilya could hear it too; the elevator had stopped at the top floor. Then the gears began again, descending. He got shakily to his feet, pushing himself up from the floor. Blood ran down the side of his face, but he dared not open his eyes.

“Follow the wall, there's nothing else in the way to the door.”

Ilya nodded, following the desk with his hands, over to the wall, and following it, keeping one hand on it at all times, passing over the windows until he got to the front door. Behind him, the elevator stopped moving. The sound of the door opening echoed around the room, followed by a throaty, wet chuckle. .

“Dear me, you've banged your head.” The old voice had power to it now, harsh and damaged by a lifetime of cigarettes and shouting.

“The key, Ilya, you have to lock her in!”

Ilya reached for the hook by the door, but felt nothing, his groping frantic.

“She's coming! Reach higher!”

Ilya reached up and grasped the key, yanking it off along with the hook. He slipped through the door and slammed it behind him. He opened his eyes now, hands shaking, and fit the key in the lock as she grasped the knob from the other side, and tried to open the door. He held it closed easily against her infirm arms. He locked the door and put the key in his pocket.

He squatted down next to the door, holding his head in his hands, feeling sticky blood. He couldn't resist, he pulled his hands away and looked at them. The color red was

the last thing he remembered before he fainted.

He came to, feeling an intense pain in his nose. At first he didn't recognize the little figure in front of him. It was Soldier, with what could only be described as a handkerchief pulled over his head like a cloak. It trailed down past his ankles, and Ilya could barely make out his rosy red painted cheeks.

The bayonet moved to the ground and one tiny hand emerged from the purple silk handkerchief. *Ilya, you have to get up.*

He struggled through the fog in his memory, and tried to sit up. He saw his own bloody hands and fainted again.

The second time he awoke, Cook had him bundled in his arms like a baby, walking down a darkened hallway with Tabitha leading the way, casting worried looks over her shoulder. He decided it was okay to go to sleep now, so long as this wasn't a dream, but if it was, that would be confusing. He decided not to think about it and went back to sleep.

For a little while and an eternity, he was sitting on the rotten dock, looking down into the fetid waters of Gdanski Marshlands, watching a snag tree bend under the weight of dozens of vultures, deep in conversation with each other. Then one of them turned and looked him in his eye, milky white to orange.

“I've told you about this. You shouldn't be here,” Orryn said, and everything started to fade. “Mind the stairs,” the bird called out in a harsh metallic tone of voice, as everything was swallowed up in darkness.

The next time he woke up, he could feel that his face had been washed and Cook was putting away a first aid kit. There was a pile of bloody gauze on the table, and Ilya's head spun at the sight, bile rising in his throat. Tabitha and Demetri looked down at him. It was a little disconcerting to see them, almost like he was on his death bed and they had come to hear his last words. What would he say? Sorry? Cook held up three fingers.

*How many fingers do you see?*

*Twenty-seven, each a different color and writhing like snakes in a barrel. Is that bad?*

The corner of Cook's mouth quirked. *How many?*

*Three.*

Cook looked over at Demetri and Tabitha. *He's fine. I told you, it looked much worse than it actually was. Head wounds always are. If he'd used the phone in her Ladyship's sitting room, rather than crawling outside, locking the door, and fainting, there wouldn't have even been that much blood loss.*

Ilya refrained from replying: *But she was trying to eat my eyes so she could see dead people and better command the thousands of apparently metaphysical bugs in her tower which can only attack me when my eyes are open and I am capable of perceiving them.* It seemed to him that now was not the proper moment to relay that information. It seemed doubtful the moment would ever come.

*How many stitches are there?* Demetri signed, coming to stand over Ilya.

*Only three. I'll take them out after a day or two.*

*Should he go to the hospital?*

*Only if you want to throw away money.*

Demetri shrugged and shook Cook's hand. *Thank you.*

*Don't worry about it. I'm just worried that Ilya's going to die here. It seems like he gets hurt on an hourly basis.* Cook turned back to Ilya. *How did you hit your head on her desk anyway?*

*The carpet bunched up and I wasn't paying any attention and tripped.*

Cook nodded. *He should stay here for the rest of the day, he's still got some blood loss, and he'll be weak until tomorrow.*

Ilya glowered at the news. It was all well and good to have allergies and infections, but not things that made him sit in bed all day. Those illnesses were for old people. Cook departed along with Demetri, who gave Ilya an affectionate squeeze on the shoulder. Which Ilya supposed meant, *I was really worried about you, but now you're all right and I'm glad*, in emotionally repressed man-speak.

Tabitha pulled up a chair next to the bed and sat down.

*What room am I in?* he signed. It was no servant's quarters. From the elegance and space of the place, Ilya supposed he was in a room in that disused hallway, near the crazy bitch locked in the tower.

*Just a guest bedroom. We prepared it in case we ran out of rooms in the other wings, but we didn't need it.* She took his hand, like he was some sort of invalid, as though she had to gently chaff his chilled hand to make it warm. He didn't mind. In fact,

she could hold his hand all day. It wasn't so bad being an invalid.

Damn it, if she'd waited for him, her ladyship wouldn't have tried to cut out his eyeballs and eat them. Before he could work himself deeper into his might've been scenario, Tabitha pulled out a small piece of paper and unfolded it. Scrawled in tiny, messy script, were the following words:

*That fool, Ilya Kollide, is outside the eastern tower bleeding all over the place. Go get him before he dies.*

Ilya looked up at Tabitha, doing his best to pretend he had no idea who had written this letter. He didn't smile at all. He quizzically cocked an eyebrow, but otherwise kept his face dead of all expression.

*That's odd, isn't it?* he signed neutrally.

She looked at him suspiciously. *Yes, it is. What's even more suspicious is that I got this note while I was changing the linen in one of the guest rooms. I turned my back from the bed for a moment to get a fresh pillow case, and the note was just lying there on the bed, with no sign of anyone having entered or left the room.*

*That is weird, isn't it, Tabitha?*

Her look of suspicion deepened.

He should just say nothing at all. Then he couldn't be accused of anything. It was hard to not smile, or babble.

*Well, whoever it was knew you.*

Ilya said nothing, he merely shrugged.

*He called you a fool, so he obviously met you before.*

*You think it's a he?* Ilya signed placidly, trying to figure out if she were right or wrong. He supposed Soldier was technically an it, but he certainly acted quite male at times.

*The carpet isn't loose in the western tower. I've been there.*

*It's thick though, isn't it?*

*Be truthful, did she have one of her spells and scare you, with all her weird ranting?*

Ilya seized the opportunity given to him. *She had a knife and she was coming at me.*

Tabitha looked shocked. Her fingers were still for a moment. *Oh Ilya, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have left you up there by yourself. Everything seemed fine so I assumed she was in a good mood.*

Damn right you shouldn't have left me. Ilya left that unsigned. *What sort of things does she rant about?*

*I don't know, I can't hear her, but I can see her lips moving.* Tabitha got to her feet, smoothing out the wrinkles in her apron. *You get some rest. I'm going to go tell Elem about this.*

Ilya did his best to look like he was at death's door. Maybe he could get the old

bitch into some trouble by blaming her dementia. What was he thinking? She was crazy, even if some of it were true. Sane people don't try to steal the eyeballs of teenage boys. He pulled the blankets up to his chest and did his best to look terrified and timid. Which, he supposed, was pretty damn accurate for how he felt.

## CHAPTER 15: THROUGH MOONLIGHT CORRIDORS

As soon as Tabitha was gone, the last of his visitors made himself known. Soldier jumped onto the chair that Tabitha had vacated, and from there, leaped onto the bed. Ilya supposed he would have to give up on his dream of Soldier being a state of the art I.S.B. surveillance device and learn to live with him being a magical toy person, after what had happened.

*Were you following me?* Ilya signed.

*I was keeping tabs on you,* Soldier signed testily. *There's a difference.*

Ilya gave an exaggerated nod and mouthed under his breath “Oh yes, sure.”

*You do remember that I can hear just fine, and you don't need to sign.*

“Naturally.” As in, naturally, he had completely forgotten that detail.

*I came to a decision while I was waiting outside the tower.*

“When you weren't following me?”

*I enjoy stabbing you, so keep it up and I'll enjoy myself some more.*

Ilya smiled at the toy. “What did you decide?”

*That my mistress was a liar.*

Ilya sat up in bed, suddenly interested. “Amaranth Neimasaurus?”

*Yes. I suppose you read most of the diary? Well, according to her, the Lord Alexei was mad before he was put in there, a raving lunatic, with an insatiable thirst for human blood. The thing is, raving lunatics don't have workshops and tools, do they?*



Ilya shook his head. "He's still alive. I heard his voice. He didn't try to hurt me, either."

*That leaves two possibilities. He was too weak to kill you, or he's not a raving lunatic.*

"But he killed those two people at the party, seventy years ago," Ilya said, suddenly feeling like devil's advocate.

*Yes. Was that necessity, or madness? Amaranth convinced everyone in the family that it was madness, that Alexei had gone insane, that he couldn't be killed, and the only thing that could be done was to wall him into the secret wing.* Soldier's hand stilled. He lay against Ilya's side, suddenly inanimate. The door was flung open and Aleksander came in with Shoji in tow.

"Ilya, I heard my grandmother came at you with a knife and you fell over a table. Is it true?"

Suddenly, Ilya appeared to be at death's door yet again, one hand about to knock upon it, and quite heavily asleep. Aleksander swept into the room and headed toward the bed. He knocked Soldier to the floor. "Still sleeping with toys?"

"You're supposed to knock before going in to someone's room," Shoji said quietly.

"It's my house."

Ilya couldn't see with his eyes shut, but he was relatively certain that Shoji had rolled his eyes. He felt Aleksander climb into bed and poke him in the cheek with what

was, hopefully, a finger. He pretended to sleep.

“Those stitches look serious. Just let him sleep.” The Phoenix's voice was smooth and diplomatic. “Everyone else is down by the pool waiting for us.”

“The bitches can wait.”

Ilya felt the Young Lord's breath on his cheek, and resisted the urge to shove him off the bed.

“Ilya...”

The breath was hot against Ilya's ear, and then he felt Aleksander's tongue there, and his eyes shot open. He pushed him with both hands off the bed. Aleksander laughed as he went over the edge.

“Ow...” Ilya saw his head pop up first, looking pissed off. “Your little toy poked me in the ass.” His hand came up carrying Soldier, the tip of his bayonet bloody.

Ilya resisted the urge to smile. “That's too bad,” he said neutrally.

The Young Lord threw the doll over his shoulder and got to his feet, rubbing the spot where Soldier had stabbed him. He rubbed the drop of blood between two fingers. Aleksander's playfulness seemed to have vanished along with the pricking. “Well, did she?”

Ilya nodded. “I'd still rather spend midnight with her.”

“After I've been inside you, we'll see what you think.”

“He thinks that's flirting,” Shoji said from the foot of the bed. “I tried to explain to him the nuances, but...” Shoji shrugged.

Aleksander ignored his lover's jibes. "An eighty-four-year-old woman almost did you in?" He climbed back onto the bed to lie next to Ilya, who became aware of the fact that he was dressed in nothing but a white robe and very little beneath it.

Ilya scooted all the way to the edge of the bed, leaving about a foot of space between them. "She's spry for her age."

"She never ate fried foods."

"She sounds charming. Can we go?" Shoji asked, rolling his eyes.

Ilya felt immensely satisfied at seeing the eye roll. He knew how the Oriental Boy worked. Why was he pleased by that? He quickly looked away.

"I have to tell Ilya something, and I won't lick your ear this time, I promise."

Aleksander leaned in close and whispered in Ilya's ear. "I don't think you dislike men as much as you pretend. I've figured out something that Shoji hasn't. You like him, not me. I can tell by the way you avoid looking at him." Aleksander leaned back against the bed and smiled at Ilya.

Something in it made the boy shudder slightly. "Sir, you're crazy."

"All right, but it doesn't make me wrong." The Young Lord got up off the bed. "You'll come around. But that gash on your head looks nasty, so I'm extending my ultimatum until tomorrow at midnight. It's my little gift to you." He walked around the foot of the bed. "I'll see you then." He turned toward the door and then staggered, reaching out to Shoji for support. "God damn it. This stupid fucking thing!" He snatched Soldier up off the ground, hopping on one foot. "It got me in the foot this time!"

“You should watch your step, shouldn't you?” Shoji said placidly.

“My foot's bleeding.” Aleksander straightened up, holding Soldier in his hand, the bayonet bloody, and the permanently smiling rosy-cheeked face quite appropriate to Ilya for once. The Young Lord threw him against the wall, and Soldier bounced off it to land on the day bed. Aleksander staggered from the room.

Shoji remained, looking down at Ilya, who looked away nervously. “Didn't you find it amusing?”

“I guess.” Ilya's nervousness was growing by the minute. He did not like him, but now he would second guess himself forever.

“It's just you didn't laugh or smile. It's not like you.”

“I'm all muddle headed from the fall.”

Shoji drummed his fingers against the frame of the bed for a few moments. “I guess that's it. I hope you feel better.” Shoji turned and walked from the room before Ilya could reply. It was a sad state of affairs in his life, that he was the first person to wish him well. Everyone else acted like he wounded himself according to a routine, or on purpose. He would get a lot of attention if he did that, wouldn't he? Over the last week, Ilya had come to realize he was not a masochist, and had no fondness for being hurt whatsoever.

Soldier clamored up on the bed, none the worse for wear after being flung across the room. *Are you a homosexual?* he signed.

The unchanging facial expression suddenly became creepy to Ilya. “No....”

*Then you don't like his advances?*

“Definitely not.”

*You want me to do something to him while he’s sleeping?*

“Like what?”

*I don’t know, mutilate his genitals or slit his throat?* Soldier held out his arms as though he were weighing the two options.

Ilya had never been so tempted to commit murder in his life. One little word and all his problems with the jackass would be done with forever. Just one word to Soldier and he would never be harassed again. “No.” Stupid right things...

Soldier shrugged. *Let me know if you change your mind by midnight tomorrow.*

“What should we do about Al—”

Soldier suddenly poked him in the side, holding his hand up for quiet. *Someone’s listening outside the door.*

*Who do you think it is?* Ilya signed back, nervous. It could just be Shoji, lingering, wondering at Ilya's odd behavior.

*The Mongol?* Soldier signed.

*Do you mean Shoji?*

Soldier nodded.

He hadn't really thought of him as a Mongol, but he supposed from whatever time and place the toy was from, Shoji was either a Mongol or a Chinese.

*They're leaving now. Whoever they are, they were wearing shoes.*

*Shoji and Alexander were barefoot, because they came from the pool.* Ilya's list of

suspects now contained no names. Or rather, it now encompassed everyone in the house.

*You don't think her Ladyship got loose?* Ilya shivered a bit at the thought.

*It's not likely. Someone would be here to guard you if she had. Let us turn our attention back to the blood-beast, shall we?*

They made plans to go into the secret wing together and confront the blood-beast, whom Soldier was certain had to be Alexei. Ilya was fairly certain, too. For all of the terror he associated with the place, nothing bad had actually happened to him there, besides losing his lantern and his way. Not like out in the house where people spied on him, dolls attacked him, bugs saw him as the enemy, men tried to rape him, and grandmas were after his eyes. To say nothing of the minks or vultures lurking outside.

Ilya decided to confide in Soldier about everything that had happened to him over the last few days. This time using sign language in case someone else chose to listen at the door. He was curious what Soldier would make of his eyes. Maybe he knew something about it. But when Ilya asked, all he could do was shake his head.

*I've never heard of such a thing. But these bugs you speak of, I can see and hear them too, and I cannot go out in the light, just like them. It is a trait that I have observed, from those things beyond the normal. We cannot abide the kiss of the sun. Your ghost and the bugs could not exist there.* Soldier sat down on Ilya's chest cross-legged, since it made it easy for him to see the little wooden fingers move. *All things beyond normal require something to continue as well. The blood-beast obviously requires blood.*

*What do you need?* Ilya signed, dreading the answer. Maybe Soldier needed the

spleens of cats, the brains of mice, or something else diabolical.

*I need to feel the light of the moon on my body.*

Ilya let out the breath he had been holding without realizing it. *What about ghosts, what do they need?*

*Connections. A relative, someone of a similar mindset, something to anchor them to this world. They feed on the connection itself and get stronger.* Soldier got to his feet and walked across Ilya's chest. *In your case, you perceive them because of your eyes, and that is the connection. Now hold still, I want to examine them up close.*

Ilya felt the cold wood resting on his nose and felt one hand reach out to pull his eyelid open. It was extremely itchy and Ilya did his best not to move as Soldier's unreadable face stared into his right eye. He looked at it from several angles. He had Ilya look up, down, and all around. Finally, he retreated to the comfy spot on Ilya's torso, in the little hollow between stomach and chest. *They're an odd color, but that seems to be the only difference I can see.*

*I didn't thank you for writing that note, did I?* Ilya signed suddenly. *I'm sorry, you saved my life and I forgot about it.*

Soldier's chest seemed to puff out a little bit. *It's nothing. But I think with the eyes you've got, you need to get used to the sight of blood.*

*Oh, I don't mind blood, just not the sight of my own.* Ilya signed it as if it were the most normal thing in the world. He loved the sight of other people's blood... really. *What do you think the bugs feed off, if they're beyond normal?*

Soldier tilted his head at Ilya. *I don't know. But if what the old woman said is true. I don't think normal people can see them. They can be heard, because the exterminators have been coming regularly. They don't kill this type of bug though. Maybe they feed on what can perceive them.*

*I can perceive them. Why didn't they kill me?*

*Were you listening? Your eyes perceive them. When you close them the creatures no longer exist for you and you are no longer food.*

Something about this theory seemed off to Ilya. It couldn't be true, not the business about his eyes and perceiving them, the part about Ilya being food for them. *Why don't they kill Alina Neimasaurus?*

Suddenly, Soldier shot to his feet. *I know what they eat! You saw it last night. They were frantic to get at Alexei. They eat him. Or people like him, tainted by the blood fountain.*

Ilya nodded. That fit to him. He wasn't a top priority to the bugs; after all, he'd only had trace amounts from an indirect source. He tried not to think about it too much. *They wanted me dead, not to eat me. They were angry at the fact I'd drank some of it.*

Soldier nodded. *Why aren't they surrounding the church then, if they want this blood so bad?* Suddenly, Soldier jumped off the bed and rolled underneath. A knock came at the door. Before he could say hello, the door opened. Tabitha came in with a tray, the same sort of silver tray he'd had earlier, except there was a big piece of roast pork, along with boiled potatoes, sautéed mushrooms, a glass of milk, and a golden sour cherry tart.



*I may bash my head in every day,* Ilya signed as the tray was laid across his lap. Tabitha fluffed the pillows behind his head as he picked up the knife and fork.

*Cook says you need to eat a lot, because of the blood loss.* She sat down in the chair and leaned back, closing her eyes for a moment. She looked worn out to Ilya. The masquerade and the continuing presence of some of the guests had exhausted the staff. Especially the ones that worked hard. Well, Ilya was exhausted too, wasn't he? She opened her eyes and sat up.

*Elem's coming by to see you after dinner. He's very upset about this whole situation. Alina apparently denies everything. Not even her own grandson believes her. At least she doesn't remember it, which is probably for the best.*

*Aleksander talked to her?*

Tabitha nodded. *He visits her once a week. I guess he does care about her. Well... At least a little bit. He went up there right after it happened. You know what else he did?*

Ilya didn't think that he ever wanted to hear anything good about him, but from the way she'd signed that, it seemed likely he was about to hear something nice about the blackmailing rapist son-of-a-bitch. *What did he do? But I don't want to hear about anything nice.*

Tabitha smiled. *In the middle of a busy party, where we're all working ourselves to death on his behalf, he sends one of the footmen into town, to visit an animal shelter. Apparently he brought back a cat for the Young Lord.*

Shit. Masque was a gift from the rapist to help get Ilya in the mood. Masque, he

hadn't fed her all day, and there was still no litter in the box, just sand. Hell, there was no box, just cardboard. Poor thing. She couldn't help how she was brought here anymore than Ilya could. He was not going to give her back, because Aleksander would probably just have a servant chuck her into the Bleeding Swamp, where some Italian cannibal would skin her and eat her. He would probably make a rather interesting hat out of her fur, which of course, Ilya would see when he was in the swamp looking for the Weeping Church. Then he would feel bad and know that he was responsible for her becoming a head warmer.

*Are you drifting again?* Tabitha signed.

With a start, Ilya realized he was. These were the kinds of thoughts he had when he was alone, not when he was having a conversation.

*Don't forget your food. Cook told me to make sure you eat it all.*

Ilya looked down and was surprised to see the tray of food. He'd forgotten about it. Suddenly, he had the overwhelming desire to tell her everything. Well, not everything, but everything to do with the cat and Aleksander's ultimatum. He signed it with one hand, while he ate. He wasn't hungry at all and the food tasted like nothing but roughage in his mouth, but it was less trouble to fight with her, so he ate. He started out telling her about Arsenic, and then recounting each encounter he'd had with the Young Lord, Masque's arrival, and finally his visit to Ilya today, omitting Soldier stabbing him in the ass and foot.

Tabitha leaned back in the chair, her expression suddenly stony. *I told you to stay*

*away from him.*

*It's hard when I spend all day in his house.*

*Yeah.* She took the tray from him. *I don't get it, you're not that attractive.*

*Thanks.* Ilya smiled at her and leaned back on the pillows, suddenly tired.

Tabitha blushed. *Sorry. I meant, why is he obsessing over you? I thought he was actually concerned about what happened. He just didn't want you dead until—*

*Yeah,* Ilya cut in, not particularly caring to hear the end of the sentence.

*And that cat was just to butter you up so he could—*

*Okay, I think we both know all of this.* Ilya smiled at her, hoping she'd change the subject.

She got the message and promptly shot the metaphorical messenger dead. *And to think he's still got about forty guests left he could be fuc—*

Ilya closed his eyes so that he wouldn't see the rest of the sign. He felt a tapping on his shoulder and opened his eyes. Tabitha leaned over him.

*Are you getting sleepy?* she signed.

*Yes.* He wasn't that tired but if the only thing she could talk about was...What should he call it? He'd read a book once where the author had referred to a homosexual character as suffering from "The Greek Affliction" so hence forth Ilya would refer to it as the Greek thing. If all she could talk about was doing Greek things, then he was very tired indeed.

She stood up with the empty tray. *Well, there's only one thing for it, I'll tell Elem*

*and that will be the end of it.*

*He's got that much power over Aleksander?* Ilya said, impressed.

*No, silly. He'll tell Aleksander's mother.* Tabitha shook her head and walked toward the door.

Ilya waved his hand to get her attention. *Can you feed my cat? Demetri might forget.*

*I guess. Get some sleep, and I'll tell Elem. He'll probably be by later this evening.*

*Thanks,* he signed and then she was out the door. He would have fallen asleep, had Soldier not leapt onto the bed and poked him in the shoulder with his bayonet until Ilya opened his eyes.

*She's the one.*

*Huh?* Ilya signed sleepily.

*It's the same footfalls. The same shoes. She's the one who was listening outside the door earlier.*

Ilya almost laughed. *But she's deaf, she couldn't listen to a conversation outside a door.*

*Obviously, she is not.* Soldier leaned back on his haunches, deep in thought. Ilya supposed he would have a contemplative expression on his face if he could change it.

*Why would she pretend to be deaf?* It was more for Ilya's own contemplation than anything else, and Soldier merely shrugged in reply.

Ilya was too tired to keep his eyes open much longer. But then they popped open.

*Will those bugs come after me when it's dark?*

*Just keep quiet. They can't get you when you're sleeping, because they can't perceive you when you can't perceive them. Take a nap. I'm going to creep around a bit.*

Soldier got up and walked toward the edge of the bed.

*But what if something happens to me?*

*If Aleksander or the bugs or the Blood-beast or Alina Neimasaurus or the Calviarri Cannibals come for you, there's not much I can do.* Soldier jumped down and disappeared from Ilya's view.

*Why did you have to list everything!* Ilya heard the tell-tale scraping of the heating grate and knew that Soldier was off to creep about. He was probably going to stalk Tabitha and throw things at her to see if she would react. If the Toy had had an air horn, he probably leap out behind her and let it rip to see if she jumped. Finally, he was too tired to stay awake any longer. When he awoke to a knocking at the door, it was dark inside the room. The door opened, and Elem stepped inside. He turned the light on and Ilya blinked up at him sleepily. The man was painfully well groomed as usual.

*How are you, Ilya?* he signed, pulling up a chair next to the bed.

*Much better, sir.* It was true; the short nap had made his head feel less muddled, though he still longed for eight hours of sleep later tonight. *What time is it?*

Elem withdrew a silver fob watch on a silver chain from his coat pocket and flipped it open. *About half-past seven in the evening.*

Ilya tried not to smile. Of course he had a pocket watch. Ilya longed to be able to

have one, along with a monocle, to look like a distinguished gentleman. Of course, Aleksander technically was a gentleman of means and had neither. Maybe that was the Young Lord's problem, he needed more things to remind him that he was an aristocrat, rather than a randy young man always on the lookout for Greek things.

*About the matter you discussed with Tabitha, it's been taken care of. He has received his instructions from his mother. I know something of your personal situation from Demetri and I feel the need to apologize again for the simply disastrous turn of events you've had here. I know you're in no position to leave your employment here, but if you should choose to do so, you will receive a good reference from me. If you'd like, when I return to Petrograd, I could ask the Lord and Lady Neimasaurus for a transfer to the staff at their mansion in town. I know you used to live there.* It was quite a little speech Elem had given, and he'd delivered it with a very earnest expression on his face.

*What about Demetri? Would he go to Petrograd too?*

Elem winced. *Unfortunately, he could not. I am the only staff there that is deaf, along with Klimov and that is only because we have served her ladyship since she was a child. Otherwise, the staff must be able to hear. Your bilingualism makes you ideal, so that you can understand orders from us.*

Ilya wasn't certain about this. He wanted to leave; it was like a dream come true. He'd disliked this place since the very first day. But now, he felt like he would be leaving his family when he left Demetri. He would leave his friends when he left, like Tabitha and Cook. He supposed Soldier was his friend too, and technically there was some kind

of bond between him and Orryn. He wouldn't miss Aleksander, Shoji, The Cannibals, the bugs, the mad woman in the tower, the Blood-beast, The Archivist, the minks that might have survived the Young Lord's new fur coat, and the ghosts. Well, he might miss Sacha. Wasn't the dead boy his friend too? What about the child locked in the church? Who would help him if Ilya left? Damn it. He wanted to go home. He could go back to school with all the people he knew, like all this had never happened.

*I can tell that you're torn about this. Think about it, and tell me when you've made a decision. Cook and Tabitha know how to get in contact with me when I'm in Petrograd or Moscow. Elem snapped the watch closed and returned it to his pocket. Now, if anything else happens with the Young Lord of Neimasaurus, go straight to Tabitha or me, if I'm here. Elem got to his feet. I believe Demetri and Klimov are coming by around eight o'clock to give you some company.*

*Thanks, Mr. Elem? That's your first name, isn't it?*

*Kabalevsky, its Elem Kabalevsky.*

*Thanks, Mr. Kabalevsky.*

Elem opened the door, and signed, *You're not the first servant he's tried to coerce like this, and you probably won't be the last. It's important if you see anything going on with any of the other servants, to report it immediately. This isn't the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he can't simply do as he pleases. If no one in authority knows about it, then no help can be offered. Do you want me to leave the light on?*

Ilya nodded and Elem departed, shutting the door behind him. Ilya got out of bed

slowly, leaning on the chair Tabitha had sat in earlier for support. His head spun a little bit, but it passed after a few moments. He made his way into the bathroom and relieved himself without making a mess. When he was finished washing his hands, he looked up at the mirror. There was a nasty gash above his right eye and back toward the temple. It was about an inch long and had been sutured shut. His bile rose. He turned his head the other way so he couldn't see it. He really had to get over his inability to deal with the sight of his own blood. If it hadn't been for Soldier he might very well have bled to death from a relatively minor wound because he couldn't function covered in his own blood.

He heard a quiet scuttling in the walls, of thin membranous scuttling limbs of cicada-like creatures. He immediately closed his eyes. If Soldier was right, they would not be able to see him, so long as he closed his eyes. He stood perfectly still, in the darkness of his own making.

Scuttling swept like a wave through the bathroom and into the bedroom before fading away. Now that it was dark, they were sweeping the house. Ilya felt suddenly cold in his heart, and he knew that they were searching the house for him, because they wanted him dead for something that had been an accident. But they had passed him and his room by, so he hadn't ingested enough of the dog's blood for it to affect him. It was only the eyes that allowed them to see each other. How could he convince some insects that this was the case? Somehow, Alina communicated with them, so Ilya should be able to also, if he could figure out how before they sliced him to pieces.

He stumbled back into his room, still keeping his eyes shut, afraid that a few of



them might still be lurking by a crack in the wall, keeping a wary eye out. He was feeling his way over to the bed, using the chair for support, when he heard the door open. He peeked out of one eye quickly and saw Demetri looking at him curiously. Ilya opened his eyes completely, and saw the net bag in his hands, full of wine, some slich, playing cards, and other various items.

*I got dizzy for a moment, so I shut my eyes,* Ilya signed quickly. He caught himself before he smiled at Demetri, and gave himself a metaphorical pat on the back for being able to more effectively lie to his uncle.

*Get back into bed then. What are you doing wandering around anyway?* Demetri signed, as Klimov came in behind him with a small folding table under one arm, and a black case in the other.

*I had to go to the bathroom.* He didn't mention the bugs, because they could neither see nor hear them. For the deaf of Neimasaurus they did not exist in any capacity whatsoever.

*Well, sit down. You're done with that now.* Demetri pulled up a chair and sat down, putting the bag on the floor. *Why didn't you tell me what Aleksander was doing?*

*Demetri, we all know the answer to that. He was embarrassed about it,* Klimov signed, before unfolding the table next to the bed, so that he and Demetri could sit on one side, while Ilya could reach it from the bed, if he sat up. Ilya sat on the bed next to the table.

*What are we doing?* he signed, looking on with interest as Demetri put the cards

on the table and fiddled around until he withdrew a bottle of vodka. Ilya wrinkled his nose at the sight of it.

*Don't get all out of joint. Cook said the last thing you need is alcohol, so I brought you some of that American fizzy stuff that Cook found in the pantry. He said all the sugar would be good for you.*

*You mean soda pop?* Ilya asked as Demetri pulled the glass bottle from the knapsack and passed it over to him. Ilya took a sip and the warm, brown liquid burned its way pleasantly down his throat. He took a second sip as Demetri laid out some shot glasses for him and Klimov.

*We're going to play some poker, to help you work on your bluffing skills,* Klimov said, with his naturally impassive face almost completely expressionless. Ilya hoped that they wouldn't be using real money for this, because he suspected he would soon be completely bankrupt playing against him. He hadn't really seen the man since the masquerade preparations, but he'd spent hours training with him and hadn't done a completely awful job at the party either, so he supposed the man wasn't a half bad teacher.

They spent the next two hours being schooled by Klimov on gambling, both Ilya and Demetri. Ilya once again became acquainted with the little shake of the head every time he fell prey to a bluff. On the plus side, he was getting better and actually won a hand at the end, but he suspected Klimov had thrown the hand so he could win. Demetri took his trouncing at the older man's hands with good grace, because they were using

chips, not money. Toward the end, Ilya had adopted a technique to have an unchanging frown on his face, no matter what was in his hand, and no matter what his chances were. He kept his expression frozen like that for almost half an hour. It lasted until Demetri started referring to his poker face as “the baby scowl.” After that, smiles started to creep in.

After three bottles of soda pop, Ilya felt like he was ready to burst at the seams. He got up and paced back and forth on his side of the table every few minutes, causing both Demetri and Klimov to lean back in their seats and keep their cards hidden from him. Finally, around eleven o'clock they called it quits with Ilya's winning hand. He felt ready to lie to anyone now and get away with it. The baby scowl would serve him well. Ilya wasn't really sleepy after all the soda, nor was he particularly hungry after eating half the jar of slichichki himself, but he returned to bed as they left and pretended to sit in the darkness. About ten seconds after they turned the light off and departed, he heard the tell-tale scraping of the grate. He reached over and switched the lamp next to the bed on, just as Soldier jumped up on the chair and then vaulted onto the bed next to him.

*How was creeping?*

*Fine. Soldier flopped down on his back. Actually, it was boring as dirt. I watched her for hours and she must have the most boring life imaginable. The high point was when she went to feed your cat. I watched her from the grate in her room and she just sat there for hours, reading a book. A book! I dropped some coins out of the grate and they hit the floor pretty loud, but she didn't react.*

“I told you she was deaf. Anyway, have you considered that maybe all the maids wear the same kind of shoes?”

Soldier sat up, and Ilya imagined he would be grimacing if he could. *I guess that must be true. Did you hear the bugs?*

“Yeah, they came through the walls in the bathroom and the bedroom.”

*They're sweeping the house, looking for you. You know where you're safe from them?*

Then it clicked in Ilya's brain. It was so obvious that he was rather surprised to have overlooked it. “The secret wing. The blood-beast had been hiding in there for seventy years, and the bugs never got in there.”

*That we know of. But I don't remember hearing them that often, especially not back then. I suppose I could have mistaken them for normal cicadas. The seal on the wing must still be intact after all these years.*

“I wonder, has the blood-beast been locked in there, or has he been hiding from the bugs all these years?” Ilya put his hands behind his head. Maybe the creature hadn't been trapped at all; maybe it was protected in there. “Let's go ask him.”

*Now?*

“Why not? Most of the house is probably asleep, and you wanted to go down there anyway. Let's just do it.”

*We need the key to the attic.*

“Can't you steal it from Tabitha?”

*Of course I can. I even saw where she puts her keys before I left. I don't think it's a good idea to rush this. If Alexei has enough strength left to attack you, there's not much we can do to stop him, is there?*

“I've got the pistol—”

*Back at the cottage in your room. Soldier got to his feet. We need a plan before we can do this, Ilya.*

“I think I've got one.” Ilya sat up, excited at the prospect. It was a risky idea, but it could work, and if it didn't, well, that would be bad. “We sneak into the secret wing and steal a jar full of the dog's blood, and we use that to lure some of the bugs into some sort of trap, and keep them. Then we can confront Alexei, and if he gets crazy, we can let them loose. Given a choice between me and him, I bet they ignore me.”

*How do we contain them?*

“Maybe we just trap them in the jar with the blood?”

*How many could we fit, you think?*

“It depends on how big a jar we can get. Let's go down to the kitchen and see what they've got in the pantry.”

*You just don't want to sleep anymore do you?*

Ilya got out of bed, searching for his shoes. “I'll go to sleep after we look at our choices for capturing bugs. Don't you think they need a different name? I mean they're not just bugs, are they?”

Soldier shrugged and jumped to the ground. *I'm still just a toy, aren't I?*

“I guess, but I call you Soldier.”

They bickered over cool names for the creatures until Ilya found his shoes in a wardrobe and slipped them on. He turned the light out and waited a few minutes until his eyes were accustomed to the darkness and the moonlight streaming in through the window. Ilya opened the door into the dark, unfamiliar hallway. Moonlight created rectangles of light on the floor, every half a dozen feet or so. It was a little eerie to Ilya, and he was already regretting his night-time creeping expedition. Walking around the grounds and the woods at night seemed much less frightening to him. Hell, driving around in the swamp at night hadn't been that bad. He leaned down to Soldier, who was walking along beside him. “Do you know the way to the kitchens?” he whispered.

Ilya got the feeling that if he could have, Soldier would have rolled his eyes at him. Instead, the toy stepped into a puddle of moonlight and signed: *I've lived here for over a hundred years. What do you think?*

“Yes?”

Soldier set off down the hallway, appearing and disappearing on the purple carpet as he stepped in and out of the moonlight. Ilya stopped to admire the nearly full moon in one of the windows before moving to catch up with Soldier. It was a clear sky tonight. Were there birds? He couldn't be sure; he thought that perhaps a small pack of birds had flitted across the moon, outlined in black. He thought he saw little ripples in the moonlight on the carpet. Where the hell had that little toy gone to?

In a panic for a moment, Ilya stopped, carefully scanning the darkness around

him. Then a small wooden head peeked around the corner and signed. *What are you doing? Do you see something?*

Ilya shrugged, trying to look nonchalant, and hurried to catch up. This whole expedition couldn't be over quick enough for him. At the junction, he turned and came face to face with himself in a full length, polished silver mirror. He started at his reflection and quickly looked away. As he did so, he was not certain, but behind him, down the darkened hallway Soldier had not taken, something moved, stepping into the shadows for concealment. He told himself that he was just seeing things. Who could it possibly be? It was the wrong questions to ask himself, as his mind supplied a suitable rogue's gallery of possible stalkers: Whoever it was listening outside the door could have hidden by the doorway and waited to see if he went anywhere, or maybe it was Aleksander out for revenge, or the blood-beast, or Shoji, who had been so suspicious of him earlier. Maybe it was just a ghost like Sacha, or the mad Alina Neimasaurus escaped from her tower, but she was over in the east wing. There was whoever was locked in the room in the west wing, too.

“Hey,” Ilya whispered, trying to get Soldier's attention as quietly as possible. The toy looked back at him, his head almost entirely spinning. That was a neat trick. Ilya would have liked to have a spring loaded spinning head too. “Which wing are we in?”

Soldier considered for a moment. *West. It's a good ways from the kitchen.*

Shit. It could be him, couldn't it? The person he suspected of opening the attic on the night of the masquerade. Wait, when he'd been flinging junk around up there looking

for the gecko mask, had he flung a toy Soldier over his shoulder? That sneaky little piece of wood.

“Did you open the attic during the masquerade? I remember now, I flung you over my shoulder when I was looking for that mask.”

Soldier turned around to face him. *I wondered what you were looking for, digging through the trash, and then you got all weepy like a girl. I didn't open the door, I don't have a key, remember? I thought you opened it. You didn't?*

Ilya shook his head. “Did I tell you about the person Aleksander had locked up in a room in the west wing?”

*I think you mentioned it when I questioned you. Why bring it up now?*

“I think someone's following us.”

*Really?* Soldier seemed almost gleeful at the news, as he nearly bounced in place. *I'll hide against the wall beneath this window, and you walk down the end of the hall and wait around the corner, so that you're out of sight, and we'll see who creeps along.*

Soldier made a shooing gesture. *Don't say anything, just go.* He stood up against the wall in the shadows and almost disappeared.

Ilya looked down the long gallery before him and swallowed nervously. The moonlight came through the windows at an angle here, so that they formed puddles on the wall, leaving the carpet in blackness. He walked down the hall, the moonlight shining into his eyes as he crossed each window, throwing the far wall into darkness, obscuring the sculptures on display.



Finally, the corner came. He paused, wondering what would be around the corner. Swallowing, he barreled forward. It was another empty corridor. The windows still lit the area dimly. This side of the house was out of the moon's orbit. He waited there for a few moments.

"Hi, Ilya," said a voice behind him.

Ilya whirled around and came face to face with a very dead twelve year old boy, in his signature green gecko gloves. Ilya was perversely proud of himself for not screaming. "Sacha, were you following me?"

"No, I always walk the hallways at night. I don't have anything else to do, so..." The boy shrugged and smiled up at Ilya.

For a second, he flashed back to the vision of Sacha, blood pouring from his eye sockets, being dragged behind the secret panel. Had he ended up like a pile of picked clean bones like the other man? "Yeah, I guess there's not much to do at night, when you're a ghost."

"There's not really anything to do during the day, either." Sacha scuffed his shoe against the carpet. It made no sound.

"Thanks for helping me out in the tower," Ilya said nervously. There was something creepy about the boy now that Ilya knew he was dead. If only his shoe had made some noise when he scuffed it.

"That old woman's scary, isn't she?" Sacha drifted over to the window and looked up into the sky. He folded his hands behind his back. "The moon's pretty tonight, isn't it?"

“It's certainly bright.” Ilya really didn't know what to say to that, besides a simple *yes*, which seemed a little too perfunctory for a dead conversation-starved twelve-year old.

“When I was alive, my Nyanya always gave me hot sbiten before bed, so I could sleep.”

Ilya nodded. His mother had given him hot chocolate when he'd been younger. Sadly, neither of them would ever get a special beverage before bed time, since Sacha was dead, and so was Ilya's mother. He was too old for cocoa anyway. “Sbitten was always too sweet for me.”

“You like that American soda stuff.”

“You don't?”

“I died before it was invented. I'll never get to try it now.”

Suddenly, it occurred what Sacha was trying to do. It all came down to what Soldier had said. *Ghosts feed on the connections that they have with the living*. “My mother always gave me hot cocoa when I was small, instead of sbitten.” There, feast away parasite. How had Sacha known about the soda? Damn it, there was no privacy in this house.

“I liked cocoa. We had it in the morning sometimes,” Sacha said wistfully.

“Is your brother here too, along with his...girlfriend?” Is that what they called it back in Sacha's time?

“I don't know, but sometimes I forget a lot of things if I don't talk to someone in a

long time.”

Before Ilya could respond, Soldier came around the corner, and stopped dead in his tracks. Sacha looked over at him curiously.

“Is that a puppet? I can't see any strings. How does it move?”

“Basically, he's magical.” Ilya looked over at Soldier, who tilted his head at Ilya before taking several steps forward.

“Neat!” Sacha drifted over to run his hand over the top of Soldier's head several times and then looked crestfallen. “I guess I wouldn't feel anything if there were strings...”

“I assure you, he doesn't have any.”

*What are you doing?* Soldier signed to Ilya, walking through Sacha to confront him.

*Talking to a ghost,* Ilya signed back. It was difficult to read his little wooden fingers in the dark, but he could just barely make it out.

“The puppet knows sign language?”

“Yes, he can't speak even though he's got a keen sense of hearing.”

*I don't see anything.*

“What did he say?”

Ilya smiled. “He said I don't see anything, because he can't see you like I can.”  
*You wouldn't, would you? You don't have magic eyes,* Ilya signed, perhaps, ever so slightly smug.

“Tell him I said hello,” Sacha said, leaning down to watch Soldier.

*Sacha says hello.*

*Tell the annoying thing to go away, we've got stuff to do.*

“What did he say?” Sacha was like a child with a new toy. With a start, Ilya realized that's exactly what he was. He was much more animated than he'd been earlier.

“He says hello to you too, and his name is Soldier.”

Sacha smiled, and Ilya got the distinct impression that on the inside, Soldier was not.

A thought occurred to Ilya. “That thing with the strings reminds me; you held my hand the other night. If you can't touch things, how did you do it?”

“That surprised me too!” Sacha reached out and took Ilya's hand in his own. The gecko glove felt cold and a little slippery, but real to Ilya. Sacha looked up at him and smiled. “I can still do it.”

*Of course you can touch the ghost, you have a connection!* Soldier signed impatiently.

“He says you can touch me because we have a connection.”

“He's smart for a toy, isn't he?” Sacha said looking over at Soldier, impressed. Ilya translated for him.

*I feel as though I'm the only intelligent person in this hallway.* Soldier stalked away, ignoring them.

“What did he say?”

“He's going to scout ahead.”

Without warning, Sacha embraced him, wrapping both of his arms around Ilya. “I like you, Ilya. You don't get annoyed with me like Kiril.”

Ilya was paralyzed at the touch. On one hand, creeped out by the fact that Sacha was a ghost, but at the same time, ever so slightly touched.

“Kiril said I was too young to go to the party, but Mama made him take me.”

Ilya's heart went out to the mother, for sending her child to a horrible death. But how could she have known? At least she never knew how her sons died. Maybe that was worse. Ilya didn't know which he would have preferred.

Finally, after the embrace became acutely uncomfortable, Sacha broke away from him, and drifted away toward the wall. “Tell Soldier his sister is not yet dead. I think he's wanted to know that.” Then he disappeared into the wall.

Well that was interesting. Who knew a toy could have a sister? He hurried to catch up with the rather short-tempered stick figure, waving to get his attention. *Sacha says to tell you that your sister is not yet dead.*

Soldier stopped in his tracks. Ilya liked to imagine the emotions going on beneath the wooden exterior, but now, he wasn't certain. One hand came up and signed to Ilya:

*How does he know this?*

“I don't know, he's gone. He just told me to tell you.” Ilya was uncertain how Soldier was taking this news. “He said he thought you would want to know.”

Without warning, Soldier shot to his feet, and seemed to almost dance, spinning

around Ilya, signing madly, *She's still alive!* Over and over again. Neither of them was particularly observant at the moment and failed to see the old woman, dressed in a black mourning gown, with veil, creeping down the hallway, silver knife clutched in a lace covered hand. Then the moon betrayed her. It shined on the blade brightly, reflecting down the hallway.

Soldier's head spun in her direction. *Ilya, run!*

Despite her advanced years, Alina Neimasaurus was not slow; she came at Ilya as a black blur. Only the silver blade of the knife was visible. Ilya ran, turning the corner, and coming upon the enormous marble staircase of the grand foyer. In his mind echoed Orryn's warning: *Mind the stairs.*

## CHAPTER 16: THE LIVING, THE DEAD, AND EVERYTHING ELSE

The moon shined down on the landing from a large window where it hung, as Ilya ran into the patch of light. Then he froze in indecision for one horrible moment, terrified of the woman in black coming up behind him, but suddenly wary of the stairs. Behind him, the window shattered, and Ilya shielded himself from falling shards of glass. Fist sized rocks bounced down the marble steps with a cacophonous echoing effect. A shadow loomed behind him, and Ilya flung himself toward the bannister, gripping it with both hands. The air shimmered next to him, and the old woman, mere inches from him, raised the knife above her head. Above her, the moon looked down through the shattered window.

Hacking laughter came from beneath the veil, and Ilya was paralyzed against the bannister. “Please don't kill me,” he begged. “You can have my eyes!” It wouldn't be so bad being blind, would it? It would be another connection between him and Sacha for the boy to feed on.

“It's too late for that now,” the old woman spat. “You've gotten me in trouble.”

Then a shadow passed in front of the moon, and feathered blackness came spilling through, with two pinpricks of white amongst it and a dark beak. It was the gray talons that got to her first, raking her scalp and splattering blood on the white marble. Alina screamed, the knife biting into the marble wall next to Ilya, the blade snapping as Orryn clawed at her veil, easily shredding it. She staggered backward, away from him, batting

feebly at the bird with her withered arms, as Orryn's talons tore an eye from its socket to dangle on her cheek.

The entire spectacle was lit in silvery light, and their shadows danced on the white marble. Orryn's blows pushed her toward the lip of the stairs, and then he shot upward, away from the woman as she swayed on the edge, most of her face missing, the blood-soaked muscle and bone contorted into a rictus of pain. And then she fell. At the last second, she reached out toward him and Ilya turned away from her, closing his eyes tightly. A boney hand closed on his sleeve, but it wasn't enough to pry him from the bannister, which he clutched in a death-grip. The fingers slipped away. A shard of glass beneath his foot made him lose his balance. The sound of the old woman's body smashing down the hard marble steps echoed around the foyer, louder even than Orryn's triumphant cawing.

Still, Ilya kept his grip on the bannister, his feet slipping on the glass until they were planted firmly on the ground. He opened his eyes and saw Orryn swooping past him and out into the night, an eyeball clutched in his curved beak. Ilya looked down into the foyer and saw the broken body of the old woman, her limbs and head at an unnatural angle, making her appear to be a broken, tossed aside marionette. Blood littered the steps, and halfway down, illuminated in moonlight was a nearly perfect imprint of her face with holes for the eyes and mouth, where her skinless face had brushed the marble. Ilya was transfixed by the horrible sight until someone threw a piece of glass at him and it skidded along the ground and bumped into his foot. He looked in that direction and saw Soldier,



signing wildly.

*Come on!* he signed frantically. *Before you're blamed for this!*

They ran from the foyer, as the house came to life around them. Miraculously, they made it back to his room before anyone caught them. Once the door was shut and locked behind him, Ilya collapsed on the side of the bed, gasping for breath. He gasped and wheezed, but didn't seem to be making any headway. He could see the face print on the stairs every time he closed his eyes. When he wasn't seeing that, he was seeing blood rushing down the drain at the execution yard. Soldier looked up at him, the rifle clutched tightly in his hands. Ilya imagined he was looking at him with concern, until Soldier jabbed him in the knee with the bayonet.

“Oww!” Ilya said, clutching the wound. The gasping ceased as Ilya concentrated on the pain.

*You were having a panic attack.*

“Oh.” Ilya rested his head on the bed for a few moments. “I guess you take these things better.”

*When you're made of wood, you don't lose your cool.* Soldier cleaned the bayonet off on Ilya's pants, before walking toward the heating vent. *I'm going to see what's going on in the foyer. Get cleaned up and go to sleep.* Soldier pulled the grate open and was gone. He got to his feet, leaving the light off, and stumbled into the bathroom. He washed his face and turned the light on to see how he looked. He was blinded for a few moments. When he could see, he thought everything was fine with his livery. Then he saw the hand

print on his sleeve where Alina had grabbed him. He took the jacket off and did his best to wash the sleeve, constantly repeating to himself that she'd been trying to pull him down the stairs with her.

It didn't work though, since Ilya could think about two things at once, and the other side of him said: What if she was clutching at your sleeve to save her life, what if she just didn't want to die, and you wouldn't help her? You might as well have pushed her down the stairs to die yourself. And then what, hmm? His other side replied, Wait in dread for her next attempt to blind you? You didn't save her, but you didn't kill her, either. Orryn did that. I bet he's not beating himself up about it. Why would a vulture care about a dead old woman? He probably regrets the only part he could eat was an eye. Ilya wasn't a carrion feeder, he was a boy, and as such, his feelings were more complicated. Wonderfully, interestingly complicated. For all of their complications, right now all they were saying was that Ilya didn't want to be a murderer of old women. If he was, he wanted to feel bad about it.

He hung the jacket up to dry and went to bed. He could hear distant voices in the house, and he saw light beneath his door for a while. He tried to sleep, but the horrible image of the face imprint wouldn't leave him alone. Ilya was relatively certain that he was developing a case of post-traumatic stress disorder, which really wasn't surprising since he was a very sensitive person. Aleksander could have pushed his grandmother down the stairs and never thought of it again. He told himself that was an unkind thought. He did get Ilya a new cat, which now that he thought about it, he would like to pet right about

now. It would be a great way to calm him and reduce his PTSD symptoms. Aleksander had gotten him Masque even though he hadn't killed Arsenic like Ilya had accused. He shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. He should apologize, shouldn't he?

Like hell he would. It was just leftover guilt for killing his grandmother. That was it. When you kill someone's relative, you feel guilty, that's all. He wasn't apologizing to Aleksander about the cat thing, until Aleksander apologized for threatening to fire Ilya and his uncle unless he performed sexual favors for him. There, now he would never have to apologize, because it wouldn't even occur to the Young Lord to apologize for that, nor would Ilya need to feel guilty. Problem solved. As usual, his solution involved doing absolutely nothing. Around 2 a.m., he finally slept.

He was lying on his back in the boat he'd taken into the swamp, looking up into the branches of the mangrove trees as golden dawn shined through them. Orryn was alone on a branch, watching the sun rise, the tips of his feathers blazing in the rays of the sun. The vulture looked down at Ilya. *Ilya, your time is running short. Nemesis has always been against you. Nemesis will undo everything.* Orryn looked away at the dawn, lighting the swamp on fire. He bowed his head to preen at his neck briefly. *Not even you should be here. My dreams are for myself, no matter how intertwined we become. Attend to Nemesis.* A feather fell from Orryn's tail into the boat. For once, the bird looked tired to Ilya.

“Help me...” The voice came out of the swamp faintly, and Ilya knew its source as the world dimmed, and was snuffed out.

He was shaken awake by Tabitha around nine o'clock in the morning, with a breakfast tray piled high with thin blini, a sort of wafer thin pancake, slathered in melted butter and honey, and another pitcher of milk. He stretched and sat up while Tabitha plumped the pillows behind him. She set the tray down in his lap and he discovered how hungry he was for them. Demetri never made these, preferring meatier fare that took less time to make. Cook knew what he was doing, because they almost melted in Ilya's mouth.

Tabitha seemed to be bursting to tell him something. Ilya tried not to let his bland, “Yay! I have pancakes for breakfast!” facade crack. Eventually she would tell him.

*Did you hear?* she signed suddenly.

*What?* Ilya signed back, looking at the cup of milk. He craved hot cocoa after his discussion with Sacha.

*Alina Neimasaurus escaped from her tower last night and fell down the stairs in the grand foyer. Apparently, someone threw a rock through the window and shattered it. All the broken glass tore her face up as she fell. They're still looking for one of her eyes!*

Ilya stopped chewing as an image of Orryn flapping by him, an eyeball dangling from his beak. They had been such good pancakes too... *That's horrible*, Ilya signed, without much enthusiasm. Please don't tell me more, he thought.

Tabitha continued on about the odd facts surrounding the demise of her ladyship for the next fifteen minutes, while Ilya tried to choke down the rest of his pancakes. The thin wispy batter now reminded him uncannily of the flapping folds of skin hanging from

the old woman's face. Yummy. It didn't help that as they cooled, the pancakes became slightly rubbery and he had to tear pieces of them off. The dripping butter and honey quickly became blood to Ilya, and he had to give up eating entirely.

Eventually, Tabitha got bored with the murder of the old hag and asked Ilya how he felt.

*Okay, I guess*, he signed, feeling decidedly unsettled this morning, what with helping a vulture kill an old woman and looking at her mangled body. At least he wasn't having another panic attack. Today was the day. Orryn had said time was running out. He had to confront the blood-beast today, who had to be his nemesis. He was doing it with or without Soldier. It was time to get things done. Put an end to the boy's suffering, to everyone's suffering. He could do this. He was a success at everything, wasn't he?

*Cook says you don't need to be kept in bed today, but you don't have to go back to work for another two days.* She winked at him as she stood up, taking the tray from his lap. *I think he's giving you an extra day off, personally.* Then she was gone from the room and the tell-tale sound of the grate filled the silence. A few seconds later, Soldier jumped up on the bed.

“Well, what happened?”

*No one suspects your involvement, but they do know a bird was involved. The coroner said as much when he examined the remains of her face before taking her away. All the servants are shocked at the old bitch's death.*

Ilya felt a chill go down his spine. “You don't think she'll become a ghost and

haunt me, do you?"

Soldier shrugged. *That seems like something you should ask your ghost buddy.*

"Sacha?" Ilya snapped his fingers. "That reminds me, what's this about you having a sister?"

Soldier shrugged again. *A long time ago, when I was a boy, I had a sister.*

"You used to be human? I thought you started out as a toy."

*No, I was turned into this, and my sister was turned into a doll. The Puppetmaster of Vyborg did this to us. I've been looking for her ever since I escaped from him a long time ago. I gave up because I thought that she must be dead by now, so I just let time pass me by here. I did what Amaranth wanted and kept the beast confined. At least I could do some good with all the time I had.*

"So when Sacha said that she wasn't dead yet, he meant that she's still—"

*A doll, roaming the world like me. But it's different for her. She was only five when he got her. I was ten.*

"How did it ha—"

*I don't want to talk about it anymore.* Soldier jumped off the bed.

Ilya stewed for a bit, the desperate need to have his curiosity sated almost unbearable. "I'm sorry if I pried..." he started to say, when a heavy brass key was hefted onto the bed, followed by Soldier.

*I got this from her when she was sleeping. If I'd known she was going to bring your breakfast, I would have just waited. Is she sweet on you? She must like you, to*

*personally deliver your breakfast.*

Ilya blushed. Tabitha was what, three or four years older than him? It seemed so unlikely that she would have feelings for him...He always felt a little nervous being alone with her. Was it because he liked her? Ilya supposed he did, but considered her out of his league. "I don't know...maybe?" Ilya sat up in bed, excited and nervous. "Do you think she does?" he asked, suddenly worried and hopeful.

Soldier rolled on the bed, pounding his fists onto it, his shoulders shaking, making the sign for laughter with his fingers.

Ilya's ego deflated into a small puddle the size of his heart, before evaporating into the wind. "You're just messing with me, aren't you?"

*Yes.* Soldier sat up and patted him on the leg. *Anyway, we've got the key. Let's get the jar and the pistol and go have some fun. They've even given you the day off.*

Ilya threw the covers off, careful not to knock Soldier from the bed, and put his livery back on, examining the slightly damp sleeve. No one would notice it unless they were looking for it.

*Put me in your pocket.* Soldier signed, pointing to Ilya's breast.

He reached down and picked the piece of wood up. Ilya reached around inside his jacket until he found the flap.

*Make sure the sun doesn't get to me,* Soldier signed as Ilya slid him into the pocket and did the two bottom buttons so that the jacket would stay closed, keeping Soldier in a little pocket of darkness. \

Ilya laughed. It had been a while since he'd been back to the cottage and had the opportunity. He made his way down to the kitchen. Cook looked him over and seemed pleased, making him follow his finger around in a circle to make sure there was no signs of any concussion. Cook gave him a potato pancake and sent him on his way. Ilya crammed it into his mouth and ate almost in one bite.

It seemed impossible that Demetri and Cook's potato pancakes were made out of the same thing, since Cook's actually tasted good. A little self-consciously, Ilya made his way through the perpetually muddy field to the oxidizing gate, with one hand holding his jacket closed, since he didn't know what would happen if Soldier was exposed to sunlight. Masque was overjoyed to see him when he came in the back door of the cottage. At least that was what Ilya chose to think. She rubbed on his legs and purred for a bit before running over to the glass bowls for her water and food. She looked back at him hopefully. He fed her some kibble from the bag and her attention turned away from him to the food. He could hear Demetri's snores coming from the closed door at the end of the hall.

Soldier popped his head out of the jacket as Ilya walked down the hall. *Where's the cat at?*

“Feeding in the kitchen.” Ilya opened the door to his room and was hit by the simple fact that he had missed the place. Sure, it had very few personal touches, because Demetri didn't frequent the kinds of stores where he could have bought useless trinkets to decorate it with. His uncle would not have understood. He was old and rural. A person,



especially a teenager, was an expression of their possessions. Ilya himself, despite the relative lack of wealth of his parents, had acquired a collection of identity markers or junk, including movie memorabilia, and an extensive collection of books and magazines from the scholarly to more adult fare.

He hadn't been able to take his stuff with him. The social worker who helped him pack his trunk had forced him to pack clothing, shoes, and other sundry items. His one “luxury item” as the woman had called it, was his parent's urn. He carried that with him in his lap on the train from Petrograd, and then secured in his bunk with him at night, because it did take nearly four days to travel all the way here. The social worker wanted him to fly, he but had suggested that he simply jump from the sixth floor window of her office if she wanted him to die a horrible death that badly. He also suggested that she be waiting downstairs with a club of some sort to finish him in case it wasn't a far enough drop to be lethal. As he had informed her, his chances of dying from a six story drop were significant, but by no means certain. They were roughly on par with the chances of his remains actually being identified in a plane crash. The large silver samovar in the corner of her office should do the trick, with one quick blow to Ilya's head in case he was still squirming.

That had been the end of a plane ride. Besides, he would have had to sit still for nearly 22 hours, which would have taxed him at the best of times. Ilya threw himself onto the bed, careful not to crush Soldier, who crawled out of the pocket as Ilya signed *I'm home*, to the urn resting on the shelf behind his head. Soldier looked at him curiously, as

Ilya signed, *How long has it been since you died?* Around three months, of course. The murderers had been tried in a fast-track court. Poor people usually were in Russia. Real trials were for important people. It had taken all of three weeks from the murder of his parents for the two boys to be executed for the crimes. Ilya knew that trials and court cases could stretch into years in other countries. How would he have felt, if two years from now, the Tatar boys were convicted of the crime, and Ilya had to travel back to Petrograd to witness the execution? By then he would have put it all in the past, and it would have just stirred everything up and make him go through it all again. So what if it wasn't fair? He'd seen them do it. Their guilt was beyond doubt. They got back what they'd done to others, and that was all.

*Who are you talking to?* Soldier signed, looking at Ilya and up to the shelf.

“My parents, they're in the urn up there.” Ilya said, reaching up and plucking the urn off the shelf. He set it on the bed between them and opened the lid. Soldier peered inside with what Ilya assumed would have been a dubious expression, were his face malleable. “See?”

Soldier dutifully looked at the ashes. *I didn't really doubt you. Now, where is the pistol?*

Ilya reached up to the shelf and moved a dirty shirt aside and picked up the pistol hidden beneath. “Does it work, you think?”

*It did a long time ago.*

Ilya put the urn back on the shelf, and the door to the bedroom was pushed open

by an unseen force.

Masque jumped up on the bed next to Ilya and looked over at Soldier curiously. The toy froze as the cat padded across Ilya's legs to examine it up close. The white of her face towered over Soldier as she sniffed at him, her pink tongue flicking out to give him a quick lick. She didn't like what she tasted and moved over to Ilya's hand, bumping her head against it until he gave her a good scratch behind the ears. She purred loudly, and crawled onto Ilya's chest so that he could scratch behind both ears at the same time.

“See, I told you she'd be nice,” Ilya said, as she bumped her wet nose against his own.

*You'd say that about any cat.* Soldier sighed. Her blue eyes flicked in the toy's direction as he moved his hand to sign, before she settled down on Ilya's chest.

“Everyone deserves a chance, even cats.”

Soldier shook his head. *That sort of logic's going to get you killed.*

“Aren't we giving the blood-beast a chance?”

*Alexei, his name is Alexei Neimasaurus.*

“So far, I'm not fond of either of the Neimasaurus I've met. Both of them have tried to poke me with something.” Ilya set Masque to the side and got up off the bed. Her head swiveled in Soldier's direction. The toy shook his head and reached behind one of her ears to give her a good scratch.

Ilya changed out of his livery and into proper secret wing exploring gear: a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved ugly gray sweater. Sadly, he only had one Wellington boot left,

the other still floating in the Bleeding Swamp. Soldier was forced into more scratching by Masque; behind the other ear, behind her neck, the itchy spot beneath her chin, and even her belly.

*Hurry up, this is annoying.* He signed with one hand, and Masque gave him a dirty look until he returned to scratching her belly with both hands.

“Maybe she'll let you ride her, like a horse.”

*I can but dream.*

When Ilya was ready, with an electric torch and a large pickle jar taken from the garage, the pistol shoved down the back of his jeans, he gave Masque one last good scratch, and picked up Soldier. “What do I do with you? I don't have a jacket with a pocket.”

*Put me beneath the sweater, I'll hold on to your shirt with my hands.*

Ilya slipped him down the front of his sweater. It looked very obvious that he had something shoved down the front of his shirt, so he held the pickle jar up in front of it. Then he was off to see the blood-beast.

In less than fifteen minutes, which was quite a feat given his navigation abilities, they were standing in the study in the attic, with the secret panel opened. The pickle jar was sitting on the corner of the desk.

Soldier stared at it from where he stood next to it. *Are you actually going to scoop up a bunch of the dog's blood in there to catch the cicadas?*

“Yes, why?”

*It seems like you'll be in a spot of trouble, trying to screw the lid on with your eyes closed.*

“It won't be that difficult.” Sometimes, it seemed to Ilya that Soldier could be a little cynical, just a little bit of a glass half empty, soon to be totally empty kind of guy. There might be some trouble getting the lid on before the bugs could escape, but nothing that Ilya couldn't handle. He took the rusty wheel of the metal door in his hands and turned it. He pushed the door open after it had risen out the frame, and was hit by the musty smell of decay from within. He shined his electric torch down the blackened brick tunnel. It was much more useful than the lantern in this regard, in that it allowed Ilya to see all the way down to the end of the passage.

He shined it down at his feet and the work boots he'd found. He hadn't worn them since nearly killing the Gamekeeper with them. They wouldn't be water proof. He stepped into the tunnel and put thoughts of his previous adventure in here behind him.

*God damn it, would you move?* Soldier jumped into the tunnel from the desk, and moved ahead of him. *Don't second guess everything.* He stalked into the darkness, motioning for Ilya to follow. He should have brought a handkerchief to put over his mouth to avoid the mold and dust in here. Maybe some protective goggles, too. He stepped over the floorboard and hurried down the tunnel, slightly hunched over because of the low ceiling, and hurried after Soldier before he disappeared in the darkness. The hand clutching the pickle jar was slick with sweat.

*Hey!* Ilya signed, waving his arms back and forth wildly to get Soldier's attention,

a horrible thought suddenly occurring to him. The little head swiveled around to look at him, the rosy cheeks slightly sinister in the artificial light. *What if someone shuts the door behind us? We'll both be locked in.*

*I know another way out. Amaranth designed it for me. The tunnel in the desk connects to a small air duct in here.* Soldier turned and proceeded down the tunnel, pausing at the doorway where Leonya Kirkuk had met his unpleasant end. Soldier peered into the room, before turning his back on it. There was a subterranean heaviness to the brickwork that reminded Ilya of old horror movies where explorers would penetrate the tombs of mummies. As a general rule, those movies didn't end well for the explorers. Didn't they end up cursed? With his luck of late, he wasn't certain how he would be able to tell if he was cursed. He put thoughts of tombs out of his mind. This was a secret wing, not a tomb, even if there was a large pile of bones belonging to something down to the right of the passage, while to the left lay the rotted wooden stairs.

Soldier was already waiting for him at the junction. *Which way?*

Ilya pointed to the right. *The lab's down there, along with the bones of whatever the creature was.*

Ilya got the feeling that Soldier was rolling his eyes at Ilya, as he set off down the passage to the right, before turning back. *You should get the pistol out.*

*I can't hold the pistol, the jar, and the flashlight.*

*Fine, just make sure it's handy in case you need it.*

*Are you getting scared?* Ilya smirked slightly, and was also a little reassured by

Soldier's concern. It was nice to know he wasn't the only one afraid.

*Ilya, Alexei can't eat me, I'm wood. You're not. That pistol is the only thing stopping him at the moment.*

Ilya's reassurance evaporated. Soldier was concerned for Ilya and the fact that his body was still comprised of flesh. Ilya set the jar on the ground and got the pistol out of the back of his jeans and shoved it into his pocket. He leaned down to pick up the jar and the pistol slipped from his pocket and fell onto the stone with an extremely loud clatter. Soldier jumped at the sound and glared at him, hands on his hips. Ilya smiled sheepishly and stuffed the pistol back in his pocket, this time as deep as it would go, before picking up the jar.

After a dozen more feet, they came upon the bone pile of the unknown beast. Soldier looked back at him again. *How do we know that's not Alexei's remains?*

*Because someone spoke to me at the foot of the stairs. Whatever this was, I don't know if it was ever human.*

Soldier turned and waded into the bones, climbing over them as quietly as he could. They shifted, even under his relatively slight weight. One of the hands was still dug into the ceiling, with the dangling bones of a forearm, swaying gently at the disturbance in air currents around it as Soldier clambered over the bones. Once he was clear, Ilya started the delicate task of moving himself across; several of the bones broke and sent up little motes of dust as Ilya waded through them, the flashlight pointed down around his feet as he did so. Once he was over it, he almost tripped as Soldier ran into his

foot. He had his rifle out, and the bayonet pointed further down the corridor. He pointed behind him into the blackness, and the electric torch followed.

What it illuminated was the doorway to the study and a figure, prone on the ground. A faded, nearly rotted away black cloak covered the body, the hooded head lying in the doorway, face down toward the blood. Ilya shined the light on the hood, and an inhuman scream ripped from the creature's throat, a rasping, breaking, breathy, shriek of pain, not all together unlike a dying animal. Ilya jerked the light away, dropping the jar which bounced on the stone, cracking down the side and rolling across the hall. In the second that the light had shone on the creature, Ilya thought he saw a white shape within, and for just a second, a tongue black as midnight, flick out like a snake into the blood, before snapping back.

“Please...” the figure whispered, one arm slowly coming up from its side. The disintegrating sleeve pulled away to reveal a skeletal hand, with blackened fingernails left on a few digits, and yellowing bones showing through papery skin that had torn and cracked in several spots, bleeding out a black goo the consistency of syrup. The hand covered the creature's face. “It hurts my eyes so much.”

Ilya pulled one of the long sleeves of the sweater down past his hands and used it to muffle most of the light from the electric torch. He took a few cautious steps forward. “Who are you?” He pulled the pistol from his pocket and pointed it at the creature. It shook lightly, but at this range it probably didn't matter. The half-light that illuminated everything gave it a more sinister look. The sound of blood dripping could be heard



within the laboratory as the dog played out its macabre resurrection.

“You came back,” the voice mumbled. “I hoped you would. It took me all day to climb up here. I didn't want to miss you...” The voice faded away into nothingness. “Not again,” the creature shrieked without warning, and the voice had a harsh metallic edge to it. “Not again...” it croaked, almost in a whisper.

Ilya didn't have the heart to tell the creature that it had been close to four days since he'd last been in here. He supposed time was meaningless to an immortal being trapped in the dark. “My name is Ilya. Are you Alexei?”

The figure shuddered for a second, and then it wheezed and shook, releasing little rasps of air. It took Ilya a moment to realize that it was laughing.

“Not for a long time.”

Ilya took a step closer and leaned down, trying to make out more of the creature.

“Don't come any closer!” the figure shrieked, turning away from Ilya to huddle in the wooden frame of the door. The cadaverous hand gripped the door frame and the wood splintered where his claw- like fingers dug into it, one of the remaining blackened fingernails snapping and falling onto the bloody floor. It howled, pulling the hand into the rotted folds of the cloak, sobbing. “You can't look at me, or you'll scream! I know you will...”

Ilya was shaking even worse than a leaf but plowed ahead. “Did you kill those people at the masquerade?”

Alexei went still. “That depends on which of us you're asking,” he said quietly.

“Are you asking me, or the boy... Alexei...” The voice faded away.

Ilya strained his ears but heard nothing else. “I’m asking Alexei.”

“He didn’t do anything. People did things to him. He was a good boy.”

“Like what?” Ilya whispered, trying to decide whether or not he wanted to hear the answer. He took another step closer.

“Like...Make...Me...” the voice faded away again, and then the body started jerking, and Alexei rolled onto his back, the hood falling back, and Ilya recoiled in horror at the sight. The face, like the hand, was covered in the papery cracked skin, only the cracks were almost like a spider web, crisscrossing his face, the yellow bones shining through so brightly, he looked more like a Halloween costume than a human being. The eyes were so sunken in, all Ilya could make out was blackness, so encrusted with the tar-like black substance they were. The lips, shrunken, cracked and nearly gone, revealed a mouth with only a few teeth. They were mostly black, as was the tongue, lolling from the mouth, the end nearly pointed. The nose was there, but the skin was gone, revealing rotting cartilage that barely held it to his face.

The robe came open as the figure jerked one last time, and Ilya saw how malnourished the body was, its condition even worse than the head. Alexei’s waist would take no more than two hand spans to wrap around it. But the most horrifying thing of all was how translucent the skin of his chest had become. Ilya could see the heart pounding wildly within the chest. Then it stopped. Alexei went still, his legs no wider than a child of ten, the muscles long since rotted away. He was as still as a marionette with its strings

cut.

Ilya waited for a moment, his light moving up to shine on the dog through the doorway as its heart started again and the tail began to thrash again. It took a moment or two, but then Alexei's heart beat once more, and the horrid thing gasped for air, the lungs contracting and expanding in the papery chest. He was starving to death, only he could not die. From his emaciated appearance, Ilya could draw no other conclusion. How long would it take for him to die again?

“Do you need food?”

Alexei nodded, trying to close the folds of the robe with one feeble hand, attempting to hide his body. Ilya made his decision. He set the pistol down and reached out to pull his robe closed. The black eye holes blinked at him, and Ilya realized they were not rotted away, they were black, almost like a doll. Ilya helped him into a sitting position.

“I just want to die.” Alexei laughed, but it turned into a cough and then a sob, and the shoulders were shaking, the thick fluid leaking from in between fingers that came up to cover the remains of the mouth. Alexei was wracked with sobs, his tears made of the same oil-like substance. “I've wanted it for so long. I don't know if I remember wanting anything else.”

Ilya's fear evaporated at the sight of the pathetic hunched figure, too weak to even stand. He leaned forward, taking out a handkerchief to wipe the brackish ooze from Alexei's face and hands.

The figure lunged forward with sudden strength to grab Ilya's hands. "Please kill me...." Alexei begged, his rictus of a face looking up at Ilya. "Please... Please...Please...." The grip tightened on Ilya's hands, as he repeated the phrase over and over again. "I've tried everything. Nothing works!"

Gently, Ilya extracted his hands, trying not to flinch at the foul smelling black goo now on them. Whenever he thought of death he would remember the smell of Alexei Neimasaurus. "I'm going to get you some food, bandages, and clothing," Ilya said hurriedly, wiping his hands off on his jeans and standing. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Alexei's head followed Ilya's movements. "I don't believe you." The raspy voice had returned. "You're a liar, aren't you?" The figure convulsed again, and the heart beating in its cage sped up. "Please don't leave me!" the creature shrieked, as Ilya backed away in shame, because he couldn't bear to watch the death play out again. He turned and ran, Soldier on his heels, pushing his way through the bones. He wiped at his eyes with his sleeve. He didn't stop running until he was back in the study and he'd pushed the door shut, turning the rusty wheel until it was locked.

*Well?* Soldier signed from the floor. *What are you going to do?*

"I have to help him. I don't have a choice," Ilya said. Whatever wrongs Alexei may have committed, Ilya wasn't the judge of the punishment that he deserved, but it seemed to him that the man had suffered enough, especially if the condition had been forced on him.

*Good,* Soldier signed. *But we need to question him before he gets too strong. He*

*may return to his old ways. At least we know if you shoot him with the pistol it will kill him, or at least long enough for you to escape.*

Ilya ran down to the cottage, getting a change of clothing and rooting around in the cabinet for some gauze to wrap around Alexei's head and face because he just couldn't even try to keep his head straight looking at what was for all intents and purposes a zombie. He put it, along with some surgical tape and a bathrobe he'd found, into a backpack he found in the garage. Then he raided the refrigerator, putting anything that was edible in the bag: three apples, a bit of boiled beef, half a block of cheese, and a whole loaf of brown bread. Demetri would have some questions for Ilya about this. He could only take the growing boy shtick so far. He had to push the bread down to close the straps on the package. Then he found a large, empty bottle of vodka in the trash. He rinsed it out, filled it with water from the tap and screwed the lid on tight.

Then he was on his way to help the blood-beast. There were so many questions he wanted to ask Alexei, but right now, he was so mad that it seemed impossible to have a conversation with him, and the whole dying thing right in the middle of it was a bit disconcerting as well, but for the first time, Ilya felt like he was accomplishing something. Alexei had to know where the church was. He had to know the way. Maybe he even knew why the boy was locked inside of it, unless the biblical story Amaranth had related in her diary was meant to be taken literally. Ilya shivered at the prospect, but he was filled with the possibilities as he rushed back into the dark, cold embrace of Neimasaurus.

## CHAPTER 17: AN EVEN LOWER CIRCLE OF HELL

It took him fifteen minutes to get back to the study in the attic, where Soldier awaited him on the corner of the desk. He tapped his foot impatiently, which made a tiny clicking sound, like the tapping of a pen or pencil.

*Took you long enough,* he signed.

*I wanted to make sure I was on time,* Ilya signed back with a smile. Soldier opened the desk drawer and crawled inside of it, then a click was heard and the secret panel disappeared into the ceiling to reveal the iron door. The sound of a sudden sharp impact against the outer door of the study echoed through the room. Ilya jumped nearly a foot into the air at the sound and Soldier stuck his head out of the drawer.

*Close the panel!* Ilya signed frantically, and Soldier disappeared. The panel slid closed and Ilya shut the drawer door. The door handle jiggled in the silent room.

“It's locked. I thought you said it would be open.” It was a man's voice, low and raspy sounding, probably from partaking in dangerous quantities of alcohol and cigarettes over an extended period of time. “Where the hell are we going to get a key from?”

Another voice, unknown to Ilya replied in a bored and slightly falsetto tone of voice: “We can try and ask one of the dumb mute servants, but I doubt they'd understand.”

“This is definitely the room though, isn't it? Where those cicadas come every night,” Rasper said, and Ilya suspected from the condition of his lungs that he wasn't

long for this world.

“I told you, they can't be cicadas. They don't live in walls or houses at all, and they would have died from everything we've sprayed around,” the bored voice replied.

Exterminators. That's what they were, hired by Aleksander to rid the house of the bug problem that had haunted it now for nearly seventy years. They had probably become more active with the unknown “vampire,” according to Yaisha, living in the west wing somewhere. He still needed to chat with her about that. Maybe she could tell him where the man was being kept.

“We can ask his Lordship,” bored voice said.

“Nah, he gives me the creeps,” Rasper said, voice dripping with disdain. “With that weird foreigner he hangs out with. I mean, is it a man or a woman? I can't even tell,” Ilya knew exactly who he meant, and agreed with the assessment.

“Well, he has an Adam's apple, so I assumed it was a guy.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I think he makes you.... Uncomfortable,” the bored voice said condescendingly.

“Fuck you, you goddamn midget,” Rasper snarled.

Footsteps could be heard outside the door now, as the voices retreated. “Let's go back to their nesting area and set some traps. Maybe we'll find a servant to let us in up here.”

Nesting area? That certainly piqued Ilya's curiosity. He was torn; secretly follow after them, or go to Alexei. The man's pain had left an impression on him, of that there

was no doubt. Soldier. He pulled the drawer open, and the toy popped its head out.

*Follow them, he signed they're going to where the bugs nest, and I want to know where it is.* He reached in with his other hand and pulled the cord for the panel, which slid open.

Soldier nodded in the direction of the door, as Ilya turned the wheel. *What about the door?*

*Close the panel behind me.* He would leave the door open, so that he wasn't trapped, at least. Ilya pulled the door open and stepped through, closing it just far enough so that the panel could slide shut. He clicked the electric torch on and walked down the brick tunnel, passing Leonya's remains. Ilya decided he should take the bones on the way out. He deserved a decent burial, didn't he? Then he stopped cold. What if Leonya's ghost was wandering around in the secret wing somewhere? Nah... Couldn't be. Ilya would have seen him by now. Besides, he really didn't need to see another ghost of Alexei's victims. What if the man gave him gory details about how Alexei had dismembered and eaten him? Ilya's constitution was at best, embarrassingly delicate in such matters.

He pushed those thoughts far away and hurried past the open doorway, down to the junction, kicking away bones in annoyance. It was tiresome to walk over them every time. Then he was upon the ruined man, who hadn't moved from where Ilya had left him. Ilya muffled the light with his sleeve as he approached.

"Alexei?" Ilya said quietly, so as not to startle the remains of him.

The head in the ragged hood jerked slightly, a few clumps of stringy white hair



falling out of it. Morbidly, one of the chunks fell to the ground, a papery piece of scalp still attached to the hank. Ilya looked away.

“What do you want?” the voice rasped.

Ilya knew that he wasn't talking to Alexei. This was the beast. “I brought you food, like I said.”

“That was months ago....” the voice whispered from beyond the hood. “Do you think I'm a fool? That I don't even know about the passage of time?” A cackling laugh came from the darkness and the shoulders shook, or convulsed, it was impossible to tell. “I never trusted you.” The ragged hood turned toward Ilya. “Wait! Who are you? What are you doing in here...? Answer me!” the blood-beast shrieked. Then there was silence and the figure was still for a long time.

Ilya didn't know what to do. “I'm Ilya, like I already told you.”

“You want the secret, don't you?” he whispered, and a bony hand was raised to point into the open door of the laboratory. “It's in there...” Then the blood-beast laughed, throwing back its head to bang painfully on the wooden door frame, cackling madly as his chest heaved. Then he grew still. The freakish black tongue lolled from the side of his mouth and its last involuntary muscle spasm ceased. He had died again. Ilya set the bag on the ground and took out the bread, tearing a chunk of it off. Alexei should be able to gum small pieces of bread, and the boiled beef might be soft enough for him to gum as well, until his strength returned.

Without warning, Alexei jerked to life, gasping for air. The head turned in his

direction. “Ilya?” the voice was quiet and broken, without the rasping metallic twang of the blood-beast.

He'd half feared that Alexei wasn't coming back. “I got you some bread.” Ilya ripped off a small piece and held it up to his mouth. Alexei leaned forward and the black tongue curling around it. Then it disappeared into his mouth, except it couldn't disappear, because of the almost totally absent lips and the missing teeth. Ilya looked away as the ball of bread was mashed between gums until it disintegrated and was swallowed down the throat. Ilya did his best to mentally block out the sounds as well. A second piece of bread followed, and then a third. When Ilya brought the fourth piece up to the remains of dried, desiccated and translucent lips, Alexei shook his head.

“Put it in the blood,” he whispered, looking away from Ilya. “I...I...I need it.”

He wrinkled his nose and dragged the next chunk of brown bread in the puddle of dog blood in the doorway to the laboratory. He brought it up to Alexei's mouth and it disappeared. Ilya looked away, as a drop of blood ran down Alexei's chin. After another couple pieces of bloody bread, Alexei was full. There were signs of healthiness within him already; he seemed more alert and aware, as though the cycle of starvation had been broken with just a few pieces of bread. He brought his arms up and wrapped them around himself, his black eyes perhaps a little less sunken. He looked over at Ilya with a modicum of interest.

“W—what's the year?” he asked at last, as Ilya got the bandages and tape out of the pack.

“1990. How long have you been in here?” Ilya got out the bottle of water and Alexei's eyes lit up, or at least they tried to. They seemed to widen the skin, which was the consistency of parchment paper and wrinkled around the sunken sockets.

“Vodka? I don't know if I'm well enough for that.”

“It's only water.” Ilya handed the bottle to Alexei, who took it with a great deal less enthusiasm. Ilya unscrewed the cap for him when he had trouble, but he could pour it into his mouth himself.

“1912. That was when I was sealed away in here.” He eyed Ilya suspiciously as he reached out and pushed the hood back. Then Ilya picked up the bandages. Carefully, he started to wrap Alexei's head, though he had to put several layers of gauze on before the black blood no longer seeped through. He left a spot for the eyes, mouth, and the nose. As he taped the gauze at the nape of the neck, Alexei rested his head against Ilya's chest, almost like a child. Ilya froze at the close contact with the unnatural thing, mingled fear, revulsion, and pity welling up in him at the slight weight of the man's head. It wasn't that much more than the weight of a child's head, either. Then Alexei began to sob, black tears staining Ilya's gray sweater and thickly seeping down his gauze covered cheeks. The cold and boney hands came around Ilya's waist.

Awkwardly, Ilya held Alexei as he cried, acutely uncomfortable at the man's emotions. Ilya wasn't used to helping people deal with emotions. Actually offering support to someone was a new and excruciating experience. As to what had set him off, Ilya was none the wiser. Was it his kindness? Was it the knowledge of seventy—eight

years having passed in here for him, or was Alexei simply mad now? Without warning, the sobs ceased and the claw-like hands with the pointed tips where the fingernails had fallen away, withdrew from Ilya. He got the roll of bandages and started wrapping Alexei's fingers.

“You don't seem surprised to find me down here. You haven't asked me why I'm this way...” It was the rasping voice again, the voice of a beast. “You wanted to find me...” The slightest twinge of tearing metal could be heard in the whisper. “Or did you want to find Alexei, instead?”

Ilya did his best to ignore the demented ramblings of the creature, hoping for Alexei's swift return. “I brought you a robe to wear, too.”

The corners of the blood-beast's mouth quirked in a mockery of a smile. “I smell meat.” The cadaverous hands with their translucent, cracked skin went hard in Ilya's own, tightly gripping him. “Give it to me,” the figure rasped, the black eyes looking right through Ilya.

“I will, when I've finished wrapping your hands.”

The blood-beast let Ilya's hands go and leaned its back on the door frame. “If you've lied to me, I'll drink you until you're dry.” The threat was worse when delivered as a barely audible rasping whisper, than a scream.

Ilya gulped, hurrying with the bandaging. He started on the other hand, his fingers shaking now. He shouldn't have come back. He shouldn't have felt sorry for Alexei. He was mad now. Maybe too far gone to save. What help could he possibly be? The

wrapping of the second hand passed in agonizing slowness for Ilya. The blood-beast didn't blink, nor did his gaze waver. When the last piece of tape was in place, Ilya reached into the bag and got the chunk of boiled beef wrapped in aluminum foil out of the bag. He carefully pulled the metal away. Without warning, the beast's hand shot out and snatched it from Ilya, easily knocking him over.

With his back turned to Ilya, in the dimmed light of an electric torch, he hunched over, devouring the flesh with a series of disgusting slurping and sucking sounds. Ilya's hand went to the pistol in his pocket and he waited for the feeding to end. The beast spit out a tooth, and it hung by a thread of sticky blackness, perhaps a nerve or thick rope of the viscous black fluid. The creature didn't notice either way. When it was finished, it turned around, no sign of the beef, a mess of black blood on the bandages of its chin. The beast pulled the dangling tooth away in annoyance and the desiccated nerve it hung from snapped and it was flung into the darkness. Silence passed for a few moments.

"I... Want to go downstairs," Alexei said, no sign of the rasping beast at the moment. He tried to hide his face from Ilya as he wiped at the mess on his chin.

Ilya's hand left the pistol in his pocket. "I'll help you down," he said. "But first, do you want to put this robe on I brought you?"

Alexei nodded, his bandaged hands came up to try and slip the black rags off his shoulders, but they shook too badly, so Ilya had to do it. He looked away, stripping the rags from Alexei's body, trying to afford him a modicum of privacy. By the time Ilya was done, his hands were caked in filth and black blood. He rinsed them off with some water

from the bottle, and helped Alexei into the green bathrobe, belting it securely. He had a newfound appreciation for morticians now, and was firm in his belief that they didn't get paid enough for the job they did.

“Thank-thank you,” Alexei said quietly, holding his arms out to Ilya, who helped him to his feet. He collapsed against the wall, gasping. “I...Haven't stood up in a long time.” It was slow going, with Ilya trying to hold the flashlight, the pack, and prop Alexei up as he moved down the corridor to the circular iron stairwell. *Mind the stairs...* Orryn's words echoed in Ilya's mind as he looked down into what looked like a rusted, infinite staircase into an unknown abyss. Surely the bird had meant the stairs in the grand foyer, when Alina had died?

One small boon was that Ilya's sleeve had slipped from the flashlight and Alexei's eyes had adjusted to the light. Carefully, Ilya set foot on the stairs, and they creaked. “How far down is it?”

“It goes down to the bottom level of the basement, it's almost eight stories.”

Ilya didn't even know there was a basement to this place. For eight stories, that meant there were three basement levels. Three! How massive was this place? This wasn't a house, it wasn't even an estate, hell, the housing projects in Petrograd and Moscow that Ilya had seen on the news, which housed hundreds of families each, had nothing on this.... Whatever it was. As they sunk deeper and deeper into the abyss, Ilya understood how Alexei could have spent a week crawling up these stairs. How many times had he died of starvation on his climb? It was a miracle there was any shred of reason left within

the man. Perhaps creating the alternate ego had been the only way to cope. Did he have any more personalities, or was it only the two?

The stairs seemed to be endless, as they spiraled lower and lower into darkness, with Ilya's electric torch the only beacon in black oblivion. Occasionally, he illuminated a puddle of wet red, where the dog's blood dripped from above, down onto the stairs until it grew thick enough to run down one side and down to the next level. For a horrible, awful second, Ilya considered the fact that his batteries would fail, as they had in so many low budget horror films, right before people met death. Alexei was not too heavy, being almost literally skin and bones. The smells changed the further down they went as well, smelling less of dust and more of swamp to Ilya, with the decay and rot associated with Gdanski slowly creeping into his nostrils.

Finally, the end of the staircase came into sight; it was a small room, much like the one the staircase had begun on, enclosed in brick, but down here they were covered in black mold, and almost fuzzy to the touch. Not that Ilya would touch them in a million years. As a matter of fact, every article of clothing would be burned as soon as he got out of this place. At the foot of the stairs, the blood pooled, until it ran into the corner of the wall, disappearing into a small crack. To his horror, Ilya saw that a space on the floor next to the blood was free of the mold, and it was the shape of a human body, curled up on its side.

“I...spent a long time there. The blood was the only thing I had to sustain me.”  
Alexei laughed bitterly, black sludge bubbling out onto his chin, to mingle with the

drying grease from the beef. “A diet of immortal poison.” He reached out with one skeletal hand, it seemed more the leafless branch of a tree in winter than a limb, and pointed down the hallway. “My study is down there, but I haven't been inside of it in decades, it could be flooded, like the lower level.”

Another entire level beneath this. The secret wing was apparently mostly beneath the house then, but there were two more openings into the house which had been blocked off. “Is it the swamp?” Ilya asked, as he supported Alexei down the corridor.

“Yes, it's been trying to swallow the house for a century. It never should have been built here. We should have left it alone.” They came upon a doorway on the right and Alexei pointed toward it. They stepped through and Ilya's light illuminated the past. Everything was as it should have been, seventy odd years ago; an oaken desk, two bookshelves filled with dark green, burgundy, light blue and black books, all hard bound and covered in a thick layer of dust. A simple day bed sat in the middle of the room, near the desk with a simple table next to it, where a dusty oil lamp sat. On the far wall was an open panel, revealing a small wooden platform, perhaps a dumbwaiter, where a dusty tray with an empty plate and silverware sat, the utensils now covered in rust.

Ilya helped Alexei over to the day bed. Alexei's strength was totally failing him now, and Ilya was essentially dragging him across the floor. He seemed quite tired, almost to the point of falling unconscious. Ilya got him propped up in the bed, which despite its fragile and run down appearance, took the slight weight of the emaciated occupant with ease.



“What did you mean, we should have left it alone?” Ilya asked, as Alexei got himself situated in the chair.

“What?” the man asked after a few moments, the sunken eyes drooping. “I don't know... I'm so tired. I haven't slept in so long. I died instead.” He reached out feebly toward the lamp on the table, and the large box of wooden matches beside it.

Ilya set down the backpack and patted the bandaged claw-like hand away. He lit the lamp and the wick crackled as the dust burned away until a steady, distorted light shone through the dust covered glass.

“I don't want to be in the dark anymore. I've had enough of it,” Alexei mumbled turning onto his side.

“I'll come back tomorrow with some clothes and a blanket.”

Alexei mumbled something, but Ilya couldn't tell what it was and did his best to wipe the table clean with his sleeve and set the food out on it, where Alexei could easily reach it. He would bring him something to give light all day long, an electric lamp, maybe, if he could find one. Then Ilya got to his feet. All of his questions would have to wait until tomorrow, as a breathy sort-of hissing came from the bandaged creature, which he supposed meant that Alexei was already asleep. The cheese, apples, and bread should last him until tomorrow, when Ilya could come again, and ask him questions. Hopefully, he would get some answers, too.

He shivered at the chill in the place, but still walked over to observe the dumbwaiter. If he could lower supplies down here, it would be so much easier. There was

no bell, but the rope and pulley within it still seemed to be intact. It might need some lubricant, but it should work. He just had to find out where the other end was. The tray sitting on it was obviously the remains of what had probably been Alexei's last solid food for who knew how long. Something caught his eye, sticking out from beneath the plate, a scrap of yellowing parchment. He pulled it out, sending little motes of dust into the beam of light, and discovered it was still legible, protected from dust, but not time, by the plate. It took Ilya a moment to realize it was a page from The Bible. Someone had underlined a passage in ink:

*And whatsoever man there be of the house of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, that eateth any manner of blood; I will even set my face against that soul that eateth blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul. Therefore I said unto the children of Israel, No soul of you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger that sojourneth among you eat blood.*

*And whatsoever man there be of the children of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, which hunteth and catcheth any beast or fowl that may be eaten; he shall even pour out the blood thereof, and cover it with dust.*

Ilya carefully folded the piece of paper up and put it in his pocket. He hadn't

considered religion as a motivator for sealing Alexei away. The whole stopping him from killing and eating children after blinding and terrifying them thing seemed more relevant, but maybe his family had been quite pious in past generations. Still, Ilya should investigate this. Hadn't there been a quote from the Book of Judges in Amaranth's journal? Ilya turned to leave and his foot crumpled something. He looked down and saw a wadded up piece of parchment, much like the other, only covered in dust. He picked it up, doing his best to shake it clean. His skin crawled with the need for a wash, and he would be happy to oblige as soon as he was out of here. Carefully, he unfolded it. It was much harder to make out than the first one, but it too, was a page from the Bible, with a smaller passage outlined in pen:

*If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.*

At the bottom of the page, written in the same ink which had underlined the passage, were the words: *Starve in darkness forever.* Ilya rolled his eyes. Another homosexual? How many gays were in this house? It was getting ridiculous and statistically very unlikely. At least Alexei wasn't putting the moves on him. He wasn't physically capable at the moment...but if he got his strength back.... Ilya carefully smoothed out the parchment and put it in his pocket along with the other piece. Starve...

someone had fed him through the dumbwaiter and then stopped, because... Alexei lay with other men and drank blood. The two things didn't seem to be equal to Ilya, and it seemed an extreme reaction to have. That made something very clear to him: it was personal. Whoever it was had known that Alexei wouldn't die from starvation. At least not permanently, because the hand written note promised starvation forever.

It had to be a family member. Who else would know about this? A servant wouldn't be trusted with something so serious. The only name that came to mind was Amaranth Neimasaurus. Soldier would not be pleased by this at all. He had no idea how long he'd been down here, but it seemed like hours. Then again, down in the dark, time seemed to pass in a crawl, unless you were Alexei and then a day passed every half hour. As he walked up the stairs, it seemed like he'd been on them forever. He stopped mid-step. These bugs were either immensely stupid or things weren't as simple as they appeared. They wanted to kill Alexei and anyone else who'd drank the blood, but couldn't access the secret wing. Yet... Amaranth had sent trays of food and recriminating notes down on a dumbwaiter... From somewhere in the house, presumably.

It was almost funny. There was a secret entrance to the secret wing, and in seventy years, the dumb things had never found it. As he stepped through the pile of bones on the top level, he stopped off and set about the grisly task of collecting the bones of Leonya Kirkuk in the now empty backpack. Hopefully, no one would look inside his pack until after he'd had time to bury the poor fellow. He desperately wanted to wash his hands after handling the remains. He walked down to the end of the hallway, and saw that the door

was still open a crack. The panel was down, because no light shone through the crack. Maybe it hadn't been as long as he thought.

Before Ilya could properly obsess over every possibility that might have occurred, light was revealed as the panel slid open and Ilya pushed the heavy door open. Soldier stood on the edge of the desk, leaning on his rifle. Ilya stepped out and shut the door behind him, turning the wheel until it was tight. There was no sense in taking a risk and leaving it open for Alexei to return to old habits and start roaming the halls looking for blood still in people's veins. He stepped back and the panel slid into place. He turned around and saw Soldier emerge from the drawer, shutting it behind himself.

*Well?* They both signed at the same time, Ilya using sign language in case of over-curious ears.

*You go first,* Soldier signed, sitting on the edge of the desk and swinging his feet back and forth.

Quickly, Ilya outlined what had happened in the secret wing, which didn't take very long, since Alexei had fallen asleep right when Ilya had gotten an opportunity to start asking questions. When he told him about the pages from the Bible, Soldier looked away, and Ilya sensed the toy was uncomfortable. Soldier got to his feet and went over to the desk and opened a drawer. He pointed inside of it, and Ilya looked inside. An old leather bound bible sat within.

*It's hers,* Soldier signed.

Ilya got the parchment out of his pocket and laid them down next to Soldier, who

looked them over. Ilya lifted the bible out of the drawer and set it down.

*What's the first page number?*

875, Soldier replied and looked over at The Bible as Ilya flipped it open, thumbing through the gold leafed pages until he came to page eight-hundred and seventy-four. Next to it sat page eight-hundred and seventy-seven. Soldier looked up at Ilya glumly. There was no point in checking the other one; it would be missing as well.

*Well, that was settled pretty quickly,* Ilya signed. It was nice when mysteries were instantly solved, rather than hanging over his head for weeks at a time.

*How could I not have noticed this?* Soldier sat on the edge of the table, his chin resting in his hands in a perfect imitation of human posture.

*We still don't have all the facts,* Ilya signed. It was looking less and less likely that Alexei was an evil monster. Crazy, but not evil. Dangerous certainly, but not malevolent. A killer even, but not a vicious murderer. A long time ago, who knows what he'd been like? He or someone like him had killed Sacha, Kiril, The Ocelot, and Leonya Kirkuk. Ilya looked through the bible for a moment. It was odd, because amongst the Eastern Orthodox Christians of Russia, which was the only Christian sect of note within The Empire, The Old Testament was generally ignored. Both pages were torn from *The Book of Leviticus*, or as his mother had called it, *The Book of Banning*. In Petrograd, they had been close to Poland and their arcane Catholic ways, and many Poles had worked in the city illegally, where he'd been acquainted with the good book, and their adherent's frequent attempts to convert Ilya from Orthodoxy, a religion he knew even less about,

except that Russian Churches had pretty painted icons everywhere, and beautiful exhibits at the Hermitage showing them off. Catholicism was known for... Witch burnings and child abuse.

Amaranth, if her diary was to be believed, had come from Dakota, in the United States, so it was no wonder she'd apparently been a zealot. Ilya closed The Bible and put it in his pack. He would need to read in full the section on not drinking blood, to see how it connected with the Story of Emernon in Judges. He really didn't believe in any kind of biblical origin for what was happening here at all, but others did, including Amaranth and maybe the other ancestors of the Neimasaurus family. If he was to deduce their twisted, illogical reasoning, he needed to know more about this.

*So, where did the Exterminators go?* Ilya signed, trying to disrupt Soldier's hard thinking on the edge of the desk.

*To the east wing, which is under renovation.*

*The side with all the scaffolding outside?*

Soldier nodded and stood. *That's the place. I could hear those things everywhere, in the walls, on the curtains, just everywhere.*

*I should probably avoid it, then. What's over there?* Ilya's interest was only of a passing nature, to see what could interest the bugs.

*There's a bunch of rooms... I think the gallery is there, several salons or sitting rooms, bedrooms on the upper levels, of course, the chapel, and the bath house, but it hasn't been used in years, since plumbing was added to the upstairs bedrooms.* Soldier

shrugged. *There are probably a hundred rooms to it, Ilya.*

But Ilya was struck by one. *A chapel? More religion.*

*Well, a shrine actually, but Amaranth always called it a chapel.* Soldier shrugged.  
*I don't know the difference.*

Ilya drummed his fingers on the pack idly. *Don't you keep something of religious significance in a shrine?*

*I already said I don't know the difference, but the nest, as the exterminators called it, was a small room behind the shrine. I heard the bugs everywhere.*

Ilya flung himself down in a chair. *Then I can't go there, can I?*

*I can, I was there a little while ago.*

*Well, why didn't you say so? Stupid toy...*

*How the hell was I supposed to know you'd suddenly become god-fearing?* Soldier looked away. *Besides, I think I'd forgotten about it. It was in the back of the shrine, and the workers had knocked through the wall at some point and found the room by accident. There was nothing in there but mud and sand covered walls and a large black statue of a phoenix. There was a silver plaque covered in grime at the bottom. It said something, but all I could read was your name on it. It made me feel bad and unwanted to be in the room with it, so I left and then... I guess I forgot about it.* Soldier shrugged, and then signed emphatically, *I'm not going back there!*

Everything felt all right to Ilya suddenly. A sort of calm and a thought crystallized in him. *The Oriental Hall is in the east wing, isn't it?*



*Yes, it's part of the gallery, along with the auxiliary ballroom.*

He'd felt dread that day, a sense of discomfort, and he'd run away, hadn't he? That was the day when Demetri had driven out to pick him up before he could get to town. What if... He'd been in that room before, when he was lost, trying to find his way back to the kitchens. Did he remember it? The small shrine... the walls beautifully painted in religious murals of the red sea parting and the miracle of the fish. There were two beautiful life-like icons at the altar, and Jesus, not on a cross in his humiliation, but as though he were walking on water, on the wall above the altar.

No, this wasn't right at all, somehow, he was lying to himself. No, that wasn't right either. Somebody was lying to him about the shrine. Someone was lying to him in his own head. There had been a broken wall, a light clamped to the top of the ceiling, and the dirty, muddy room beyond it, with the black statue, but in his mind he saw a man and knew it was not. He was lying to himself again. What was really there? He remembered The Archivist, looking down on him dismissively, taking a drag from her cigarette in the silver holder, the green smoke billowing at the edges of his vision. The workers looking at him curiously, as though they were unaffected by the place. Then Ilya was running, lost in the house. He awoke after banging his head, to his first meeting with the Young Lord and the Oriental Boy. Why had he run? Something...a movement in the shadows, maybe. For an instant, Ilya gripped the armrests of the chair so tightly, his knuckles were white and he almost screamed, then he couldn't remember what it was. The Archivist and the workers had been oblivious. *Don't go there.* The thought came unbidden to his mind, and

Ilya was in complete agreement.

Ilya shivered. *I've already been there. I forgot about it too. It was my first day here. Tell me what the shrine looked like.*

*Well, I know it pretty well. Amaranth spent hours in there. The walls are white, with painted icons placed in little alcoves on the walls, three per side, with an altar made of stone, and a stained glass ceiling illustrating... I can't remember what it illustrates.*

Soldier scratched his chin. *That's odd...* He shrugged. *I'm not going back there.*

*I think my desire to visit has faded as well, now that I already have. My picture of the shrine in my mind is completely different from yours. But I know I'm lying to myself. I didn't see a phoenix, I saw a man. But I think you're right. It's a phoenix.*

*A phoenix resurrects, you know,* Soldier signed, as though it were some sage piece of advice.

Ilya rolled his eyes. *Promise that you won't set me on fire while I'm sleeping, to see if I will be reborn.*

*I promise not to do that while you're sleeping.*

Ilya's shoulders slumped. *Or while I'm awake.*

Soldier signed nothing. Ilya imagined the toy was smiling up at him, a smile, which if Ilya could have seen it, would have been both innocent and diabolical.

*I guess I should be getting home,* Ilya signed. *Demetri will be there soon.*

*I think I should stay here and keep watch.*

Ilya nodded, it was probably a good idea. He picked the pack up and slung it over

his shoulder. A brittle toe bone slipped out of the flap and fell to the floor. Soldier looked down at it and up at Ilya. Silence hung between them.

Soldier tilted his head up at him. *Well? Aren't you going to tell me what you're carrying?*

*Fine, since you're so damn nosy, I'm taking the remains of Leonya Kirkuk and burying them somewhere.*

Soldier's hands were still. He tilted his head to stare up at Ilya, which was a little infuriating. Ilya just knew the toy was laughing at him on the inside. *Where?*

*The Swamp?*

*Is that safe? What if you get caught dumping a bunch of bones?*

*Well, if there was a graveyard nearby, I'd put him there.*

Soldier's head tilted even more to the side, and Ilya hoped it would fall off before the piece of wood replied: *There is one.*

*What?*

*The Neimasaurus mausoleum. It's on the hill opposite the swamp, on the other side of the house.*

*Really? Is it spooky to go there?*

*For me? No.* Implicit in the statement was that it was an entirely different matter for Ilya.

*I'll be back tomorrow in the early afternoon. We can chat with Alexei.*

Soldier nodded. *Shall we go to the mausoleum tomorrow, if you promise not to pee*

*your pants?*

*Maybe if you could see ghosts, you'd be scared of a graveyard, too.*

*I'm sure, you seemed terrified of that ghost boy who thought I was some sort of puppet.*

*Until tomorrow!* Ilya signed, leaving. A minute later, Ilya rushed back into the study, terrifying Soldier, who did his best to look like he wasn't surprised at all. Sheepishly, Ilya leaned down and picked up the toe. It just wouldn't do to leave that laying around.

After hiding the pack in his closet and having a pleasant dinner with Demetri, which involved lamb, sautéed mushrooms, onions, and boiled potatoes, where Ilya wistfully recollected eating green, leafy vegetables in Petrograd prepared by his mother, he dreamed again as he always did, about the swamp. He flew around it, like a bird, landing on a dead tree branch over a peat bog, looking down at a gray fox at water's edge, a rabbit dangling from its bloody maw. It trotted along, looking for a good patch of sand to bury its prey to eat later, except it wouldn't work out that way, because as soon as the fox was out of sight, Ilya would be over there to uncover it. And.... Eat it? A large black shape flew overhead and landed on the branch next to Ilya, the whole tree shaking precipitously. Orryn looked down on him with his beady eyes with their milky white centers.

“This must stop, Ilya. You cannot dream about me. It's too dangerous.”

Things began to fade to black around Ilya.

“If you go in the shrine again, you won’t be the same. People like you die there.”

Ilya was now in darkness, propelled into oblivion by Orryn's will.

“You need to forget about what happened, again.”

## CHAPTER 18: NEMESIS

The next morning, Ilya got out of bed remembering the conversation with Soldier where they had discussed the Bible passages and agreed to meet in the attic in the afternoon. He chose to leave the cottage around ten, so that he had time to squirrel away some food from Cook, pretending he'd had no breakfast. It was already hot, even though this was the dying days of summer. Ilya was sweating as he walked toward the house, past the disused peasant's cottages with a slight itch behind his neck.

“Ilya?”

He felt instant irritation at the smooth, pleasant voice behind him. He'd thought with Elem's intervention that he would be free of them and their harassment. He should have known it wouldn't work out that way. Ilya turned around, not bothering with a smile, because this was his day off and he didn't have to do what they said. To his surprise, Shoji was alone, emerging from an overgrown path between the disused cottages, for once not dressed in clothing worth a year of Ilya's wages. Ilya stopped himself from doing a double take. Shoji was dressed in a t-shirt, not even a new looking one at that, and jean cutoffs, which were, in Ilya's estimation, cut a few inches too high to be respectable, if they could ever be such a thing. He couldn't even remember the last time he exposed his knees in public.

“What?” he said, not bothering to hide his annoyance.

Shoji was completely unfazed by Ilya's demeanor. “How's your head?”

“Fine.”

Shoji stepped out of the undergrowth revealing that he was actually wearing flip-flops. “That's good to hear.”

Ilya tried not to stare at them. He kept his expression neutral. “What are you doing down there?” Ilya jerked his head in the direction of the abandoned cottages, resisting the urge to lecture him on the dangers of not wearing closed-toe shoes in the forest.

Shoji glanced back at them with a shrug. “I wanted to go for a walk by myself.”

“I'll leave you to your thoughts, then.” Ilya turned and hurried away, not believing his good luck at the opening he'd been afforded. It didn't work. He heard the tell-tale flop of flip-flops behind him as Shoji hurried to catch up.

“I don't mind the company now. There's actually something I wanted to talk to you about.” Shoji kept pace beside him easily, despite the design limitations of his footwear.

“Look,” Ilya said, speeding up, “I've got to be somewhere in a little bit and I don't have time to play games with you.” It felt a little empowering to be the one in control for a change.

“Why are you being such a bitch?” Shoji said, grabbing him by the arm, the perpetually pleasant smile vanishing from his face. “What have I ever done to you?”

Ilya stopped, resisting the urge to slap the perfectly proportioned hand with impeccably manicured nails away. “What?”

“Have you heard the story about the swamps?” Shoji said, his hand slipping away

from him, his expression still a little disconcerted, but false cheer was reasserting itself.

“No,” he said. So he was here on Aleksander's behalf fishing for secret information, was he? He'd get nothing from Ilya.

“Oh. I thought maybe you were looking for the fountain when you went into the swamp the other night,” Shoji said, smiling pleasantly as he regained control of the situation. His teeth were very white, perfectly spaced, and straight.

It made Ilya want to smack them out of his mouth. He seemed a little too unblemished to be real. Excuses... What the hell could he say about this that would be plausible? Nothing, which left one path open. “I haven't been in the swamp. Do you have any idea how dirty the water is in there? The bacteria count in swamp water is forty-seven thousand, eight-hundred to—”

“I followed you when you returned to the boathouse. You walked back to the cottage that you share with your uncle.”

“What the hell were you doing out at night?”

“Just going for a walk.” Shoji smiled again and stepped closer to him. “I do that a lot. It's the only way to get some time to myself.”

Ilya stepped back from him, suddenly nervous. The tall grass brushed against his pants, and he was grateful for his boots. “I just wanted to explore it, and everyone said it was forbidden, so I did it at night.”

“It's quite dangerous, you know, there are people in there that will eat you for breakfast, and that's not a euphemism.” Shoji reached out and slowly ran a hand down



Ilya's shoulder.

His left eye twitched at the touch. “Euphemism, is that like an idiomatic expression, or more like a saying?” Ilya pushed the hand away.

“It's more like a saying, but I don't for one second believe that you didn't know that useless bit of trivia.”

“Why do you care about my explorations?”

“Well, you see, going into the swamp is a fire-able offense...” Shoji took another step toward him.

Ilya backed up again, and his back bumped into the gnarled wood of a cottage and the Ivy growing along it scratched his shirt. Things were turning ugly now, just as Ilya had thought they would.

“Let's speak plainly to one another.” Shoji put his hands on either side of the wall behind Ilya.

“If you think you can,” Ilya said, quite seriously. He found the prospects of it doubtful at best.

Shoji laughed again. “Why don't you tell me why you were in the attic, too?” He leaned in close to Ilya who turned away from him. “You remember, we played cricket.”

“I was cleaning it.”

“You don't seem to have made much progress.”

“See, I knew you couldn't speak plainly.” He pushed him away with both hands before he could get any closer.

Shoji staggered for a second, surprised.

Ilya turned to run. "I've got to go."

"You have dreams here, don't you?" Shoji said, leaning down and putting his hands in the tall grass. "People like us do, everyone does actually, but only we remember them."

Ilya stopped, as he heard the sound all around him, hidden in the tall grass, of hissing. He was paralyzed. How often had he had nightmares of the creatures? Imagining their bite, hidden in a chest, surrounding him in the secret wing, and attacking him in the swamp... "Y-yes, do you?"

Shoji nodded with a little smile. He ran his hands through the grass as though he were looking for something. "What do you dream about?"

Unbidden, the word came into his mind: *Nemesis*. "About the church, and birds."

"I've seen it from afar with their eyes," Shoji said, reaching deeper into the grass.

"The vultures?" Ilya said, the breathing catching in his throat. He looked down into the tall grass around him.

Shoji smiled at him, and stood up, a black and copper colored adder wrapped around each hand. Their heads rose from his palms, yellow eyes staring only at Ilya, and within them, he could see a keen understanding that Ilya had only seen from certain vultures in the swamp. Their mouths opened, showing white fangs and pink flesh within, and flicking black forked tongues a little too similar to Alexei's.

He almost screamed. And then he did when he felt movement at his feet and

looked down to see two more of the black creatures winding about his legs.

Shoji smiled “I don't think it would be in your interest to move, Ilya.” He brought one the serpents up to his face and the creature caressed his lips with forked tongue, before slipping around his neck and resting its head on Shoji's shoulder. “To answer your question, I saw through a snake's eyes, which leaves a lot to be desired for a human. I've never smelled so many things or felt them with such acuity.”

Ilya closed his eyes, not wanting so see anything else, and felt the snakes on his feet beginning to make their way up his legs, winding around them like the red stripe on a candy cane. He shuddered and lost control of his bladder, the urine running down his legs. He turned his head against the wall as Shoji laughed. “Please get them off, I'll tell you whatever you want.”

“We're friends, aren't we? Almost two of a kind. Why, I'm not threatening you at all,” he said pleasantly. “I just wanted you to meet my friends.”

Ilya felt the forked tongue on his cheek and heard the hissing near his ear.

“Please!” It was almost a scream now. He couldn't even form a coherent thought now, as fear gripped his mind completely.

“You see, Ilya, I didn't follow you into the swamp, but they were there watching you. They were in your boat the whole time. One of them had the misfortune of hiding in your boot, but the others were always with you, keeping an eye on you, making sure you were safe. Because friends look out for each other. You do remember how a snake gave its life so you could get away from that cannibal, don't you?”

Ilya felt Shoji's hand on his cheek, not the one with the snake. It turned Ilya's head to look at him. "Open your eyes and let us talk about the fountain. I have no desire to hurt you."

He tried to obey, but his eyes would not open. He couldn't face it. Above their heads came a harsh cawing. Ilya's eyes snapped open, and he saw Shoji recoiling from him, the snake's heads turning in all directions, seeing the black shapes alight on roofs behind them. Directly above them, Orryn looked down from the roof's peak. There were nearly a dozen vultures surrounding Shoji and Ilya. He'd never been so happy to see the carrion eaters in his life.

The snakes on Ilya's legs hissed, bearing fangs, glaring up at the birds, resting their heads on the femoral arteries in his thighs. Shoji stepped back and looked up at Orryn. "He's rather large, isn't he?"

Ilya looked Shoji in the eyes and nowhere else, particularly not the snake around his neck. "Yes—he is. He tore off Alina Neimasaurus's face last night. I'm sure he'd be happy to take yours off, too."

"If he does, the venom will kill him." One hand came up to pat the snake on his shoulder. "This is a bit of a standoff, isn't it? If my snakes kill you, your vultures will deal with me. It's rather interesting, isn't it?"

Ilya nodded, hoping it was true. "Not really, we're friends, remember?" he said sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

"Exactly!" Shoji replied with a dazzling smile. "I suppose I will be the one to

blink.” The snake wrapped around his hand dropped into the grass and the one around his neck unwound itself and slithered down his arm in an almost hypnotic spiral pattern. It too, dropped into the grass. “I don't want to hurt you. I've had so many opportunities. It would have been so simple if I did.”

“Shoji?” Aleksander's voice came from down the road, as he came into sight. The snakes unwound themselves from Ilya's legs, disappearing into the grass. Meanwhile, Shoji pretended like there was something really fascinating to the left of him on the roof, while the other vultures took to preening themselves and looking up at the sky or in other directions, except down at the humans. In more pleasant circumstances it would have been amusing.

“Over here.” Shoji stepped back and waved at him, as the vultures took flight from the roofs entirely, pretending to be spooked by Aleksander's sudden approach.

“What are you doing? I've been looking for you for almost half an hour. Everyone's already down at the pool—” The Young Lord stopped in mid-sentence as Ilya, still prone against the wall, his inner legs wet with urine, came into view.

Ilya, for his part, was both relieved and embarrassed to see him. Shaking, he pushed himself off the wall, his eyes not leaving the tall grass.

“Ilya's had a bit of a moment. We surprised a snake and it almost bit him.”

“So he peed his pants?” Aleksander looked Ilya up and down as he carefully stepped out of the tall grass and on to the packed earth of the road. “First you tattle on me to my mother, and then you pee your pants. You really are a child, aren't you?”

Still shaking, Ilya looked up into his face, and saw the petty anger still smoldering there from being denied. “Fuck you!” he snapped.

Aleksander was still for a moment. Then he laughed, slapping his thigh. “No matter what you do, I find it charming.”

How the hell was that charming? Did Aleksander understand what charming actually meant? Didn't words have meaning or definition to the man?

“Why doesn't he come down to the pool with us today? He could use some relaxation after the nasty surprise he's had this morning,” Shoji said, tilting his head at Ilya. “I think he has off today, since he banged his head, when your grandmother tried to kill.”

“What a splendid idea!” Aleksander said, “And you don't even have to worry about my grandmother anymore, either.”

“My fair skin makes me susceptible to skin cancer, I don't have a swimsuit, I can't swim, and I'm allergic to chlorine,” Ilya said, completely truthful. “Other than that, it's a great idea.”

Aleksander thought for a moment. “It's overcast today, you can borrow one of Shoji's suits, since you're about the same size. He's got dozens of them anyway, and I can teach you how to swim,” Aleksander was ticking the points off on his hand with a little smile. “As for the third, chlorine is poison. Of course you don't like it. If it bothers your eyes, you can use some goggles.” He wrapped his arm around Ilya's shoulders. “Now, let's see how you look in a swimsuit.”

“Probably gawky, awkward, and mortified,” Shoji said, leading the way. “If you like that sort of thing.”

Ilya did his best not to snarl as he was dragged toward the house. “I’m underage, too.”

Aleksander leaned in close to him and whispered in his ear. “Now be truthful, have you been eating asparagus? Because I certainly smell something.”

“I have A.I.D.S.”

“Really? You’re one of those hiv-positive virgins?”

How did Aleksander know? Why did everyone seem to know? “You can get it from a blood transfusion, or sharing needles, from urine, or getting infected blood in an open wound—”

“Thankfully, condoms exist, so there’s no need to worry. Anyway, I’ve had my talking to so I won’t be forcing you. But one thing you can’t do, nor can my mother, is get me to stop liking you.”

“I can think of a few things, like—”

Aleksander laughed and ruffled Ilya’s hair. “I’m sure with your imagination you’ve already compiled quite a list in that head of yours. But I don’t want to hear it. This is the end of summer, Ilya! Don’t spoil it by being you. Don’t spend it inside. You’ll have enough of that in the other nine months of the year. Besides, Tania and Lena will be there. You might have met them at the masquerade. Don’t you want to hang out with babes in bikinis?”

“Ilya, they're—” Shoji started to say.

“Shut up!” Aleksander roared, trying to drown him out.

“—lesbians,” he finished, with a raised eyebrow at Aleksander's outburst. “I don't know why you're screaming. Do you think straight boys don't want to hang out with a pair of beautiful lesbians?”

Aleksander looked thoughtful for a moment. “Like women enjoy the company of gay men?”

Shoji shrugged. “I think there is a different motivation, but the end result is the same. What do you think Ilya?” They both looked over at him.

“I don't like lesbians,” Ilya said solemnly. “It's morally wrong.” Never had he told a more outrageous lie in his life.

“Are we morally wrong too?” Aleksander whispered in his ear.

“Yes,” his heart said, while his brain said, *No, just different*. Stupid intellect.

“I think people who view themselves as morally superior aren't as happy as those who are honest with themselves.” Shoji walked ahead.

Aleksander stared into Ilya's eyes for an uncomfortable length of time. “I like being forbidden. It makes it exciting,”

It occurred to Ilya suddenly that the Oriental Boy was dressed that way because he was going down to the pool. That small corner of the universe righted itself and Ilya felt a little calmer.

“Do you want to go in by the side door?” Aleksander asked suddenly, as they



neared Neimasaurus.

Ilya was instantly suspicious, seeking for motivation. “Why, are you afraid Cook might be in the kitchen and put an end to your fun?” It sounded a little bitterer than he'd meant it to sound.

Aleksander looked slightly affronted. “No, I thought you might not want your friends to see that you'd pissed yourself like a child.” Aleksander put his arm around Ilya's shoulders and smiled in a way that made him flinch. “Maybe we should go in the kitchen, let that red-haired maid, what's her name, Tabitha?”

Ilya nodded, his ego somewhere in the vicinity of his boots.

“Let her get a good look and smell at you.” He pulled Ilya's head closer, and whispered in his ear, “What do you think? I hear the deaf have a keen sense of smell to make up for the loss in hearing.”

Ilya pushed him away, adjusting his soaked pants uncomfortably. “The side door.” It was just above a whisper.

Aleksander blinked for a moment. “I'm sorry, I didn't hear that.”

“The side door!” Ilya screamed, making Shoji jump up ahead, and turn back to look at them.

Aleksander was patting the side of his head and ear, blinking his eyes slowly. “Shoji, remind me never to ask him to speak up again. Really, I just didn't hear what you said, Ilya. There's no need to scream. I've been to a lot of rock concerts, you know.”

“I take it we're going in the side door?” Shoji looked at Ilya and smiled. “Through

the tall grass?”

Aleksander rolled his eyes. “Yes, and when we get inside, we're going to walk on the carpet, and then the floorboards, in case you want to know.”

He didn't understand the meaning of the comment, but Ilya got the message loud and clear. Shoji walked ahead, turning from the muddy field and practically prancing into the green grass that went past his ankles.

Ilya stopped at the edge of the muddy field, and Aleksander turned back to look at him. “What?”

Ilya willed himself to take a step forward into the grass, but he couldn't. Shoji turned and looked back at him, tapping one sandaled foot in the grass.

Understanding dawned on Aleksander's face. “I think he's afraid of snakes.” He walked back to Ilya, a look of faint amusement on his face. “That must have been some shock the snake gave you this morning.”

“Th-they were adders,” Ilya said, as a gentle breeze blew across the grassy field, making the green blades bob and weave, filling the air with sound.

“There was more than one?” Aleksander seemed to be considering something, and then he reached out and picked Ilya up, clutching him tightly, one arm beneath his knees, the other around his chest. In his paralytic state, Ilya wasn't quick enough to resist, and once he was up, he had to put a hand around the Young Lord's distressingly firm shoulders.

“Put me down,” Ilya said shakily.

Aleksander stepped into the grass, ignoring the request. “Are you sure?”

“Are you?” Shoji tilted his head at Ilya, before reaching down into the grass with one hand, and feeling around.

“No.” Ilya's hand dug into Aleksander's shoulder as he watched Shoji.

“I can feel your piss on my arm, Ilya, so you better appreciate this,” Aleksander said, walking across the field at a slow and steady clip.

Shoji shifted so that his back was to Ilya, and pulled up something from the grass, and stood, keeping it hidden, by making sure that he never faced them. Ilya's eyes never left him. With agonizing slowness, Shoji turned to reveal a pink wildflower in his hands.

“That's real nice,” Aleksander said, walking past Shoji who hurried to catch up, tucking the stem of the pink blossom behind Aleksander's ear and giving him a quick kiss. Aleksander's right eye twitched, probably because he had no hand with which to remove the flower. “Ilya, could you stop trying to dislocate my shoulder? I'm not going to drop you. Really, I lift weights all the time, and I'm quite strong.”

Ilya loosened his death grip on the man, still scanning the grass around him for snakes. They were there, he knew it. Shoji had put them there. How many did he have, anyway? They walked up the steps of the side balcony, where Ilya was set down on the faded stones tinged slightly with blue-green mold. Aleksander pulled the flower out and threw it over his shoulder before walking into the house.

Ilya prayed for another servant to cross their path, but none were in evidence as they inexorably marched toward Shoji's suite of rooms in the northeast. He could make a

run for it, but he suspected they were both faster than him. What chance did he have of eluding Aleksander in his childhood home, a home that Ilya still got regularly lost in? What if Shoji found him and not Aleksander? As the French windows loomed before him, Ilya stepped across the threshold, because he had no choice. He had to stay close to the Young Lord, or there was no telling what Shoji, his nemesis according to Orryn, would do. It was hard to argue with the bird after his altercation with him and his snakes.

With a sudden shock, Ilya realized if he could kill him, he would. Why had he been so afraid of those snakes? Why was he still so afraid of them? They had always seemed so unnatural and utterly alien in mindset. Ilya could see the wheels turning and the minds at work in cat and dogs, even birds, like Orryn, and they were much like Ilya in motivations. Masque and Arsenic were both killers, mother nature had made them so, even if one was markedly more lazy and sociable. But Ilya understood their motivations and he was kind to them and they would return kindness. But snakes... They were as different in mind from humans as their body was. Showing a snake kindness would get one bitten, without any chance of affection in return, just a load of toxin in his veins. That was the only reward for consorting with snakes.

An interesting thought occurred to Ilya. Vultures were intelligent birds, very much non-confrontational, preferring their food already dead. Orryn had been forced into acts of aggression on Ilya's behalf, but what he did was try to guide him into whatever it was Orryn wanted. Ilya wasn't that different from a vulture, was he? He preferred to avoid conflict and ran from danger, but if he was cornered, he would lash out. Like when he'd

come out of the cottage swinging that knife to get Arsenic's body from the Young Lord's friends. If Ilya was like a vulture, then Shoji was like a snake.

Had it not been for Aleksander's arrival, Ilya couldn't help but believe he would have told Shoji everything... eventually. Then the snakes would have disposed of him. Shoji had been all smiles and pleasantness at first. Then, as all snakes do, he'd bitten or tried to. One could not be a snake's friend. Ilya could never turn his back on him. He could never let his guard down again. Aleksander was now the vastly lesser of two evils. If anything, Ilya might feel a small amount of pity for him. One day, when he was not any use to the snake, Shoji would get rid of him. Ilya would never again imagine him as a phoenix. That had been a lie. In the masquerade, Aleksander had been the carnivore and Shoji the herbivore. How foolish the Young Lord was if he believed that.

Ilya watched Shoji as he led the way. Of course Aleksander had been taken in. Hadn't Ilya himself commented that Shoji was perfect? Even Ilya had to admit that the Young Lord hadn't been far from the truth when he said that Ilya favored Shoji, not him. The snakes had wiped away any trace of attraction he might have at one time felt. Aleksander couldn't help the way he was and he'd been snared as helplessly as any detective in a film noir confronted with a femme fatale. There was no way that Ilya could think of to warn him that Aleksander would take seriously. By the way, sir, your friend commands snakes and is plotting to get immortality from a fountain in the swamp. You know, the one guarded by cannibals? Damn it! Everything seemed so normal on the surface in this place, yet beneath it all was a situation bordering on the absurd.

Anyway, why should he warn him after everything he'd tried to do to Ilya, and frankly, was still trying to do? Because Ilya wasn't a snake, that's why. Stupid conscience. Finally the door came into sight and Shoji reached out and put his hand on the knob. He turned and looked back at Aleksander

“Why don't you go down to the pool and I'll help him pick out a suit.”

“No!” Ilya shrieked. They both turned to look at Ilya, surprised at his yell.

“I... Mean... I... Want...” Ilya had no idea where he was going with this, and then with a feeling of dread, a thought occurred to him. “I want Aleksander to pick out the one that suits me best.” It was the worst bit of improvisation in his life. He wasn't certain whether or not death by adders was preferable. Why couldn't Shoji have a special connection with garter or pygmy snakes? Maybe hamsters... No, butterflies, immortal, ageless butterflies...

“Really?” The Young Lord seemed a little dumbfounded.

The corner of Shoji's lip quirked. “He's full of surprises today, isn't he? I wonder how far he'll go.”

Ilya smiled blandly at Shoji. As far as he had to in order to stay alive.

## CHAPTER 19: SWIMMING WITH SNAKES

Aleksander was like a kid in a toy store as he shoved Shoji's door open. "Well, say no more, let's see what you've got." He looked Ilya up and down quickly. "I think I bought most of them, anyway." Aleksander headed over to the closet. "Ilya, you've got slightly short legs for your height, so you want something that emphasizes the length you've got."

Ilya bobbed his head in agreement, looking down at his legs and wondering what the hell the man was talking about. His legs looked normal to him.

"The bathroom's over there." Shoji extended one long and slender figure toward a door on the other side of the room. "Why don't you go clean up?"

Ilya beat a hasty retreat from the room as Aleksander pulled small pieces of spandex in varying colors from a drawer, muttering about how they were all too big, and something about minimal coverage. Once inside the bathroom, Ilya beat his head against the wall three times as punishment. A knock came at the door.

"Yes?"

"Do you need any help?" Shoji's pleasant voice came from the other side of the door. "I heard a noise."

"No. I'm...fine?" Two lies in one sentence. Right now, help was sitting in the attic study, waiting for Ilya and probably thinking profane thoughts, or snoring away in the cottage in the room at the end of the hall, or looking over the menu for lunch in the

kitchen, or changing linen in some bedroom somewhere, gossiping about the horrible death of Alina Neimasaurus to anyone within eyesight. It was not up here with him. Unless you counted the Young Lord. There was no telling what he would pick out for Ilya to wear. No, there was. He would pick the sluttiest, craziest thing he could find and present it to Ilya as though it were perfectly normal. His knees would certainly be exposed. How much more than that? Ilya reached down to lock the door, only to discover there wasn't one. Lovely. A horrible thought occurred to Ilya. What if Shoji had thongs? They didn't make those for men did they? At least not for swimsuits, surely... Ilya's sphincter clenched involuntarily at the thought. He wasn't wearing one of those and that was that.

At least there was nowhere for snakes to hide in here, the bathroom being comprised of a sink and cabinet, toilet, and tub with a frosted glass door. Unless there was a snake in the bathtub, everything was fine. He looked around for a weapon and the only thing that he could come up with was a black hairbrush sitting on the counter. He picked it up with one hand and slid the glass door open. It was empty, so he put the brush back on the counter and turned the water on. Ilya took off his clothes, putting the soiled pants and underwear in the sink

He stepped into the tub and turned the valve so that the water was redirected to the shower head, and closed the frosted glass door. There was a dizzying array of body soaps, shampoos, conditioners, and mineral scrubs on a shelf in the shower. Apparently, being perfect required a considerable amount of work. He was trying to make his selection from



the soaps, when he heard the bathroom door open. He opened the glass door far enough to stick his head out.

Shoji strode in with a folded towel in his hand. "I just brought you this." He shut the door behind him.

Ilya's eyes traveled down to the towel. His mind went to what could hide inside those folds. Shoji chuckled, as if reading his thoughts. He shook the towel out. No snakes fell onto the floor.

"See? Nothing there. I want to be your friend, Ilya. All I want is for you to help me," he said soothingly, as though Ilya were some kind of nervous horse that Shoji was trying to break-in.

"After what just happened?" Ilya laughed.

"I was just scaring you, that's all."

"Good job!"

"Ilya, we should be friends. Both of us have special talents. I recognized your eyes for what they were the first moment we met. People like us are rare. We should be working together." Shoji came up to the shower door, laying the towel on the toilet lid.

"Snakes don't have friends," Ilya whispered.

"Ilya, I'm a human being, not a snake." Shoji leaned in to kiss Ilya.

He jerked back, slammed the door so hard that the pane rattled in the frame.

"You don't want to be my enemy."

Ilya backed away from the glass, huddling against the far wall, the water falling

down on his head and shoulders. The frosted glass distorted the image of Shoji on the other side, making his long black hair seem alive as it hung down around his face. He stood there, unmoving, and then he reached up and ran his fingers through his hair for a few moments. He seemed to separate a lock of hair, and pulled it out until he held it in front of him with both hands, like a length of rope. Only this rope undulated on both ends of its own accord.

Ilya shuddered, realizing what the lock of hair was. With mounting horror, he saw the indistinct shape of Shoji's hands reaching up to the top of the glass door, and Ilya clearly read the intent there. Frantically he looked around for anything he could use as a weapon. There was nothing. Nothing at all, he was completely trapped. He grabbed a bottle of exfoliating mineral scrub and hoped for the best.

The hands paused at the top. "I wish you would reconsider." His voice was still pleasant and accommodating. A snake through and through.

Then Ilya saw the yellow eyes at the top of the door, as the creature looked over the lip, the steam rising from the shower, making it difficult for Ilya to see the snake. At least it was a small one, to fit un-noticed in Shoji's hair. He had no choice, he would betray Alexei, betray Emernon, betray Soldier, betray all of the victims Shoji would claim when he took the poisoned chalice of Immortality the blood of a saint offered.

A knock came at the door. "What are you guys doing in there?"

Relief flooded through Ilya at the voice. Of course Shoji couldn't kill him in here. How would he explain it to Aleksander?

Shoji lowered his arms and the black shape disappeared back into his hair to slither who knows where. “Just chatting. Are you ready for him now?”

“I've picked out a couple. Do you think he'll wear the strapless one?”

“No!” Ilya called out, unwilling to figure out how a male suit could be strapless, and not at all curious to find out. Shorts didn't have straps, but somehow, Ilya didn't that's what Aleksander meant.

“Just give him a minute,” Shoji said, walking back over to the door and opening it. “I should get rid of these I suppose,” he picked up the soiled clothing from the sink, as a lighter shape stepped into the bathroom, which Ilya assumed was the Young Lord.

“Afraid they'll think you wet yourself?” Aleksander asked.

Shoji laughed. “No, they'll just think I was playing some crazy sex game with you. What I'm afraid of, is that they'll think I would wear an ensemble this hideous.”

“Gray sweaters and tan slacks don't seem your style, do they? You know, they don't even seem Ilya's style either. I wonder what he was planning on doing. It's much too warm today for him to have been planning to stay outside like this.”

Ilya saw Shoji's head turn to look back at the frosted glass. “No, I guess he was going to the house.”

He saw the figure walk toward the glass. “Ilya?”

“Y-yes?” he said haltingly, still a little shaken from almost having a venomous snake flung on him.

“I'm leaving the first bi—swimsuit, I want you to try on by the towel, okay?”

“Okay,” he replied, grabbing some soap from the shelf and quickly washing his legs off. He watched as the two shapes exited the bathroom and shut the door. He turned the water off and stepped out of the shower, first checking for any surprises Shoji might have dropped on the floor for him. He toweled off quickly and looked down at the counter and the small piece of thin white spandex resting there and gritted his teeth. It took him a while to figure out which was the front and which was the back, as they were nearly the same size. Would he actually go out in public like this? What if someone he knew saw him? What if Demetri, Elem, Klimov, Cook, and Tabitha all came strolling by the pool when he was there dressed in this?

He put it on quickly and resolved not to look at his reflection. He would not look down at his waist. He would simply ignore it. Out of sight, out of mind. It was however, uncomfortable around the legs, being too tight. He sighed. It wasn't that much worse than the school suit he'd had to wear back in Petrograd. They had been mandatory for pool hygiene and everyone had worn one. This one was just a smaller, thinner, gayer, sluttier, lower cut version of those. He stepped out of the bathroom and saw that Aleksander had changed into his suit as well. For a second, Ilya was jealous. The Young Lord was in much better shape, much taller, much handsomer, and much more confident than Ilya would ever be. He sucked in some baby fat around his middle, but it was a lost cause. He would never have a six pack. Why was Aleksander making him dress like this? Was it just to humiliate him? He wasn't good looking and his eyes made him look weird. What could he possibly get out of it?

“You look great,” Aleksander called out, smiling at him. The Young Lord's suit was black and went down almost to the middle of his thigh, which Ilya noted were not thin and bony like his. No, they were muscular. How do you get muscular thighs?

Shoji smiled indulgently at Aleksander and said nothing.

“Can't I wear one like yours?” Ilya asked, hoping it didn't sound like a whine.

Aleksander frowned at him. “No, I've only got one like this, and I'm not your size. It would be all baggy on you.”

“I don't mind,” Ilya said.

Aleksander waved off his complaints. “I only wore this one because I didn't want to intimidate you with the size of my manhood.”

Shoji rolled his eyes. He walked over to the closet and got a burgundy robe cover-up out. “Here, you can use this to walk down in, if you want.”

“No!” Now Aleksander was whining, as his dreams were shattered.

Ilya snatched it from the Snake's hands and slipped it on, before Aleksander's hand was halfway to it. One thought stopped him before they could head downstairs. “It's not see thru when wet, is it?”

“Of course not,” Aleksander said dismissively, and walked toward the door.

Shoji smiled at him, and Ilya couldn't decide what it meant for him. He was however, grateful for the cover up, which even had a hood. He put it up so that hopefully no one would recognize him and witness his mortification. He sunk into it as far as he could. It made him look like a monk. A sort of gay, slutty one, because the cover up only

went down to just above the knees, but he didn't care. As they walked back downstairs, Ilya was beginning to realize why Aleksander was in such good shape. If it took ten minutes and five flights of stairs to get anywhere, then of course he'd be in shape. Hell, if Ilya did more work and less goofing off, he might be in better shape too.

Ilya wondered where the pool actually was. He'd never come across it before. It certainly wasn't outside; he'd been around the exterior of the house. He hadn't noticed it in the garden/courtyard, either. His curiosity was soon sated. It was an indoor pool, which he should have known, otherwise one could only use it for three months out of the year. It was in the courtyard, and could be spied from the master ballroom where the masquerade had taken place. Ilya hadn't noticed it because it was underground. They walked into the garden, toward what Ilya had thought was a small hill, with a staircase cut into the side, which led up to the top.

Standing on the top of the hill, was the roof of the pool. Vast sheets of thick glass would normally cover it in winter, but for the mild weather today, the sheets had been opened and pulled back to rest against the walls. Another set of steps led down into the chamber below, cut into the side of the wall where the pool sat. Ilya was impressed at the engineering feat as he walked down the steps. The stench of chlorine filled his nostrils and he covered his mouth with one sleeve, trying to protect his lungs from the noxious chemicals.

Aleksander pulled his hand away. "Stop that."

"But I'm al—"

“They'll laugh at you.”

Ilya looked down beyond the large rectangular pool of poison and saw that half a dozen guests were already lounging around in various states of undress, including the young brown-haired man from the hunt, who'd had the ram's horn, Misha was what Shoji had called him, along with another blond-haired youth next to him, perhaps no more than nineteen, two women in bikinis, as Ilya had been promised, and his gaze did linger on them a little longer than it should have. Eventually, he blushed and looked away at the last two guests and his heart sank. They were identical twins with black hair and dark skin, and Asiatic features. The Cobras from the masquerade. It was the day of the snakes for Ilya, no matter where he went. At first, he thought they were naked from the way they sat on the sun chairs, but they turned to face Aleksander as he came down and he saw that they were technically in loincloths. He'd seen those before though, in a book. He looked carefully at the black-haired twins, and his suspicions were confirmed. They were not Russian. They were of Turkic extraction, possibly Mongol or Buryat. That was traditional clothing they were dressed in, wasn't it? Was it Tuvan? Ilya should have paid more attention in his humanities class, but there were so many hundreds of ethnic groups in the empire, it was almost impossible to keep them all straight.

“See?” Aleksander whispered in his ear as he stepped down onto the sun-warmed stones, “The Dolokov twins are dressed in even less than you.”

“Aleks, I thought you'd never get here,” the blond youth said, and Ilya did another inward shudder. That was unmistakably the voice of the abrasive, annoying Hyena of the

masquerade.

“Hi, Ilya,” Misha said, waving at him. He was dressed sensibly in dark blue shorts, and looked thoroughly normal. Oddly, Ilya felt slightly comforted by his presence.

The Hyena looked at Ilya and did a double take. “It’s the servant from the party, isn’t it?”

The Dolokov brothers stood, still doing things as one, and looked at Ilya with interest. “Ilya, we haven't seen you since the masquerade,” they said.

“They were just trying to freak you out at the party, Ilya. They like doing that to people who've never met them.” Aleksander pulled him along, waving to everyone. “He's not a servant today, Ivan. He's got the day off.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend,” the named Hyena replied, without any hint of remorse. Ivan's expression as he spoke reminded Ilya uncannily of Shoji. He now knew how much truth there was to that expression.

“Now, Ilya, the introductions, I'm sure you're looking forward to, oh... You can take this off now.” Aleksander pulled the robe off him and threw it on a sunbed, as they headed toward the lesbians.

Ilya's hand immediately went to cover his crotch now that he was exposed. He hoped he didn't get a cold since he was practically naked and there was a slight dampness and chill to the underground pool deck. He could definitely get sick if he was in and out of the water all afternoon, to say nothing of slipping in a puddle and cracking his skull... Again.



Aleksander smiled and reached down to Ilya's cupped hands. He pulled them away, "Stop that. Don't give them a reason to make fun of you."

"I think you already did that!" Ilya whispered fiercely.

"I don't think you have anything to be ashamed of down there," he said, his gaze lingering at Ilya's waist as he spoke. Then he was presented to the Dolokov twins who were named Karocai and Locai, not that Ilya could tell them apart at all, who were from Tuva. Then he was presented to the two tall, beautiful women, one dark haired with faintly Arabian curves, whom Aleksander introduced as Tania from Dagestan, and the slightly taller, blond-haired woman in a black two-piece that left just enough to the imagination to enthrall Ilya, as Lena. Ilya nodded nervously to them as they said hello.

Shoji lay down next to them, and said, "If you catch him staring, he's straight."

Ilya blushed furiously, trying to banish the image of the two women kissing from his mind.

Tania leaned forward. "Most straight boys your age wouldn't come to the pool with half a dozen gay guys."

"Yes." It was all Ilya could say, painfully, hideously shy and at a loss for words, but even more terrified he might start babbling nonsense at her. He'd made his decision already. Tania was the one he wanted, the one who would realize she wasn't really a lesbian at all, but she needed Ilya to show her why. The small rational part of his brain whispered to him that he didn't have a fucking clue about what to show her and that according to an article he'd read about sexual selection, once a gender preference was set

in adolescence, it couldn't really be reversed later in life. For one horrified second, he was terrified he'd said that out loud, rather than thought it.

Tania leaned back on her sunbed, a small smile on her face. Not an unpleasant one, but an understanding and perhaps ever so slightly indulgent one. “Nice to meet you, Ilya.”

Ilya waved to her as Aleksander dragged him toward the pool. “That was the most appalling display of ineptitude I've seen in quite some time.”

“Huh?” Ilya said, dragging his eyes away from Tania, who turned toward her friend and whispered something in her ear. Both of them laughed and Ilya was certain that they were laughing at him. He needed to rush over there and shout something witty at them... What could he say?

Aleksander shook his head. “Never mind, let's show you how to swim.”

Ilya's body turned to lead, mid-step. Aleksander easily dragged him toward the steps leading down into the festering blue poison-laden death trap.

“I'm not ready. What's the ph? Is it safe? It has to be between 7.4 and 7.8 for optimal sanitation. What's the chlorine ppm?” Ilya was babbling now, and he didn't care who heard.

Aleksander wrapped an arm around his chest and picked him up, carrying him into the water like a giant inflatable toy.

“No! I don't have any goggles, you said I could have some! You fucking liar!” Ilya shouted frantically.

“Shoji, would you get some for me?” Aleksander said, carrying the struggling Ilya down the steps.

Ilya felt the slightly cool poison lapping at his legs as he was forced into the water. At the bottom of the steps, Aleksander set him down. The water came up halfway on his chest.

“This is the shallow end. The other is ten feet deep. You're safe here,” Aleksander said, trying not to laugh.

“Here,” Shoji said, walking along the side of the pool, a pair of goggles in his hand. He'd taken the t-shirt and the shorts off, revealing a purple swimsuit even smaller than Ilya's. He reached out and waded over to the edge to take them. Everything was pretty much perfect about the Oriental Boy's nether regions, since there was almost nothing left to Ilya's vivid imagination. “Look down,” Shoji whispered, smiling at him, turning to go back to his seat next to the lesbians, where they could all watch him be humiliated and laugh about it together, while talking about his shortcomings.

It took him a moment to pull his eyes off Shoji's backside, but eventually, Ilya looked down and he closed his eyes for a moment. The swimsuit, the thin, white piece of spandex, which he had been assured was not see thru, was completely transparent. He hung his head for a moment before turning back to Aleksander.

The Young Lord's head was tilted, caught red handed in enjoying the back view. He smiled at him, and it looked incredibly guilty. “Ilya, you look great. It's actually a little bigger than I thought it was.”

“Really?” Ivan said, getting up from his seat. “Let me see.” He walked toward the edge of the pool.

Ilya instantly turned his back on him, slipping the goggles over his eyes. Aleksander waded over to him as Ivan tried to get a look at Ilya's crotch from different angles. Misha came up to stand beside him, a cup of tea in his hand.

“The back's not bad,” Misha said charitably.

“Would you like me to take my suit off so you feel less exposed?” Aleksander asked kindly, only it really wasn't a kind offer at all.

“I'll take mine off too,” Ivan said.

“If everyone else is going bare, I will,” Misha chimed in.

“I'm always ready,” Shoji called out from the sun chairs, taking a break from pointing at Ilya and whispering conspiratorially with the lesbians.

“Is it going to be a sausage party already?” Lena complained shading her eyes to look down at Ilya in a slightly bored, yet resigned manner.

“No!” Ilya shouted nervously.

They all laughed at him, except Aleksander and the lesbians.

“Leave him alone, you guys,” Tania said, throwing a towel at Ivan.

The others drifted back to their seats on the sunbeds. Ilya put his hands over his crotch again, as Aleksander came to stand beside.

“Ilya, I'm sorry, I forget how inhibited you are sometimes.” Aleksander leaned down to look up into Ilya's downcast eyes. “Half the time we skinny-dip anyway.” The

apology might have meant something if he'd managed to stop smiling or sneaking looks down while he spoke.

Slowly, Ilya let his hands drop to his sides. One day, when Snake over there on the sun chair decided that Aleksander had outlived his usefulness, Ilya wouldn't shed a tear.

“Now, to learn how to swim, you first need to learn how to balance on your back in the water, and then on your stomach. Put your arm around me, like when I carried you earlier. I'll make sure your head doesn't go in the water, all right?”

Despite all of Ilya's worries, Aleksander played no diabolical tricks on him in the water. Instead he concentrated on actually teaching Ilya how to swim, which was twice as terrifying as Ilya thought it would be. Ilya did catch the Young Lord's eyes straying a few times, raking down Ilya's body like some raincoat laden man in a strip club. His hands might have accidentally brushed against Ilya's no fly zone several times, but they could have been accidents. Repeated accidents... Aleksander couldn't get Ilya to open his eyes under the poisonous waters, even with the goggles on painfully tight. Eventually, Ilya was dog-paddling around the pool. He never strayed more than a foot from Aleksander or the edge of the pool where he could grab on to for support.

Karocai and Locai joined Aleksander, followed by Misha and Ivan, which for all intents and purposes seemed to be a reluctant couple. Reluctant at least on Ivan's part, who found Misha's agreeable nature to be irritating. Ilya found it odd, because it seemed to be one of the few good traits on display. To his disappointment, Lena and Tania stayed up on the sun beds talking to Shoji. Speaking of the Snake, Ilya had caught him giving

Ilya measured looks several times this afternoon. Ilya chose to ignore him and perfect his dog paddle while trying to avoid ingesting too much of the poison water. Ilya was just holding things together, dodging the questing hands of five gay guys and sort of swimming, when Lena and Tania lit up.

The cloying choking scent of menthol reached his nostrils within seconds. He groped for the pool wall and grasped it with one hand, the other coming up to his mouth to cover it. He crawled along the edge of the pool by one hand, as Aleksander and his friends were occupied in some roughhousing in the shallow end, while he crawled along, following the lip of the pool, slowly to the other side, in an attempt to escape the smoke. Where the hell was his towel? He needed it before he had a coughing fit. His world narrowed to the rough stone ringing the pool as he shimmied along it with one hand, until he came upon a perfectly proportioned, slightly-tanned thigh. He looked up and saw Shoji sitting on the edge of the pool, swinging his legs back and forth in the water, his crotch almost exactly at eye level for Ilya.

“Have you thought anymore about being friends, Ilya?”

“Not really.” Ilya shifted uncomfortably. “You... Tried to kill me earlier today?”

Shoji laughed, and smiled down at him. “How many times do I have to tell you? I was just scaring you.” He put his hand on top of Ilya's head. “When I want you to die, you will.” The hand forced Ilya's head beneath the water.

It seemed like Ilya was down there forever, his eyes shut tight, thrashing around in the water, trying to push the hand away. Then it was gone. Ilya came up gasping for air,

both hands gripping the edge of the pool, the cigarette smoke long forgotten as he gulped for air. He opened his eyes and saw Shoji still sitting on the ledge, swinging his legs back and forth.

“Ilya, provoking me will only get you dead.” He smiled pleasantly at him. “Why are you set against helping me?”

“Because you don't deserve it,” Ilya almost shouted, without thinking about it. Where had that thought come from? It was true; Shoji didn't deserve immortality, even if it made him a monster. Ilya couldn't be responsible for inflicting that much misery on the world. Even nice guys like Alexei could kill when placed in that predicament. How many would Shoji dispose of?

The Oriental Boy tilted his head at him. “You've met some of the servants here, haven't you? I bet you've become fond of your uncle, too.” He ran his fingertips through Ilya's hair idly for a few moments. “Do you want me to elaborate?” he asked finally, when Ilya said nothing.

He looked down into the water. “No.” The threat was clear. Shoji would send snakes to kill anyone Ilya liked in this place. “If you hurt them, I'll kill you. Just like Alina Neimasaurus.” Ilya looked up, trying to hide his terror and present a cool and impassive demeanor. “How many people have you actually killed?”

“I knew we weren't that different, I just had to prod you a bit, didn't I?” Shoji brushed a few strands of errant brown hair from Ilya's cheek. “We should be friends, not enemies. We should be killing people together and living forever.” Shoji slipped into the

water next to Ilya. He dunked his head quickly and slicked back the wet hair.

Ilya was tempted for a second, before he realized that their friendship would only last long enough for Shoji to get what he needed and then dispose of him. “No thanks,” he said, backing away from him, ignoring his nearly naked body, Aleksander's words from two days ago flashing in his mind: *You like Shoji, not me*. He looked away, ignoring the green eyes, the smooth perfect torso, and slim hips.

“I believe you when you say you like women.” Shoji moved forward, putting an arm on either side of Ilya. It was easy, because Ilya was so slow in the water. The Oriental Boy was so close that Ilya could almost feel his skin.

Ilya's breath caught in his throat, and he was... he was paralyzed. “Then get off me,” he said, first looking down and realizing his error, and then looking into his eyes, before looking up at the sky, which had become partially cloudy. Something about Shoji's eyes were horribly wrong.

“I didn't finish. I don't think you find men wholly un-attractive. That makes you nervous.” Shoji pressed himself against Ilya, smiling at him as he looked down for a second.

Ilya gasped at the contact, at what he felt pressed against him, the smooth, hard torso pressing into his side, and what he felt at his hip, and the leg Shoji raised, to brush against the sensitive spot between Ilya's legs. Every instinct within him told him to run, or lash out. Like when he'd pushed Aleksander off the bed for sticking his tongue in his ear or when Karocai and Locai had come onto him and he'd run. He had to run now. But



he couldn't. Ilya was paralyzed as Shoji's arms crept along the stone wall to encircle and trap him.

The Oriental boy leaned forward to rest his head in the crook of Ilya's neck. "Take the initiative," he whispered, his lips brushing Ilya's neck. "I know that's what you want to do. You just need practice." Shoji reached up with one hand and pulled the goggles off him, catching a few strands of hair in the process. He threw them to the side and looked Ilya in the eye. "Your whole life you've been outcast, different, and awkward. I've always known that you were special." Shoji removed his hands from the wall and he reached up to his eye, the other hand covering what was happening from view. Ilya watched as the hands moved away, and then he gasped. Clutched between two fingers was a Green contact lens. The hidden eye, now revealed to Ilya, was a mirror image of his own, orange and unnatural.

## CHAPTER 20: AN EXPECTED BRUSH WITH DEATH

Shoji smiled warmly at him. “You see, we're the same.” Then the colored lens was slipped back onto his eye and Shoji blinked several times until it was where it should be.

“Doesn't it hurt to wear those all the time?” Ilya asked, since he'd never seen Shoji without the colored lenses.

“Every second of every day. But it doesn't take long until you meet someone that wants them does it?”

“The lady Neimasaurus, she wanted to eat mine,” Ilya said. He wasn't the only one. Shoji was like him, only he'd been clever enough to hide his eyes. “She said she'd eaten some before, but the power was fading.”

“I figured as much. But Ilya, you've heard by now that they can't find one of her eyes. Have you wondered why?”

“Orryn took it,” Ilya said instantly, and then regretted it.

“And you know why, don't you?” Shoji moved closer and kissed him suddenly, full on the mouth, one hand going up to cup the back of his head, their legs intertwining. After several seconds, Ilya pushed him away. It wasn't a particularly forceful act.

“Stop it,” Ilya whispered. Even if Orryn had benefited by eating one of the old woman's eyes, that hadn't been why the vulture had helped Ilya.

Shoji smiled indulgently at him before reaching down between his legs. Ilya pushed the hand away before it touched him and found the proof it sought. Why couldn't

Tania or Lena be doing this? Shoji looked down into the water between them, before looking up into his eyes.

“Ilya, you must forgive me for this afternoon. I lost my temper. I never meant for things to go that far. I was frustrated. You'd denied every advance I made both sexually and friendly. It made me mad and I lost control.” Shoji looked deep into Ilya's eyes and smiled at him, his hand reaching out in the water, to find Ilya's erection. “I love you, Ilya, and I think...” Shoji leaned in so that he was only a few millimeters from Ilya. “...you like me, too.”

“What are you guys doing down there?” It was Ivan's voice, from across the pool. “Aleks, I thought you said he was straight?”

It was as though the spell had been broken. Ilya flinched away from him, looking away from the Snake's hypnotic eyes, and pulling himself out of the water. He saw the robe on the ground a few feet away and grabbed it, keeping one hand on the front of the swimsuit so no one could see his guilt, and struggled into it. Shoji watched him from the water, his arms resting on the edge, his expression a little sad. He'd done something to Ilya. That had to be the only answer.

“Please, Ilya, don't run away from me.” Was Shoji crying? It couldn't be, it was water from his wet hair leaking down his face. “Don't leave me alone,” the Oriental Boy whispered, trying to regain the moment.

Ilya looked away. He would never look into those eyes again. He would not be fooled. Shoji wasn't sad at all. What was it called? Crocodile tears, and no more. But

where had Shoji's power of persuasion ended, and Ilya's own desire begun? No, he did not feel attraction to the Oriental Boy. Except.... he had, since the moment he'd met him that first day in Neimasaurus. He'd bumped his head, and Shoji had wanted to make sure he was all right, and Ilya had...been interested. But now, Shoji's true nature had been revealed, of that Ilya was certain. He'd not lost his temper this morning, he'd been waiting for Ilya, to ambush him, torture him for information, and then get rid of him.

Aleksander swam up behind Shoji and put his hands on either side of him. The Snake smiled as the Young Lord pressed himself against his flanks. "I told you, Ilya, you like Shoji. It's impossible not to. Everybody does."

"It's true." The Snake leaned his head back and kissed Aleksander. The Young Lord broke the kiss and looked back to Ilya.

"One day I'll get you to like me, too." For a moment, there was a trace of bitterness to Aleksander's voice. How long had the Young Lord been second to Shoji? The Oriental Boy heard it too, and he turned to Aleksander and wrapped his arms around him, resting his head in the crook of the Young Lord's neck. It was the same position he'd been in with Ilya not five minutes ago.

"You know that you come first, in all things," Shoji whispered at his neck, before kissing his throat. "We can go up to your room and I can show you what I mean, if you want." Aleksander reached up to stroke the long black hair, and seemed slightly mollified. Or was it resignation?

"No, there's plenty of time for that later," he said.

Ilya watched them for a few moments, and a thought occurred to him about Aleksander: Was his desperate attempt to have Ilya, because he wanted to get there before Shoji did? Had Ilya become a bone of contention between them? Maybe forging a bond with Ilya had been a way to free himself from the Snake.

No, this was beyond Ilya's limited scope of experience to parse. He knew so little about matters of the heart. He'd loved his parents and that was the sum of his deep emotional attachments. Sure, he was forming bonds with Demetri, Tabitha, Cook, Klimov, even Mr. Kabalevsky, but of sexual relationships he remained in complete ignorance. As he looked back at them in the pool, Ilya couldn't help but see a large python wrapped around a Siberian snow leopard, slowly squeezing the life from him, the piercing green eyes no longer interested in the prey. Instead, it was staring right into Ilya. He shivered at the image in his mind, as the jaw of the python unhooked and the Leopard's head disappeared into its maw without any struggle at all, just a quiet, inevitable acquiescence.

"Ilya, come sit with us," Tania said, waving him over with one dark skinned hand, a golden ring with a small inset ruby catching the sun as the clouds above them parted. Ilya hesitated for a second, wondering if he preferred the devil he knew to the unknown quality of hanging out with two women of a kind he'd never really been exposed to before. He made a snap decision and fled to the sunbeds, taking the one on the opposite from where Shoji's stuff sat, taking up position next to Tania who smiled at him in a friendly manner. He smiled back nervously.

“Don't feel bad, he can seduce anyone,” Tania said, leaning back in the chair and slipping some mirrored sunglasses back up the bridge of her nose. “Even I've felt tempted a time or two.”

“Have you?” Lena sat up to peer over at them, shaking back thick, blond hair. “I don't think I've ever seen him flirt with a girl before.”

“Oh, I started it, and he flirted right back.” Tania glanced over at Lena. “It didn't go anywhere. It was just a game between us. But I'll admit if I was to ever go back to men, he would be at the head of the list.”

“Really? He doesn't seem that different from a woman to me,” Lena said, propping the back of her sun chair into an upright position, so that she could more easily participate in the conversation.

Tania laughed. “Maybe that's why Ilya and I both like him.”

“You...” Ilya started nervously, and then lost resolve, deciding it was better not ask such an impertinent thing.

“Slept with men?” Tania looked over at him. “Of course, until I realized what I was missing.”

“What was that?” Ilya asked, without thinking.

Lena looked at Tania and they both burst out laughing. Ilya felt like a fool, as though his social standing with them had just plummeted.

“How long have you known Shoji?” he asked, to quickly change the subject.

“About six months,” Tania said, reaching over to Lena's sunbed and picking up a

magazine that lay between them with a dusky skinned woman dressed in a riot of colorful clothing that hung from her nearly emaciated frame.

“We've known Aleksander for about five years,” Lena said, patting Tania's hand away from the magazine and flipping it open. “Now, it's multiple choice, how to tell if he's really interested in you: A. he won't leave you alone—”

“That's all men, isn't it?” Tania broke in.

Ilya nodded vigorously.

“See! He agrees,” Tania said.

“B. He asks to meet your family and C. He wants sex every hour.” Lena looked up from the magazine. “You know, I don't think any of us are qualified to answer this.”

“It's B. All men want sex all the time, so it has to be B.” At the back of Ilya's mind, was how he would ever tell if someone was interested in him. His parents were dead. Would they want to meet his uncle? An image of the burly man, shotgun in hand, to *ventilate the Young Lord*, popped into Ilya's head. It might not be a good idea for his suitors to meet his family.

“What about A?” Tania asked.

“That's only because they aren't getting enough of C,” Shoji said, as he paused in front of Ilya, toweling dry his hair.

Ilya looked away from him and out at the pool, as Aleksander, on Misha's shoulders, tried to knock one of the twins from his brother's shoulders. On the other side of the pool, Ivan, dressed in a robe, was by a small table covered in a white cloth, looking

over a selection of food.

“Has that always been there?” Ilya asked, as Shoji laid down on his sun bed, casting one more unreadable gaze over his shoulder, before smiling pleasantly.

“Yeah, they always leave nibbles on the table for us.” Lena turned the page in her magazine, not bothering to look up as the clouds parted above them and made the golden hoops in her ears glow.

“Is it a trick of the light?” Tania reached out and turned his face up into the sun, as she peered into Ilya's eyes. Her fingers were warm on his skin.

“No, it's just how they look,” Ilya said awkwardly.

“What did you call it? Ceriti-something?” Ivan said, walking by, a sandwich in his hands, along with a glass of tea.

“Ceritikonus,” Shoji said, sitting up. “Is there anything good over there? I skipped breakfast.”

Ilya's belly reminded him that he too, had skipped breakfast. Tania removed her hand from Ilya's face, and stretched. Ilya was momentarily distracted by the sight, and the way the bones moved in her shoulders. He was tempted to go find a mirror and see if he looked like that when he stretched, if the bones reacted the same way.

Ivan shrugged, smirking slightly at Ilya. “Nothing too fancy: cold cuts, bread, cheese, a bit of fruit.

“Would someone get me a martini and some olives?” Tania asked, as though she



suddenly realized how uncivilized it was to not have one in her hand.

“There's no alcohol,” Ivan said bleakly. “I'm sure if you asked Aleksander he would get us some.”

Shoji laughed. “He doesn't believe in drinking until at least three in the afternoon. He says his liver would have died a long time ago if he hadn't made that rule.”

Well at least the Young Lord was aware of the dangers alcohol posed, Ilya thought, as the white table called to Ilya to go and feed. He got up and then paused, wondering if he was allowed to eat anything, or not. He was technically a servant.

“Ilya, if you're getting something, bring me some olives and not the black ones either, and I guess some tea.”

“Me too, but just the tea,” Lena said, looking up from her magazine at him.

“Hey, you're a servant here you can go down to the kitchens and tell them Aleksander wants some rum or Vodka brought up, can't you?” Ivan asked suddenly, as though it were a brilliant plan.

Ilya was inclined to agree. He would never return with the alcohol, of course. But it was the perfect escape plan, presented to him by the foolish Hyena. “Sure, what do you want?”

Shoji got up and stretched, standing on his tip toes for a moment, his arms raised above his head, and sighed. “No, Ilya, everyone knows about the Young Lord's rule. You would only get in trouble, and you don't want that, do you?”

Ilya noted that the bones did in fact look the same way on Shoji, if not more

disgustingly pleasing and perfect to Ilya's eye. He looked away quickly.

"I wish the summer lasted all year," Shoji said with a sigh, before looking over at Ilya with just a hint of a smile lurking at the corners of his mouth.

Ivan glared daggers at the Oriental Boy as he sat down on his sun bed, taking a bite of his sandwich. Ilya shrugged and walked over to the food table, noticing that Shoji was following him. He thought about bypassing it and just walking around the pool and sitting back down. People would think he was weird if he did that. Or maybe they already did, so they would just receive confirmation of his freakishness. Damn it. He had to deliver olives and tea. He looked over the selection of foods available and got a plate from the stack next to a large samovar of tea and another of coffee. The plate was nicer than anything Ilya had ever eaten off, a fine piece of white china with an intricate rose-red thorn and vine pattern around the edges that grew across the face of the plate in a thin layer of greenery. He compared the plate to the one beneath it and saw that while the rose and vine pattern was there, the flowers and vines were different. Each one was a unique, hand-made work of art.

"You put food on them," Shoji said helpfully behind him.

Ilya flinched and almost dropped the plate. He moved down the table, looking at the spread. To Ivan a plate of boiled beef, fresh herring, and sugar-cured ham steaks sliced thin, with smoked turkey breast cut into almost paper thin slices was "some cold cuts." As for the "bit of fruit," Ilya saw pineapples, mangoes, kiwi, pomegranates, and other tropical delights arrayed in bite sized pieces on a silver tray with three levels. Ilya

couldn't even hazard a guess at what most of the cheeses were, but next to them was a selection of green and brown olives. Then he saw it: sitting in the shade, on a bed of ice, was a fine filigreed silver bowl filled with a selection of shrimp, and other seafood-like things carved out of shells, and pickled in lime juice. A slight wave of nausea radiated from his stomach

“Oh look, ceviche. Ivan didn't mention that.” Shoji reached for the silver spoon next to the bowl and Ilya recoiled in distaste, retreating further down the table to the safety of breads.

Here, he was on solid footing. Every Russian knew their bread, and Ilya was no exception. Did he want the slightly nutty flavor of a brown Rye? No, he wanted the sourdough. He would leave the wheat bread and lavash for the dieters. He took a piece of Baba, breathing deeply of the dense, slightly sticky spiced apple cake as he laid a slice next to the sour dough. He put some of the ham steaks and herring on too. It was only the shellfish he had to worry about. He looked through the cheeses but they smelled too weird and exotic for Ilya's tastes. He piled green and brown olives onto the space left.

“No seafood?” Shoji said, only finishing his pick through of the ceviche, and turning to the bread and taking the smallest loaf of lavash he could find. “I would think someone in your circumstances would have tried this Mexican delicacy.”

*Your circumstances...* Was that a nice way of saying that some poor piece of shit like Ilya never had the option to eat Mexican food? Not only was it shellfish, it wasn't even Russian. He certainly hadn't tried the Mexican treat, and Ilya had no intention of

breaking the proscription on the eating of shellfish anytime soon. He didn't know much about religion, but he was fairly certain that the eating of shrimp and lobster was an abomination, because someone had told him that once, in an attempt to prove how silly religion was to Ilya. As a matter of fact, it was in the book Leviticus, somewhere between the banning of drinking blood, and two guys doing Greek things. Amaranth's highlighted bible passage had mentioned nothing about two women engaged in such matters.... Maybe religions wasn't so silly after all.

Getting back to the point, Ilya couldn't agree more about the shellfish. Besides, it was nearly a thousand miles to the nearest ocean in the Arctic Circle, maybe more. How old were those shrimp? What the hell were Ilya's circumstances, anyway? Not having a rich friend? Ilya was willing to bet if he slept with Aleksander his circumstances would come to resemble Shoji's pretty damn quick. But he didn't reply. He kept his eye on the table and nowhere near his hips, his eyes, or any other part of him.

Shoji stepped closer to Ilya. "If you ignore me, I'll have to act out to get your attention. Is that what you want?"

The plate in Ilya's hands started to shake, as something beneath the table pushed against the tablecloth, brushing his legs.

Shoji reached out and took Ilya's wrist in his hands, steadying them. "They're only animals Ilya. You let your fear cloud your mind, and are terrified of something that at most, weighs six pounds." Shoji's hand traveled up Ilya's forearm. "Their bites are painful, but rarely fatal, with a single attack."

“Vultures don't attack people,” Ilya said quietly, his mind racing for something intimidating to make Shoji go away, before... “But no one ever finds the bodies of their victims.”

“If you had any idea how much it turns me on when you threaten me, or Aleksander, I don't think you'd ever do it again.” Shoji's hand left him. “I meant it when I said I wanted to be friends, Ilya. I was so wrong for what I did this morning, so I'll say it again: please forgive me.”

Ilya looked down at the tablecloth as it moved again. Ilya realized it was only the wind. He blushed at how easily his mind had created a snake from a bit of breeze.

“Ilya, look at me for a moment,” Shoji said in his ear.

Ilya jerked away from him, spilling an olive on the floor, and hurried way from the food table, sans tea. Shoji laughed behind him.

“What are you afraid of?” the Oriental Boy said pleasantly, and Ilya could almost picture the smile on his face. Aleksander and the others were getting out of the pool as Ilya walked by and their heads quickly swiveled in the direction of food. At least in one regard gay guys were no different from their straight counterparts, Ilya thought, as they descended on the table, their bodies' slick with poison, dripping it all over the place, getting the heavy musk of chlorine all over everything. Ilya set the plate down and Tania nodded thanks.

“I have to go get the drinks. There's coffee too, if you want that,” Ilya said, as he turned back toward the table.

“Is there anything cold?” Lena asked, her face still buried in the magazine.

“There's ice.”

“Iced tea then,” Lena said.

“Coffee, with a bunch of cream, so much cream, that I can't taste the coffee. Drop a couple ice cubes in it, too,” Tania said.

Shoji paused on his way back to his sun bed. “He's not supposed to be your servant today. Get your own damn drinks, ladies.” Shoji made a little bow to take the sting out of what he said, before sitting back down.

“I don't mind,” Ilya said quickly to the lesbians, for that was still how he thought of them.

“You should, you're the Lord's guest.” Shoji smiled radiantly at him. Not for the first time today, Ilya wanted to punch the expression right off his face.

“I don't think he'd care if Ilya got us drinks, Shoji,” Tania said, annoyed. Then she sighed. “Bother it all, you're right, though.” She got to her feet. “Lena, you said iced tea?”

The other woman nodded. Tania joined the boys at the food table. Now Ilya didn't know what to do. Was it safe for him to go get his own drink? It would seem weird if he walked up behind Tania to get himself some tea, wouldn't it? Maybe he should wait until everyone else was gone from the table, and no one was paying any attention, then sneak over and get a drink, without... Offending anyone? This was all getting too weird for him now; maybe he just shouldn't drink anything. Damn Shoji. This was all his fault.

Somehow, he'd planned it. Ilya settled in to watch the table like a hawk for an opportunity to get a drink, taking an occasional bite of what was a particularly dry tasting sourdough bread. Aleksander came looping around the pool, a plate in one hand and two cups in the other. He sat down next to Ilya, some coffee sloshing from the cups onto the floor.

“I got you some coffee, Ilya,” Aleksander said, handing the cup to him.

Ilya looked down into the glass, slightly dumbfounded. This was just another false gesture to get into his pants, what little there was of them at the moment, wasn't it? So it was more a plan to get into the little robe cover-up he was wearing. To top it all off, the unpleasant scent of chlorine wafted from the Young Lord's wet body, which yes, was glistening in the sun. Instead of throwing the hot liquid in his face and saying how he'd rather drink horse piss than accept a gift from him, Ilya said:

“Thanks.”

Things were different now. Now that he knew about Shoji, Aleksander was his best shield against him. As much as he might not like it, he had to keep the Young Lord as close as he could. He even took a sip of the coffee. He knew it was a highly addictive substance loaded with caffeine. It could cause high blood pressure and memory loss, in addition to staining one's teeth. There was sugar in it, which Ilya was thankful for, since it made it less of a bitter pill to swallow.

Then Ilya looked over at the Young Lord's plate. The blood almost froze in his veins. Sure, there was some bread, cheese, and cold cuts, but most of the plate was taken up by not just ceviche, but shrimp. The Young Lord must have carefully dug around in

the bowl, pushing aside the octopus, lobster, scallops, and other animals that had given their lives for a colorful presentation in the bowl. There were at least a dozen of the pink and white striped corpses sitting in a pile on his plate. With a feeling of impending doom, he watched as the Young Lord picked up one by the chitinous tail and brought it up to his lips. It went into his mouth and there was a soft sucking sound and then Aleksander deposited the husk and tail on his plate as he chewed the poor thing whole in his mouth. Ilya watched with sickening fascination as Aleksander swallowed, his Adam's apple bulging out slightly as the fleshy mass of the shrimp made its way down into his stomach to be digested. Ilya no longer felt like eating.

“That's good,” he said, leaning back on his sun bed, and picking up another tail in his hand, before looking over at Ilya. “What?”

Ilya shook his head, as he watched for any early on-set signs of anaphylactic shock. It was like watching a train barreling toward a stalled car on the tracks, with the occupant totally unaware of their impending doom. Ilya didn't actually know what the early indicators were, but the Young Lord seemed fine as he swallowed the second shrimp.

“Why are you looking at me?”

“You... You're eating shrimp.”

Aleksander raised an eyebrow at him. “Haven't you?”

“No, I'm allergic to it.”

Aleksander smiled. He tried to hide it, but he couldn't. “Is this the same way that



you're allergic to chlorine?"

"Yes." Ilya looked at him solemnly. "It's a quite serious matter, you know."

"You don't seem to have been affected by it at all. I had to drag you into the pool to cure you of that allergy, didn't I?"

Ilya felt a chill going down his spine. He didn't like where this was going at all. His skin had been itchy since he got out of the pool. That was an allergic reaction, wasn't it? There had been a slight burning sensation in his lungs, too. "My skin's itchy from the chlorine."

"Is your hair a little dry and brittle feeling too?"

Ilya reached up to feel his normally soft and floppy brown hair and gasped. It was just as Aleksander had said, all knotted and striped feeling and definitely damaged. "It is! See, I am allergic."

"Ilya, that happens to everyone. You aren't having a reaction, and you aren't allergic to shrimp, either."

"I've never had it before, so maybe I am."

Aleksander picked up one shrimp by the tail and held it out to Ilya. "Eat it. It's not going to hurt you."

Ilya scooted away from the dead thing, a faint breeze making it move slightly, almost like a worm on a hook. It had an extremely fishy smell in more ways than one that prodigious amounts of lime juice couldn't mask. "No thanks."

"Ilya, I dragged you into the pool. Do you think I won't force a shrimp into your

mouth?”

“What if he actually is allergic?” Shoji asked, coming to stand at the foot of Ilya's sunbed, swirling the ice in his tea before taking a sip from the glass.

“How likely is that?” Aleksander said dismissively. It was the tone of voice in which he'd assured Ilya that his swimsuit wasn't see-thru, and that he wouldn't mind playing a rape game in the woods. It was his I'm-a-completely-arrogant-asshole-who-only-understands-other-people-as-objects-that-do-my-bidding tone of voice.

Ilya noticed that Ivan was watching the unfolding shrimp drama as well. In fact, everyone was migrating from the food table with plates, to watch the imminent demise of Ilya via seafood. Aleksander dangled the shrimp in front of his face until Ilya snatched it from him. A ragged cheer went up from everyone. Ilya almost threw it into the pool, and then paused. Fine, if they wanted to see his face swell to the size of a puffer fish and choke to death, then so be it. He couldn't overpower all of them. Actually, he probably couldn't take any of them. Except maybe Lena or Tania, but he would be terrified of what he might actually touch if he tried. On second thought, they were both taller than him and could probably kick his ass too, which wasn't all that distressing a thought. He shook his head to clear his mind of such distractions.

“Leave him alone, Aleks,” Tania said, moving to sit next to Ilya on her sun bed.

“It's for his own good.”

Ilya imagined it was the kind of thing that child abusers said right before they beat the shit out of their children, yet again. Maybe it would make a man out of him, too. Ilya

crammed it into his mouth and chewed. It was awful and rubbery; bitter, sour, and fishy.

Everyone laughed.

“Ilya, you don't eat the tail,” Tania said.

Ilya fished it out of his mouth and threw it aside, and finished chewing and swallowed the rubbery unpleasant mess down in one gulp where it could fester and kill him deep in his gut. “It’s fucking wonderful, I love it!” he said sarcastically.

Everyone applauded, except Shoji and Tania. Shoji watched him carefully, and Tania glared at Aleksander. “Did you really have to do that?” she asked.

Aleksander looked enormously pleased with himself. “Now he doesn't have to worry about eating shellfish anymore. You don't know him, he's terrified of everything. You've got to force him to change or he won't do it.”

Ilya was mortified by the words. He wasn't scared of everything. He'd entered the secret wing, hadn't he? He'd gone into the Bleeding Swamp, hadn't he? It was a moot point that he had been terrified when he did those things. Hell, he'd been terrified of being forced to swim in the pool. But now he could sort of swim and he was an expert at the dog paddle. If he fell out of the boat in the Bleeding Swamp, he could actually swim back to the boat without dying. He scratched at his arm. It must still be itchy from the chlorine.

“That doesn't mean you have to force food down his throat,” Tania replied.

Ilya itched at his arm in irritation. Why was the chlorine making him itchy now?

“Ilya, are you okay?” Shoji asked, looking down at him in concern. Tania and Aleksander didn't hear him, as the volume of their argument escalated.

Ilya looked down at his arms and saw small red spots appearing on them. His hands immediately went to his throat. It was starting to swell up. He was certain of it, because it was getting harder to breathe. Shoji looked at him for another second more, and then he ran for the steps.

“Where the hell are you going?” Aleksander snarled.

“To get Cook.” Then Shoji was up the steps and out of sight.

“Oh shit,” Ivan said, as he looked down at Ilya.

“My God, he's actually allergic to it.” Aleksander was shocked, almost beyond words. He knelt down beside Ilya, prying his hands away from his neck. “Ilya, let me see.”

Ilya's breathing was becoming more and more labored, taking on the wheezing sound he associated with asthmatics having an attack. Kind of like a death rattle, he supposed. He would spend his final moments, looking up into the concerned face of his killer, who would forever remember the shy and timid boy he brutally tortured and killed. Aleksander would vow to be kinder to the next one, except then he would get fed up after a day or two of that, and then... He would force them all to eat shellfish. After all, it was a way to get away with murder, wasn't it? The police would hardly arrest him for forcing Ilya to eat a shrimp.

“Wow, I didn't know it could puff up that quickly,” Ivan said, almost in awe of

Ilya's transformation.

The Dolokovs chose that moment to speak: "The worst case we ever saw was a girl at our father's hospital in Moscow. Her head grew to—"

"Shut up!" Aleksander roared at the twins, who immediately fell silent, with matching little smirks on their face.

"I'm—I'm going to die, aren't I?" Ilya gasped out, as Tania took his hand in his own.

"Probably," Karocai and Locai said in unison.

"No." Aleksander shot them a death glare. "Fuck off!" He turned back to Ilya, trying to look like nothing was wrong. "Cook knows what to do. He probably has some epi-pens."

"If you're lucky," they said, looking down on him in curiosity. "We should check to see if the rash has spread beyond his arms."

Aleksander reached down and unbelted the robe, pushing it apart. Ilya feebly tried to stop him.

Locai and Karocai looked Ilya over carefully. "That's good. It's only his arms and throat."

"Is it?" Tania asked, as Aleksander closed the robe again, patting away Ilya's hands as he tried to close it himself.

Ilya felt the world dimming as he struggled to breathe, his hands again going up to his throat. "Promise... Promise me you won't force anyone else to eat shellfish," Ilya

whispered looking up at Aleksander.

“I won't,” he replied, completely serious for once.

The Tuvans were like two little naked angels of death at the foot of Ilya's sun chair. “The less of his body that's affected, the easier it will be to reverse the process, but at a certain point, it becomes terminal. At least that's what father says.” The Dolokovs looked up as Shoji appeared at the top of the stairs, still dressed in his swimsuit, and practically flew down the steps.

“He's coming. He had to get some stuff.” Shoji stopped short at the sight of Ilya, who supposed that he must look awful indeed. “He's... He's... got a mushroom head,” the Oriental Boy said, almost laughing.

Aleksander looked completely miserable, sitting next to Ilya. “I'm sorry.” He looked away from him.

Damn right you are, Ilya thought, as he closed his eyes, a dark swath drawing across the window of his eyes as his final curtain call for life began. He wondered what a mushroom head looked like. He would have liked to have seen it before he was snatched from existence, to be a ghost like Sacha, aimlessly wandering the corridors staring at the moon. On the plus side, he could haunt Shoji, couldn't he? And Aleksander too. He repeated it over and over to himself, in case that was important: *Stay and haunt Shoji, stay and haunt Shoji, stay and haunt Shoji...*

“He's here!” Misha said, and Ilya opened his eyes.

Cook came rushing down the steps, a tan case in his hands.

“He's in stage two Anaphylactic shock,” Karocai said calmly, a look of avid curiosity on his face. “With moderate to severe swelling of his head and a mild rash on his arms, in addition to difficulty breathing from an inflamed esophagus, which remains the most severe problem to correct.”

Ilya was mildly surprised that the twins didn't have little notebooks out, scribbling in them furiously as they looked at Ilya and then down on their pads making notes on what death via shrimp looked like.

Shoji translated for the twins using both hands to sign, as Cook knelt down next to Ilya, one eye on Shoji's fingers and the other on the case which he opened revealing several long silver tubes, vials, and a syringe. Ilya was perilously close to losing consciousness. As Cook took one of the silver tubes from the case and removed the end, revealing a sharp metal point that glistened in the sunlight, Ilya decided this was an opportune moment to fall asleep, as the metal point headed inexorably for his thigh. It was quite big... He was always the one getting screwed, wasn't he?

## CHAPTER 21: THE GRIM REALITY OF ANAPHYLACTIC SHOCK

He awoke sometime later, still in the robe, in a darkened room. Shoji was standing by a window looking out of it, a white towel wrapped around his hips. Cook was leaning over Ilya with a pen light, shining it in his eyes. Aleksander, without a towel, was standing next to Cook.

*How long will his head be that size?* he signed.

Cook shrugged. *A couple hours, maybe a day.*

Ilya's hands immediately went up to his head and neck, and Shoji's words echoed through his mind with new menace, rather than humor: *He's... He's.... Got a mushroom head.* Ilya did indeed. He could tell by the way it felt to his fingers, but at least he could breathe, and his arms weren't so itchy. But now he would need a cart to set his head in if he wanted to go anywhere, because there was no way the muscles in his head could support all that extra weight. All this was nothing compared to the bitter flame of satisfaction that burned deep in his heart. All this time he'd been right. He did have allergies. If this was true, then so was everything else. The cigarettes, the pollen, the dust, animal dander, chlorine, hornets, wasps, yellow jackets, hell, probably all stinging insects, snakes, too. Since he was allergic to shellfish, it seemed a safe assumption that he was allergic to jellyfish and probably everything else in the sea, too. Except herring and smoked salmon. He ate those all the time, and they were delicious. But just to be on the safe side, he should never, ever go to the beach and actually go in the water.



*I'm calling the doctor.* Aleksander stood up and walked toward the door. *He's got to be able to do something about that head.*

*It won't hurt,* Cook signed back calmly. *You've got the money to burn, so go ahead.* He turned to look at Aleksander, who had one hand poised on the door.

It was difficult to see Aleksander's reply but Ilya caught it: *I just can't resist the urge to laugh whenever I look at him!* Then, as though the urge had become too great, Aleksander fled through the door, slamming it behind him. Faintly, Ilya could hear his laughter echoing down the hallway.

Lovely. Now he would be Mushroom Head Boy forever. Maybe they would shorten it to just Mushroom Boy, or just Mushroom. Then, he would just be Shroom for a while, and then it would be back to Ilya.

*Ilya?* Cook signed, turning back to him, and biting his lip, guessing from Ilya's resigned expression that he'd seen the whole conversation. *It's really not that bad.*

*Don't lie, his head looks like a giant head of cabbage,* Shoji signed. *Eventually he'll look in a mirror, you know.* He turned from the window and walked over to the bed. *I would like to say though, before you tell Elem about this, that Aleksander really wasn't trying to bully him. This time. He said he was allergic, which as you probably know, means nothing coming from Ilya. Fortunately, he's never gotten the idea in his head that he's allergic to air or he would hold his breath until he was dead.*

Ilya was affronted. Of course he couldn't be allergic to air. If he had been, he would have died at birth. It was a simple matter of logical deduction. But he could

certainly be allergic to contaminants in the air, couldn't he? He was pleased about one thing. The nickname Mushroom Cap would eventually yield the name Cappy. That was something he could quite easily live with. It was even, dare he say it, a little cool. All Ilya had to do now was plant the seed and let it grow. But back to the issue: he'd been forced to eat that shrimp. It seemed like bullying to him. *He made me eat it*, Ilya signed, only realizing how petty and childish he sounded after the fact. *Now I have a mushroom CAP for a head*, he signed, emphasizing cap. Just a gentle nudge in the right direction...

*Yes, Ilya, he did, and I told him not to, but he was only doing it to make you realize your fear was unfounded, just like he did when he taught you to swim this afternoon*, Shoji signed placidly, as though he were communicating with a delusional four-year-old bent on revenge.

It irked Ilya that Shoji had cast himself as the reasonable adult of the conversation, when he'd tried to kill him with poisonous snakes a few hours ago for refusing to tell him what was in the swamp. *I told him I'd never tried it*.

*That doesn't mean he thought you would get hurt. None of us wanted that, Ilya.* Shoji smiled at him.

It's Cappy, goddamn it! Ilya thought, but still giving way to Shoji's reasoning, mainly because he didn't want Aleksander in trouble now that he needed a buffer. This reminded Ilya, he really didn't want to be left alone with Shoji. *I guess that's true. He did teach me how to swim*, he signed grudgingly.

Cook looked at Ilya for a few moments, but the mushroom head probably made it

impossible to read Ilya's expression. Then he shrugged and got to his feet.

*You're not leaving are you?* Ilya signed, ready to panic.

*Yes, I've got to start on dinner.*

*What are we having tonight?* Shoji signed, with mild curiosity.

Cook spared a pained look at Ilya. *Fish Kulebiaka. I'm making it with Red Snapper and Orange Roughy.*

Ilya almost retched at the thought of the deadly concoction. *I'm—*

*Oh, are you allergic?* Shoji cut in, smiling sarcastically.

*It's better that we don't find out until his head shrinks.* Cook headed toward the door.

*Can't we have a vegetarian meal every once and a while?* Shoji signed wistfully.

Both Ilya and Cook looked at the Oriental boy and realized simultaneously that he would never truly be Russian.

*But... This is Russia,* Cook signed, shaking his head sadly, probably because such a foolish thing had been asked. *Maybe in China or wherever you come from—*

*Japan,* Shoji cut in with a smile.

*Maybe in Japan they serve vegetables as a meal, but here, that's what we feed our food.*

Ilya nodded for emphasis. *But we do like onions and mushrooms, especially the caps.*

*Well yes, but those aren't really vegetables, are they?* Cook signed. *A meal without*

*onions and mushrooms is a meal with only half the flavor.*

*Demetri eats mushrooms three times a day. Sometimes I do to. Though I really only like the caps. Say, Shoji, do you think my head is kind of shaped like a mushroom cap, maybe kind of capish, or CAPPY looking?*

Cook shook his head, a smile on his grizzled features, and left the room.

*Wait!* Ilya signed, but his back was turned and then the door was shut, as leaden as the door on a tomb. Ilya had read that somewhere in a book. It might be a cliché, but now he knew what the author meant, as he turned back to look at Shoji.

*Alone at last, Ilya. Sadly, you're in no position for me to seduce you, with that head of yours.* Shoji sat down in an upholstered chair next to Ilya. *I'm going to appeal to your honor instead.*

Ilya was momentarily incredulous. *Really?* He hadn't been aware that he had any, having always been a bit of a coward. Well... he knew when a course of action was ill-advised, and he did try to do the right thing, so maybe he had some of this honor stuff.

*I saved your life. I got Cook and he barely made it before you suffocated. Because of me, you're alive.*

Ilya considered for a bit. It was sort of true. Someone would have gone for help eventually. But Ilya would give him this much. Shoji had the intention behind the act, anyway. Ilya would use his own logic against him. *That's true, so I'll wipe away the time you tried to kill me this morning, which only leaves the time you tried to kill me in the shower, and when you pushed my head beneath the water, and when—*

*I get the point.* Shoji sighed and got up from the chair. He walked over to the window and stared up into the sun for a moment. Then he turned back to face Ilya. “You've worn me out. I don't have all the time in the world to convince you of my sincerity.” He closed the curtain and plunged the room into semi-darkness. “I'll have to do things the painful way now.” Shoji held up one hand in placation as Ilya tensed. “I'm not going to hurt you. Because you're going to be my friend. It's only a matter of when you realize it's in your best interests.”

Shoji walked toward the door, and Ilya followed him with his eyes. “What are you going to do?” he whispered, as Shoji reached out to open the door.

“I won't kill Tabitha or Demetri first. They're too important to you. I'll work my way up to them. But I'll tell you this, I'm going to kill a servant, and it's your fault, because we are brothers, and you won't help me.” There was a pause, and then he said something surprising. “And I need you, Ilya.” Shoji wiped at his face as he shut the door behind him.

Ilya became even more familiar with the cliché as leaden as the door of a tomb. There was only one choice now, get to Shoji before he could hurt anyone. The only problem he could see was that he wasn't a killer. He needed someone else to kill the Oriental Boy. Orryn? Soldier? The blood-beast. Ilya sat up in bed. Would Alexei do it? Was he strong enough to kill and eat Shoji? It would probably help him get his strength back.

Ilya felt the familiar touch of nausea at the thought. What he was planning was

awful. He hadn't really been given a choice. What if... he tricked Shoji into drinking the dog's blood? The insects would get him. He reached down and scratched at his crotch in annoyance. The ridiculous swimsuit was getting itchier by the moment. He was still mortified that Cook had seen him in it. Ilya got out of bed and walked over to the fireplace against the wall. He undid the robe and slid the damp piece of white spandex off and threw it on the kindling. He got a match from the little jar where they sat and lit the wood, watching as the flames consumed one of the many sources of his shame, and felt a small amount of satisfaction at his petty act as it went up in smoke, with much crackling as the moisture was evaporated. He'd been doing so well, braving the Secret Wing, helping Alexei, making real progress in saving Emernon from the Cathedral. Then Shoji had undone it all.

He'd made Ilya feel like he was six years-old. He wet himself, begged not to be hurt, and was sexually abused by Shoji, even if the question of consent was a little cloudy, but the victim got to determine the guilt, didn't they? That seemed fair. He'd been systematically humiliated at the pool, and now his head was the shape of a mushroom. He wasn't going to take this anymore. He slammed his fist against the stone and flinched at the pain. People did things like that in movies, but it hurt in real life. If Shoji wanted war, then Ilya would kill the son of a bitch, not because he wanted to, but because he had no other choice. He wouldn't enjoy it, but it would get done. The first thing he had to do, though, was read up on how to snake proof the cottage. He really didn't want to find any adders in his bed, or closet. Actually, he could happily go through life never seeing

another of the creatures.

The important thing he had to do was convince someone to kill. He supposed that Soldier, sweet tempered toy that he was, wouldn't need any persuading in this regard. But would he be effective? Ilya suspected there would be snake sentinels while Shoji slept, and Ilya didn't have all the time in the world to get rid of him, either. Someone could be dying while Ilya was crouched next to this fire breathing in the dangerous fumes of burning spandex. If there was any luck allotted to him today, Soldier would still be waiting for him, no doubt with some kind words of encouragement. He got to his feet, belted the robe closed, and headed toward the door. His luck, which had apparently been spent not dying earlier, ran out. The door opened right before he could reach it, and Ilya came face to face with Dr. Zdansky, cancer stick dangling from his lower lip, sending little puffs of poison out cloaked by the cloying scent of menthol.

“That's some head you've got there,” he said, eyeing Ilya from head to toe.

Ilya had forgotten about his swollen head. He reached up and felt the pronounced bulbousness of it. Suddenly, the nickname of Cappy was a little less appealing as it became more literal to him. “Hello.”

“Hello. Still stumbling around without glasses?”

“He needs glasses?” Aleksander said, following the doctor into the room, by now dressed in respectable clothing. His eyes went to the fireplace and the burning spandex. His shoulders slumped slightly.

Zdansky nodded. “Oh yes, it's the side effect of the Ceritikonus. He has trouble

seeing at distances.”

Ilya held off from mentioning that while he might have trouble reading a chalk board from the back row of the class room, he could see ghosts and metaphysical bugs much better than anyone else. Unless they were far away, then he imagined they would probably be fuzzy. “How common is Ceritikonus?”

Zdansky pursed his lips, sucking in on the cigarette and expelling poison with his answer. “You're only the second case I've seen. I would say no more than one in a million at most.”

Some quick math told Ilya that with a population of three hundred and eighty million, that was only three hundred and eighty people like him in the whole country. “Cool.”

“I'm glad that pleases you. Now please take that rather large head back to bed, so I can examine you.” Zdansky moved forward to set a small black bag on the table.

“Are the glasses that he needs expensive?” Aleksander asked, tearing his eyes away from the fire, with one last little shake of the head.

Ilya sat down on the bed. “I don't need glasses.”

Zdansky gave him a patronizing smile. “Yes you do.” He turned toward Aleksander. “Stay where you are by the door and hold up some fingers for Ilya.”

Aleksander held up a hand.

“Ilya, go ahead and give us a guess on how many you see.”

“Three.” He had no idea how many the Young Lord was holding up.



“Five, but that wasn't a bad guess. To answer your question, Mr. Neimasaurus,” Dr. Zdansky said, “they would indeed be pricy. He needs special lenses. You probably know that the human eye is comprised of cones and rods, which allow us to see. Well, there are three kinds of cones, blue, green, and red. The blue cones only comprise two percent of the total amount of cones in the eye, but for Ilya, these blue cones are more numerous, and have a different structure added to them, a sort of vestigial funnel attached to the back of the cone, which is a pink color. This makes him a little light sensitive at times and damages the effectiveness of rods which the funnels can block, accounting for his difficulty seeing at range. It also accounts for the unusual color as well.”

Ilya refrained from mentioning that his vestigial funnels, which weren't very cool sounding, were actually quite handy. He favored the term ghost receptors. That was what they actually did after all.

“The glasses have to be custom crafted to overcome light-sensitivity, far-sightedness, and the astigmatism caused by the vestigial funnels.”

“I can pay for them,” Aleksander said, looking over at Ilya.

“I don't want any glasses.” A fear had gripped Ilya now. What if, by correcting his vision, he lost the ability to see the supernatural? Maybe that was why more people weren't aware of this phenomenon. They'd been blinded by old, cancer-ridden busy-body doctors and homosexual bullies trying to buy their way in and out of Ilya. “Leave my funnels alone,” he added for emphasis, “every last one of them.” He directed that last comment at Aleksander. “Is there any scholarly material I could read about this

condition?” he did want to read up on his ghost receptors a bit more, to see if anyone knew what caused them. Were they mutations, or inherited genetic material from his parents? Maybe they came about as a result of environmental factors during conception. Did the genes that made his parents deaf do something with his eyes?

“There was an article a while ago, back when I saw the first boy with ceritikonus, about twenty-five years ago. I might still have the journal somewhere.” Zdansky opened the bag and reached inside of it to withdraw a syringe. “Right now, I would like a blood sample, just to verify that it was the shrimp you had a reaction to.”

Ilya's blood ran cold at the sight of the silver needle, but he forged ahead. “Did the other boy live here?”

“Yes, but he died eighteen years ago. That's nothing for you to worry about. Now hold out your arm.”

Ilya complied, his eyes never wavering from the needle. Was this the person who'd forcibly donated their eyes to Alina Neimasaurus? “What happened to him?”

“I don't remember now, it was a long time ago.” Zdansky disinfected a spot on Ilya's arm with a small wet wipe.

“Oh, is it the kid who got stabbed to death and had his eyes ripped out?” Aleksander said, leaning over Ilya with interest to see the needle sink into his flesh. “I think mother told me about it. She was worried because I had sort of unusual blue-gray eyes when I was a child. She was afraid there was some lunatic collecting the interesting eyes of children.”

“That might be it.” The needle stopped right at his skin. “Ilya, maybe you should look away?”

“I’m sorry, doctor, that’s not possible.” Ilya was transfixed by the needle, waiting for it to sink into his skin and find a vein. It was much like a man-made leech, wasn’t it? Soon the clear vial would fill up with Ilya’s blood. Blood.

Aleksander reached out and covered Ilya’s eyes. “Do it.”

Pain lanced up Ilya’s arm and he flinched. “Did they eat his eyes?”

“They were never found,” Zdansky said. “All finished.”

Aleksander removed his hand, and Ilya saw a bead of blood on his arm before Zdansky pressed a piece of gauze on to the spot and used a piece of surgical tape to hold it in place.

“I don’t see why someone would eat them, though. If they were that crazy, there would have been other victims.” Aleksander sat down in the chair next to Ilya.

“Maybe there were, just not here.” Zdansky packed the vial of blood away.

“Maybe there was a police cover-up.”

Ilya’s eyes widened slightly. Zdansky knew. Of course there had been a police investigation, and when it led to bat-shit insane Alina Neimasaurus, it came to an end with promotions all around for everyone in the investigation. The doctor had been around back then, and the boy had been his patient. Alina Neimasaurus had probably been his patient as well. He was the only doctor in town who knew sign language after all. Had he been the link between the two of them? Had he actually helped get the eyes? That implied

he knew what they were capable of. But then why try to force glasses on him?

“Someone else's eyes did go missing,” Aleksander said, his expression lighting up. “My Babushka, they never found her eye, and her face was all tore up.”

“Really?” Zdansky seemed a little incredulous. “I heard she fell down some steps.”

“That's what we told the police to say.” Aleksander waved his hand dismissively. “You can't trust anything they say. Besides, she did fall down the stairs. After the face mauling.”

Zdansky took his blood pressure, his temperature, and poked needles in his head to test the sensitivity, which set off Aleksander into a fit of laughter, and he was banished from the room. Finally, the doctor leaned back in his chair.

“I'm going to give you an injection of steroids, which will reduce the swollen tissue and reduce your head to a normal size, hopefully in an hour or two. This other bump,” Zdansky indicated the stitches from his spectacular fall in the west tower. “How did it happen?”

“I tripped and banged my head on the corner of a desk.”

“Is this like when you tripped and got hit by the cricket bat, and then got hit again, and again?”

Ilya shook his head. “No, I actually tripped this time.”

Zdansky clapped him on the shoulder. “Good to hear it. You seem to be getting along with Mr. Neimasaurus now.”

“His mother had a talk with him.”

“That usually does the trick. Still, it’s best not to provoke him. If he wants to buy you glasses, you should let him.” Zdansky got to his feet with a groan. “Even if you don’t intend to wear them.” He got a clean syringe from his bag along with a small glass bottle of innocuous looking clear liquid.

“What did you mean, when you mentioned a police cover-up?” Ilya babbled, trying not to think of needles sinking into his head.

Zdansky glanced at him for a moment, the cigarette almost slipping from his lip as he filled the syringe, an alcohol wipe in his other hand, ready to disinfect. “I’d forgotten all about Marco when I saw you at the office. It had been a long time ago, but it wasn’t until now that I remembered. Marco’s body was found in the lake by Neimasaurus, on the boundaries of Gdansky Marsh. When the investigation suddenly folded, I assumed, as did a lot of people, that someone important, perhaps aristocratic, was to blame.”

“Like, maybe, Alina Neimasaurus?”

Zdansky smiled at him, the cigarette almost slipping. “Maybe. She’s dead now, so we’ll never know.”

Then Ilya felt a slight pressure on his cranium as the syringe slipped into his head. He closed his eyes, and imagined happy things like butterflies, riding horses, which was only a safe activity in a dream, being happy in the apartment in Petrograd with his parents, Shoji dead at the foot of the stairs in the grand foyer, Orryn circling his lifeless corpse, the dead body of an adder dangling from his curved beak. He might have smiled

slightly at that last image.

“All finished,” Zdansky said, packing away the syringe.

“So I guess this means I have some significant allergies then?” Ilya said, with the slightest trace of gloating.

“I remember our little discussion from last time. You might be allergic to shrimp. Or not. The test will confirm it. This in no way vindicates any other delusions you have.”

“But I'm likely to be allergic to other shellfish, and probably jellyfish, too.”

“I'm not going to argue with you. We'll see what the test shows. I withdrew enough blood to test out other shellfish as well. But you know what? You should stay away from jellyfish anyway.”

The door opened and Tabitha came in and stopped dead at the sight of Ilya, biting her lower lip.

*Is he all right?* she signed, her hand shaking at the force of repressing the desire to make the sign for laughter. She had what looked like grape juice stains on her apron, which seemed a little odd to Ilya, since Russians weren't known for eating grapes or drinking that much wine.

*Fine indeed, the swelling should go away in about an hour, maybe two.* Zdansky stood up and walked toward the door. *I do hope you aren't serving shellfish for dinner.*

*No, it's a French menu tonight. I can't spell any of the dishes, but the entree is made from steak, butter, onions, and red wine. Not that servants will be eating any of that. We don't get shrimp either, unless we pay for it ourselves. We're having a fish pie.*

Tabitha smiled maliciously at Ilya. *Or you're good friends with the Young Lord.*

*Yay for me,* Ilya signed with zero enthusiasm. *I wouldn't mind the French food though. I've had enough seafood for today.*

*I'll let his Lordship know,* Tabitha signed sycophantically, curtsied, and turned toward the door, with a smile frozen on her face.

Zdansky laughed and exited the room, as Ilya sat up too quickly, the weight of his head making it sway back and forth for a moment before he could right it. Tabitha hurried over to his side to steady him.

*I'm just kidding,* she signed, helping him to lean back.

*Can I stay here until my head shrinks?*

*I don't see why not.* Tabitha settled down in the chair next to the bed, the burnished cherry wood squeaking loudly. *This isn't just a social call. Tomorrow, your time off ends, and there's lots of work to be done thanks to her Ladyship's death.*

*Isn't there less work, now that she's dead?*

*Only after the funeral.*

*Is that going to be here?*

Tabitha grimaced. *Yes, in the house and on the grounds. She'll be interned in the family mausoleum.*

*Where's that?*

Tabitha rolled her eyes. *Right here, well, about a ten minute walk in the opposite direction of the marshlands, up the hill. But the funeral and reception will be here. The*

*Lord and Lady of Neimasaurus will return, along with hundreds of guests, and possibly a thousand mourners on the day of the funeral.*

*When is that?*

*Today is Wednesday, Friday, we set everything up, and then on Saturday, will be the actual funeral. There's an outside chance that the Tsarina might come, too, along with the President.*

*Of what?*

*The Nation. You know, The Russian Empire? You might have seen him on TV.*

*Maybe, what's his name? Ilya smiled at her.*

*Ilya, do you have any idea how much trouble it will be for the servants of Neimasaurus to prepare for a visit of the Tsar's wife and the President?*

*Ilya stretched and yawned. This sounds like it's going to suck a whole lot. What does Tsarina Ismailova care about some dead eighty-year-old backwater noble?*

*Alina Neimasaurus married into this family from the Lermontev family, which you may recall, intermarried freely with the Donetsk family, where Ismailova came from, before she married Alexander Romanov. Technically, Alina was her aunt, once removed. No! Twice removed, I think. Tabitha seemed embarrassed at her momentary slip up in royal lineage.*

*Ilya's head spun at the vast, potentially inbred web of Russian aristocracy. Tabitha was a monarchist. She probably watched every coronation, baptism, and royal wedding she could get her hands on, and subscribed to magazines with titles like "Royalty Today,"*



or “Aristocrats Weekly.” *Of course I knew that. What do you think I am, a fool?*

*Men just don't care about these sorts of things.* Tabitha shook her head, as though she were ashamed of Ilya.

Of all the things she could have picked to be disappointed by, this was it? *I like democracy more. I believe in the right of the people to choose!*

*Oh? Then tell me the name of the president.*

*Why? He's just a figure head of a fascist-monarchist corrupt regime.* Ilya was fairly certain it started with a K, though. Kizheh? Was that it? Kije? *The Proletariat will one day rise against their bourgeois oppressors. And their discreet charms, too.* The classic French film reference would probably be lost on Tabitha,

Tabitha just shook her head, a small smile on her lips. *All that useless knowledge you've got, and I've finally found a subject you know nothing about. Bourgeois means middle-class, and proletariat means lower-class. Shouldn't they both be rising up against their “monarchical” rulers?*

Damn her. He was totally clueless about all of this. *A true revolutionary isn't hemmed in by fascist adherence to dogmatic terms.*

*By the way, Fascism and Monarchy are two completely different things. Anyway, tomorrow you need to report to the foyer at seven o'clock sharp. Elem will be arriving then, and he's probably already got a plan for everyone, including you.*

*What if my head is still all Cappy looking?*

*Cappy?*

*You know, like a mushroom cap?*

*The doctor said it would be fine in an hour or two.* Tabitha got out of the chair and leaned down to kiss Ilya on the forehead.

For one moment, Ilya's heart jumped into his throat and he thought she was going to kiss him on the mouth. It was a bit of a disappointment, and it must have showed on his face.

*What?* Tabitha

Ilya shrugged, too embarrassed to say. He looked away toward the window, hoping that he wasn't blushing. Then Tabitha leaned back down, pausing above his lips for a second, tilting her head slightly. Then she kissed him. In a panic, Ilya dusted off the unpleasant memories of Shoji and Aleksander's kissing techniques, trying to replicate what they'd done with tongue and lips, to the best of his ability. Finally she broke the kiss, and stood back up.

*Not bad. Was that your first kiss?*

Yes, he signed, smiling, but desperately trying not to. *I'm not sure if I liked it, maybe we should do it again.*

*Now Ilya, you're five years younger than me and have a head at least two and a half-times my size, so stop being a flirt.*

*Five years? I thought we were the same age.*

Tabitha rolled her eyes and headed toward the door. *Remember, seven o'clock.*

*Wait! Does this mean we're going out?*

*No, the only thing a kiss means is that I kissed you.*

Ilya settled back into the cushions, wrapping his arms around himself, still feeling the imprint of Tabitha's lips on his own, and how soft and warm they had been. That was how a kiss was supposed to feel, not the sort of date-rapist way that Aleksander and Shoji had done it. Aleksander had even had stubble above his upper lip and it had been a little scratchy. And Shoji's lips had been... Well, they'd been perfect, and they'd done all the work, too. Maybe that was what was wrong. It was like Ilya wasn't even a participant in the kiss. With Tabitha, it felt like two people coming together. It felt like love. Was this it? He pushed away her denial that they weren't going out. Of course they were. It was only a matter of time before he seduced her, or she relented.

The sound of the grate opening could be heard, and Ilya awaited his miniature visitor. After a few seconds, the familiar toy soldier leaped up onto the bed, one hand out to sign and probably say something abrasive, perhaps ever so slightly confrontational. As Soldier looked up at Ilya's head, the hand dropped to side. Then Soldier flung himself forward on the bed, his little fists hammering the sheets, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. He looked up every once in a while, and even pointed at Ilya's head, which only set him off again. Disgusted, Ilya picked up the piece of wood by one leg and dangled him over the side of the bed.

*Finished?* Ilya signed. *This is a serious medical problem.*

*Wha...Wha...What's it called?* Soldier signed, still hanging upside down. *Humpty-Dumpty syndrome?* Then the piece of wood dissolved into spasms again.

*I had an allergic reaction to shellfish that brought on an acute case of anaphylactic shock, which obstructed my airways, nearly resulting in cardiac arrest, were it not for the timely intervention of an injection of Epinephrine. Ilya threw in as many big words as possible to make the whole ordeal less amusing. It worked, and Soldier's body went limp.*

*Sorry.*

Ilya had the sneaky suspicion that Soldier wasn't, and probably had never been sorry for anything in his life, but set him back on the bed anyway. *We have much more serious things to talk about.* Ilya turned his thoughts toward The Snake. *We need to kill someone, before he hurts someone else.*

## CHAPTER 22: THREADS OF THE PAST

Before killing Shoji in a grand master plan that would go off without a hitch, he decided to visit Alexei with a rather tardy breakfast. Besides, how clever could he be? It wasn't as if he'd pulled the wool over Ilya's eyes for weeks, and only revealed his true intentions when he wanted to, rather than Ilya deducing them. That didn't mean that he couldn't get the jump on the Oriental Boy. The ball, as the Americans said, was now in his court. He didn't really know how the concept of a court applied to a football field, but he got the gist of it. He supposed.

If he could get Alexei up and running, he could lure Shoji into the secret wing and the blood-beast himself would do the killing. The only problem was that Ilya really didn't want to turn him back onto eating people. Alexei was like an alcoholic who'd gone cold turkey for seventy years. Ilya didn't want to be the one to cause a relapse. Just have one little drink...

It took two hours for his head to return to normal. He went down to the kitchens and begged some sandwiches off Cook, claiming he'd not gotten to eat anything but the fateful shrimp, which had nearly ended his life. He got two, one with ham and the other with beef, leftover from the pool table spread. He spread spicy mustard on both of them and piled them with lettuce and tomatoes, because veggies were probably important to Alexei after not eating them for seventy years. There was probably all kinds of vitamin deficiencies going on there. Some of which could lead to chemical imbalances in the

brain.... which might explain some of Alexei's mood swings and other unusual behavior patterns. Hopefully the tomatoes would do the trick.

He told Cook he wanted to eat them out on the pier because he was going fishing. He felt a small twinge at lying to the man, but it couldn't be helped. Besides, he'd lied to everyone else. Cook raised an eyebrow at him, but wrapped the sandwiches in some newspaper.

*If you catch any fish, throw them back,* Cook signed, giving him a thermos with some tea in it.

*Why?* Ilya signed.

*There's contamination.*

*What kind?*

Cook shrugged. *That's all they tell us.*

Ilya smiled blandly. *All right.*

*You know, Demetri likes to fish. There's a lake about an hour's drive to the north that he likes to go to on his afternoons off, when he gets them.*

For one horrible moment, Ilya envisioned an entire afternoon of sitting by a lake with a stick in his hand watching his Uncle destroy his liver with alcohol with the high point being when he could eviscerate the mouth of a fish. Then he could drag it out of the water to drown. *Sounds like fun,* Ilya signed, while his eyes were quietly screaming. He departed the kitchen in agony, knowing that he'd paid the karmic price for his lie.

Soldier was waiting for him up in the study, after Ilya let himself into the attic. In

addition to the food and drink, Ilya had some clothes and he'd swiped some cleaning supplies from the closet to bring a semblance of sanitation to Alexei's study. He'd been unsuccessful in finding an electric light that would last long enough on batteries to be useful to him, so he'd brought a second flashlight he'd found in the closet.

*Your head's only slightly protuberant at the moment,* Soldier signed, as Ilya locked the study door.

*What if one of his snakes followed me up here?* Ilya signed, suddenly worried.

*Did you close and lock the attic door?*

*Yes.*

*Well, I don't think it could follow you up here, could it?*

Ilya relaxed. He supposed that was true. Snakes couldn't open heating grates like Soldier, could they? Hands were needed for that, and they could hardly bypass a stout wooden door.

*Did you dispose of Leonya's bones in the mausoleum?*

Then the memories rushed back into Ilya's head. He'd not been sure what to do with the remains, and now he remembered the conversation in this very room, and the dream where Orryn had made him forget. Dread filled him at the thought of the shrine, an uncertain all-encompassing dread. Shit. He'd liked not remembering.

*Are you all right?*

*Yes,* Ilya signed simply, catching his breath. Whatever was there couldn't hurt him unless he went to the shrine, right? His subconscious disagreed. It said that what was in

there was above the understanding of help and harm. *I'm going to do that tonight, since the funeral is coming up, and I need to get rid of those bones before the mausoleum is crawling with people.*

Soldier crossed his arms and looked out the window.

*I'll probably leave around midnight.* Ilya tapped his foot a bit.

*That's nice.*

*I need someone to show me the way. I've never been there before, you know,* Ilya added helpfully.

*Do you want me to come with you?* Soldier turned his head to look at him and Ilya unmistakably detected a hint of smugness in his unchanging expression.

*If you want...* Ilya very much did. The thought of dragging bones into a graveyard at night and burying them wasn't so bad, if it weren't for the fact that Ilya could see ghosts, and he was willing to bet he'd see plenty at a mausoleum. Fortunately, he'd never been to one as a child, otherwise he would probably be in an asylum, pumped full of drugs as the doctors convinced him that ghosts didn't exist.

*I could hold your hand when you get scared. We could make a secret pact at the grave to be friends forever, no matter what! And we could build a secret fort out in the woods to meet at and plan our—*

*Maybe you shouldn't come,* Ilya signed.

*Are you afraid of the ghosts?*

Ilya sighed. *Yes.* It was one thing to be stalked by a morose twelve year old boy



who gave hugs, but Ilya was willing to bet all spooks weren't so benign.

Soldier stood up. *Well suck it up, because they aren't going away anytime soon, and you don't want to spend your whole life avoiding wherever they are, do you? Remember, you can pretend they can't see you. Just don't react to them.* Soldier opened the drawer and slipped inside it to release the secret panel.

Ilya pulled the door open and Soldier emerged from the drawer, shutting it behind him. Then he sat down on the edge of the desk.

Ilya shouldered the pack and turned toward the door. *Aren't you coming with me? No. I think its best that I stand guard out here, and that Alexei doesn't know I exist. Just in case.*

*In case of what?*

Soldier gave him two thumbs up. *Don't worry! It's just a precaution. See what you can find out from him. Maybe he knows something about the shrine or the bugs or anything else.*

Ilya scowled at him. *I'll do my best.*

*Not the baby scowl!* Soldier's shoulders shook with silent laughter.

Ilya had forgotten that the sneaky piece of wood had been spying on the poker game from the grate. *No, the baby scowl looks like this.* Ilya let all emotion and expression drain away from his face and he looked down at Soldier impassively. *Here's what you look like all the time.* Ilya grinned like an idiot at Soldier, mimicking the cheesy smile and rosy cheeks that had been painted onto the toy's face.

Soldier's shoulders stopped shaking. *I can't believe you went there. Knock on the door four times if you want to come out. I might open it.*

Ilya stepped into the secret wing, switching his flashlight on. He pulled the door closed just far enough for the panel to be able to close behind him. What had once been intimidating was now a rather routine and boring walk, as Ilya practically skipped down the stairs into the abyss where Alexei lived. The flickering light of the lamp was still shining from the open doorway as Ilya called out "Alexei?" Not wanting to shock the man, or catch him in an indecent state.

"Come in." The voice was smoother, fuller, more human sounding, not like the rasping echo of something that had faded.

Ilya stepped into the study and saw that a single day of food and water had wrought noticeable changes on the man. The black blood on his bandages had dried, his limbs looked fuller, and the skin of his chest that Ilya could see through the robe, was no longer translucent. It was still papery and thin looking, but the cracks had sealed themselves. The food Ilya had set on the table was gone and the bottle of water was empty.

"Is your head larger?" The piercing black eyes, now flecked in blue, studied Ilya carefully. "I could have sworn it was of a normal size, when last I saw you."

"It's always been this size," Ilya said quickly. "I brought you some sandwiches," he added, hoping to distract the man. "And some tea." Ilya got the parcel Cook had prepared for him out of the pack. He passed it to Alexei from where he sat on the day

bed, and he took it greedily.

Alexei quickly unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite of it. “Is it the custom to put so much tomato on them now? I feel as though I’m eating a salad,” he said between mouthfuls.

“Did they have those back then?” Ilya asked, as he got a rag and some spray cleaner out, and started on the small table next to the day bed, figuring the first spot to be sanitized was where Alexei set his food.

“Tomatoes?”

“No, salads.”

Alexei looked up at him, slightly bemused. “Yes.”

Of course they did. What had Ilya been thinking? Alexei wasn't a dinosaur come back to life, he was merely a man of between one hundred and one hundred and ten years of age. In all honesty, Ilya had seen pictures of normal human beings that old and they looked much better than Alexei had sitting in the hallway when Ilya had found him. He moved on to the book shelves, his rag already caked in grime. “There's a change of clothes in the pack, and an electric torch I brought for you.”

Alexei picked the flashlight out of the pack. “Is that what you use for light? Electricity? But how does it work though. Electricity needs wires. I saw a demonstration in Moscow once.”

Ilya nodded. “It has a battery in it, which gives it a small charge of electricity, but it runs out after a few hours.” He got another rag out of the pack and set to work on the

lamp on the desk. His eyes alighted on the dumbwaiter and its dusty tray. “Did someone used to bring you food on that?” Ilya gestured with the rag for emphasis.

“My cousin. She did it only to make me suffer. Sometimes a week or two would pass between meals. She wanted to keep me on the cusp of death and organ failure. She put me in here, the bitch.”

“What happened? I mean, how did you...” Ilya's voice drifted off. He didn't know what to say, what to call it.

“How did I become a freak trapped in my own basement?” Alexei laughed. It had a bitter, rasping quality to it.

For a moment, Ilya was reminded of the blood-beast, and feared that his question had awakened the sleeping creature. He shifted uncomfortably, his hand coming to rest on the pistol in his pocket.

Alexei didn't miss the movement with his eyes. “It's all right. The story is long and rather unpleasant. I seem to have plenty of time. If you wish, I'll tell you it.”

Ilya nodded. “I read some of Amaranth Neimasaurus's diary—”

“My dear cousin, may she rot in a hell worse than mine.”

“She told me a story about you and her, and another boy called Dano, being lost in the swamp.”

“Then I can skip the first instance in which I set eyes on the Church. I'll begin with my fascination in the years that followed, with what the macabre sight had in my thoughts.”

Ilya got the chair from the desk and set it beside Alexei, who took another bite of the sandwich. Ilya poured himself a cup of tea in the lid of the thermos and waited, as Alexei set the sandwich aside

\*\*\*\*

I didn't know what I'd seen in the swamp that day, but I knew the hand of God when I saw it. He had saved Dano, therefore our friendship was meant to be, and he had allowed me to see his sacred house, where life flowed. Or at least, this was the justification of a child, easily swayed by things like religion. It was easy to imagine it was the blood of the Christ which had saved my friend. I have always been very good at justifying things to myself. This was my greatest source of pain in my life as well, for even if I could live with my own decisions, those around me could not abide them.

Amaranth loved me. This you may have already guessed from reading that early story in her diary. Why she chose me, I don't know. I never did anything to endear myself to her and never showed her anything other than familial affection for a distant cousin who had met with misfortune and come to live with us at Neimasaurus. I don't know how the house is now, but back then, it was a living, breathing thing, always under construction and full of life, with parties, weddings, festivals, and even the local fair was held on its grounds every year. My father was well loved by the people and by his family. His prospecting in our lands to the north had given us a huge fortune from mining, with enough wealth deep in the ground to last us for centuries.

I was his only son, only child really, after an older sister died of tuberculosis when I was seven. My mother never forgave my father for letting her die and they never loved one another again. I didn't understand why this happened until later. The blood, it could've easily cured my sister, just like it did when it cured Dano of the venom from the adder. And now, in the present, I understand why my father let her die. I gave this cursed gift from my own hands. I told him to drink and when he was healed, I thought no more of it. God had saved him and we would continue to be friends. As we grew older, we became lovers. This fact may have surprised us both, but my father was not. I think he'd just been hoping he was wrong.

But this isn't a story about that. I must return to the Blood, as I always do now. Dano might have appeared healthy to all outward observers, but within, he was changed by the gift of the swamp. He was not as emotionally sound as he had once been. I didn't know why. It got worse over time. Neither of us knew it was the simple gift of life that I had given him that now made him change from within. But I should start by relating what happened on my sixteenth birthday when in the eyes of the law and my father, I had become a man. Dano and I had been lovers for two years by now, a fact we had miraculously been able to keep a secret. What my father was not confronted with, he did not have to punish. For my family, for the Neimasaurus, another burden was given on this day. It is here that I will begin my story.

A knock came at the door, four sharp and sudden pounds. My father's typical calling card.

“Come in,” I called out, as I stood in front of the mirror in my room. My servant, Dima, an old man who had attended to my needs since I was weaned from the wet nurse, brushed lint from my shoulders as I tried to make sense of the bow at my neck, the rest of the suit in place for the formal dinner and ball that awaited me this evening in celebration of my sixteenth birthday. The door opened and my father stepped through. He was a tower of a man, still a full head taller than me, his gray hair and thick mustache carefully groomed. He was already dressed in his formal wear. There isn't any point in describing it; we aren't like women with beautiful gowns all the colors of the rainbow, with jewels, hats, fans and all other frivolity. No, we all wear black with a white shirt beneath and either a silver or gold pocket watch. Rich we might be, but we had uniforms all the same.

“Good, you're ready,” he said, striding toward me as Dima put the lint brush away and stepped aside.

I threw up my hands in defeat at the bow tie. “I can't get this,” I said, as my father looked me over in the mirror.

“I tried to tie it for him, sir,” Dima said, getting my watch out of the felt case where it was kept.

“I want to learn how to do it myself,” I said quickly, not wanting Dima blamed for my obstinacy.

“A good idea, but there is something we must do before dinner.” Fyodor, my father, reached out with deft fingers and tied the black silk bow tie for me, with a few simple moves. “It's always easier to tie someone else's, than your own. Now, come with

me down to the shrine.”

I wrinkled my nose. I hadn't been to the place in years, since my nature had shown my incompatibility with Christianity. “What for?” I took the watch from Dima and slipped it into my pocket as I followed my father to the door.

“There's something I have to show you.” He held the door open as we stepped through.

I turned back to tell Dima that would be all, only to see that he was glaring at Fyodor. This was not the behavior of the man I knew. He'd raised his voice to me, certainly. How could one deal with a three-year old otherwise? He'd even spanked me as a child when I'd been particularly bad. Dima had never shown my father anything but deference. “That-that will be all, Dima,” I said, disconcerted.

Fyodor seemed to find the man's glare amusing. “Don't glare at me, old man. You knew it would happen today.”

Dima quickly looked away. “Of course, my Lord. I'm sure you know best.”

“Yes, I do. Don't ever forget that. You know what will happen if you do.” Father shut the door on him and strode down the hall.

I hurried to keep up with him. “I've been to the shrine plenty. I used to pray there all the time. What's there to see that I haven't seen?”

“Your piousness in your youth was a trait I admired about you, Alexei. I don't know why you turned from God. Was it Dano, did he convince you?”

I said nothing. When he said things like this, I wondered, I feared, that he knew



what I did with Dano and he did not approve. It was a delicate area for me, because if forced to choose, I didn't know what my decision would be, so I would hide it as long as I could, hopefully forever.

My father continued, seemingly unsurprised by my silence. "It doesn't matter. To answer your question, it was always down there, long before you or even I was born."

"I see. What is it?"

"The future and the past of our family." He grabbed me by the back of the neck, forcing me to look at him. "You see nothing. Not yet," he said, suddenly tense. Then he let go of me.

Nervously, I followed him down into the Shrine in silence. The room was no different than it had been before. Six rows of wooden pews with a walkway down the middle and thick violet carpeting leading up to a small stone cistern filled with water. Beyond it was an alcove, where a painted icon the size of a man stood, of Saint Albanus in flowing crimson robes, his blue eyes gazing down on any supplicant before him with a long, flowing beard of red. To the right of the saint was the wall of candles, perhaps half a dozen of the hundred lit. Fyodor stepped up to the cistern and motioned for me to stand beside him, I did as he instructed, looking down into the pool.

"Do you know what this is?" Fyodor asked.

"It's supposed to be holy water, but there's no priest here, so it's probably just tap water that the servants fill," I replied truthfully. As a child, I might have been fooled into thinking it was more than that, and anointing myself with it before the Saint.

“No one fills this pool with water, Alexei. These are the tears of God that fall here, when he looks down upon the evil around us.”

I resisted the urge to laugh, but a trace of a smile must have been visible on my face, because Fyodor frowned at me. Was I expected to believe such nonsense? The tears of God? If it were true, if our family were so holy as to have such a thing, then why had we been cursed to have my mother taken by encephalitis, or my sister to die of tuberculosis?

“I wish you had kept your faith, my son. You will need it for what lies ahead.”

“That's nonsense Father,” I finally said.

He nodded, a look of quiet disappointment on his face. “We'll leave that aside for a moment. Our family is not originally Russian. We come from Canaan. We were driven out nearly two and a half thousand years ago.”

“We're Jews?” I said, rather shocked at the news.

“No, Assyrian, but that was a long time ago. First we lived in Cyprus with our evil burden, then we were driven out of there to the savagery of the Caucus Mountains. There, the blood ran down upon it and we were cast out again, after many battles and the slaughter of most of our clan until we came to Russia, where we hid deep in the Urals. We could not remain un-noticed there forever, and four hundred years ago, we were driven out again. This time, we settled in the Altai Mountains, within the region of misery known as Siberia. We had always been guided by those in our family with the gift of the oracle. This site, the most powerful that we have ever settled, was brought to us by our

last seer, for our heritage had grown thin over the last two millennia and now we cannot see the world as it truly is around us.”

My father had never been one for speeches. It was an interesting story, and I wondered, was it simple oral tradition, or was there a written account of our family somewhere? “Is this in a book somewhere?”

Fyodor nodded. “You will see it when I die, but I must continue: Fortunately, the world changed, and so did our fortunes. The world became more connected and hiding was impossible, so we embraced this change. At this point we were indistinguishable from average Russians, if a bit darker skinned. We pretended to be them and became nobility, taking on the name of Neimasaurus. Prior to that, we were Shalimar, and the first of our family was Shelesh. Our burden, the pestilence, and the sacred duty of this family, is to care for Shelesh's youngest son, Emernon, a creature from the bowels of hell, spreading evil and plague wherever he goes.” My father withdrew a vial from his pocket. Within it, at the bottom, was a single drop of blood. He held it up to the light so that I could see it.

My first thought was that he'd gotten it from that fateful shore of blood, where I had taken some in my hands to save Dano. I had called it God's gift. “Is it from the swamp?” I asked.

Fyodor looked at me sharply. “How did you know that? You swore to me you would never go in there.”

“When I was eight, and we were lost, I saw a lake of blood, and a church on an

island sitting in the middle of it.”

Fyodor gripped my shoulder tightly. “You did not drink from it, did you?”

I shook my head. It wasn't a lie, because I had not. Dano had. “No, I was frightened, and ran away from it.” That was half a lie.

Fyodor released me. “I remember that. One of the search parties came upon it. In my panic to find you, I had invited those who did not know its secrets within its boundaries. I had to ensure they did not speak of it again. I bear the burden of their deaths. Three innocent men killed because of my hasty act when you broke a promise to me. I have been forced to do much worse, and one day, so will you.” He uncorked the vial and cupped his hand to scoop the water up. He poured it into the vial until it was almost full. Then he re-corked it and shook it vigorously.

I watched these acts impassively. Had three men really died that day? Was I partially to blame for it? It seemed impossible that my father had done such things.

“A hundred parts water, to one drop of our ancestor's pure, undiluted blood. Anymore, and it is a lasting poison. It will be enough for you to see the truth in this shrine, and why the house was built here.” He held the vial out to me, and I took it. “You will cease to doubt when your eyes are opened.”

“What will I see?” I asked curiously, uncorking it.

“It is different for everyone.” He turned away from me, heading to the door. “Be brave my son, but know that there is no shame in fleeing this room. I will be outside waiting for you.” Then he was gone, shutting the door behind him.

I held the vial in my hand, looking at the slight pinkish tinges to the water. I considered whether or not I should drink it. My father was too reasonable to be mad, so he expected something to happen when I drank this. Would I see an explanation for what my eight year old mind had called a miracle? But I wondered, had the blood been diluted enough when I gave it to Dano? Or was it now, as my father called it, a lasting poison? I drank it down in one gulp and put the vial in my pocket, awaiting my visions.

Nothing happened immediately, so I sat down in one of the pews to wait. I wondered how long it would take. I checked my pocket watch. It was half past six in the evening. Dinner began at eight o'clock, and the ball began at ten. The first thing I became aware of was the song of cicadas. They seemed to come from all around me. And then, I was on the floor. I hadn't fallen, but the pews were no longer there. The stone cistern was gone, the candles, carpet, everything. Except the statue in the alcove. It was no longer Saint Albanus. In its place was a stone pillar, black as coal, and as tall as a man. The floor it sat upon was dirt. Beyond the alcove was darkness and steps leading down into it. What was it father had said? The oracles could see the world for the way it really was. Is this where I had spent so much of my time in youth, anointing myself with holy water that didn't exist in supplication to a chunk of black basalt?

Then I felt it. It was as though the room were being flooded with fear. It started with my toes, and slowly, the dread washed over me. It was the rock that I felt in fear of. It was indescribably wrong somehow. And I remembered my studies with a tutor that I'd had as a boy. He had been Persian and I studied Islam for a time, it being the second most

common religion of the empire. In their religious pilgrimage, known as the Hajj, they confronted evil in the form of a stone pillar that supplicants threw stones at, attempting to cast evil out from themselves. I knew now what I was in the presence of. The wrongness of it and the dread beyond perception, hidden by the lies my eyes told me, was unfathomably vast. If I could have lashed out at it, I would have.

*You're the one who is wrong.*

The thought was all around me and deafening, leaving no room for my own thoughts. Of course it was right. I was bad, wasn't I? I was contaminated. The blood was evil and it was in me and I must die. I saw a knife on the ground, a small but sharp kitchen knife with a wooden handle. I had cut my finger on it as child. I picked it up. I looked over at the door, my father on the other side of it, waiting for me. I wanted to go to him. To leave before it made me use it. Before it knew what I had done, how wrong and ruined I had made Dano.

*You contaminated his soul.*

It knew, because I had thought it. I could feel it, opening my skull like a book and reading from me. I was nothing. I was shit. I was filth. I placed the tip of the knife against my stomach. "Please stop it," I said, as the knife slowly penetrated my jacket and then my skin.

*I'm helping you be clean again.*

I dragged the knife across my stomach, screaming. It cut through my skin and muscle, and blood ran down into my lap and onto the dirt floor. I threw the knife away

from me and it sunk into the dirt near the pillar. Then it was on the ground next to me again. “But I drank the tears of God, I prayed...” I said, as I reached into my stomach, gripping my intestines like a fistful of pasta, and slowly pulling them free.

*I don't know what God is.*

I screamed again, pulling out the pale pink tubes for my new God, almost as a magician draws a never ending handkerchief from his sleeve to impress small children. I laughed hysterically, my own blood squirting me in the eyes as I pulled more and more of myself from the hole in the stomach.

*Tear it all out; get the infection out of your body.*

I threw myself onto my side, trying to crawl toward the door. Fyodor had said it would all be over if I could leave the room. If I could just reach the threshold. But my hands again reached down to find the knife and now I cut open my chest. I stabbed my chest over and over again, blood splattering my face. I could feel that the pillar was pleased, and that made me very happy. Pleasing it was all that mattered, wasn't it? I saw movement in the blackness behind the stone, was it a cave? Something was there and it was coming now. All around me was a cacophony of cicadas and I...died.

Then I awoke, the eyes of Saint Albanus upon me and I would never view them the same way again. My father had shaken me awake. He looked down at me in concern. I sat up from where I'd fallen over on the pew. I felt the wood at my back and looked up at him.

“Is it really here? This wood?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “Everyone sees what they want in a shrine, and if for a moment it does not make sense, or the truth of it is sensed, the brain will make you forget and shield you from it.”

“It's not here then.”

“It is as real as anything you see with your eyes, my son. The world you live in is not the world you see.”

My hand went to my own blue ones. “They lie.”

“The body was carefully designed by God. They only show us that which we can deal with.” Fyodor stood, pulling me to my feet. “I am grateful to him for the kindness of this gift and so should you.”

I did not share the truth with my father that whatever was in the Shrine had no knowledge of God, and was in fact perhaps the ultimate truth that The Creator was nothing more than man's attempt to explain what it could not comprehend. The celebration of my birthday was muted in my mind by what had been revealed to me. Later, when I was alone with Dano, as there was always somewhere in so massive a house to hide with him, we made love. I didn't tell him anything. I didn't tell him that I had given him a lasting poison that even then I knew was making him wrong inside. Though the paranoia, savagery, and madness was only beginning. In the end, I let him do terrible things to me and others, because it was all my fault.

The experiments to come were my attempt to fix him, to make something good from the blood. I wanted an antidote to give to him. I didn't care about immortality. I



never wanted to become what people called “The blood-beast.” I failed in every possible way. I ruined my life, I ruined Dano’s, and everyone would suffer because of my good intentions. All because of my attempt to correct one wrong done in ignorance, so very long ago.

\*\*\*\*

Alexei stopped, and Ilya sensed that he'd suddenly become morose. Maybe raking up these memories had made the old, or was it young man, even more depressed, thinking of all the people he'd known who were now dead. But should he consider Alexei old? True, he was probably close to a century or more in age, but the vast majority of that had been spent alone in the dark, dying of starvation. He didn't really have the life experiences of an old man. It was like Alexei had spent a long time becoming prematurely old.

“I'm tired,” he said, rolling onto his side. “I want to sleep.”

Ilya got up awkwardly. Had that been a dismissal? “I'll come back with dinner tonight.”

“Thank you for the clothes.” Alexei looked up, his mummy-like face still swathed in bandages. “When you return, I would be grateful for some soap.”

“Sure,” Ilya said, getting to his feet and putting the chair back by the desk. At least he was taking an interest in his appearance. He turned to go. “I'll bring a clock, too, so you know what time it is.”

“I have one. It's on the desk. You remember, don't you? My pocket watch.” Alexei nodded in the direction of the desk and Ilya saw a silver fob watch laying there, the chain rusted and the silver corroded to a dull almost brown color. “Dano gave it to me.”

Ilya picked it up and tried to open it, but it was rusted shut. “Do you want me to see if it can be restored?”

Alexei nodded. “Have you been in the shrine, Ilya?”

“I think so.” Ilya headed toward the door, unwilling to drag up his own memories of the terrible place. “I'll be back in a few hours.”

“I know you saw something there. I know you're an oracle. Do you remember it?”

Ilya's hand went up to his eyes. Oracular. Didn't that mean you could tell the future? “I can't tell the future.”

Alexei tilted his head at him. “No, you can communicate with forces that are privy to things we mortals are not. The family history speaks in detail about what an oracle can do, but I don't know where it is anymore.”

“Then why can't I remember what's in the shrine?”

“I think it doesn't want to be disturbed, except when it is affronted. I offended it by ingesting the blood of my ancestor and it wanted me to remember my transgression.”

Ilya looked down at the ground. “Did you ever go back there?”

Alexei laughed. “After what happened the first time? No. Once was enough for me, but I suppose you can see truth whenever you enter the room. You don't need the blood to see, do you?”

Ilya nodded. “I can feel the wrongness and see the statue, but... It has my name on it.”

“No it doesn't. What I saw wasn't the truth; I don't think there is any physical form at all to it. If your name is there, then it put it there in the minds of those who enter. It's calling to you, Ilya. If I were you, answering would be the last thing on my mind.”

## CHAPTER 23: WAR BEGINS

There was no way Ilya could have known what awaited him when he left the attic. Soldier was staying to keep an eye on things, just in case of a resurgent Alexei on the warpath for human blood, though he said he might go creeping around the west wing, looking for the unknown visitor. Ilya was distracted, still thinking about Alexei's story and one fact that had occurred to him: Aleksander knew everything. He had to, if the family tradition had continued. At sixteen, he had been let in on the family burden. If this were true, then he wasn't as much of a pawn to Shoji as he or Ilya thought. That meant the little perfect creep was not nearly as secure in his position as he thought. Somehow, Ilya had to make the arrogant prick an ally against Shoji.

So distracted was he, that he didn't notice the body in the hallway, a body of a young man in footman's livery with his throat torn out. Ilya tripped over it, the dim purple light doing very little to illuminate the body dressed in black. He fell on top of the man and almost screamed. He jerked backwards, the side of his face slick with congealing blood. He wiped at it frantically. There had been something familiar about his face...

He wiped all the blood away before looking carefully at the man: short brown hair, a youngish face, and pale brown eyes. It had been the night of the masquerade; Ilya had fled the ballroom and found two servants bickering, an older man and a younger one. The younger man, the one here now with his throat opened, had complained about one of the guests touching his ass.

“Ilya, what have you done?” The voice came from down the hall, but its smooth, pleasant sound, almost like musical notes, was unmistakably Shoji's.

He looked up at the sound, and the first thing he saw, coming toward him from the darkness of the purple lamps, was a face, hovering in darkness, until he stepped into the light. He was dressed in his normal black suit, with a blue silk shirt this time, his hair pulled back in a ponytail, probably to avoid getting blood on it.

“Now I wouldn't move. My friends are very intelligent, but they still have certain...instincts.” Shoji smiled at him. From behind the neck of the dead man, the black body uncoiled, with the first detail Ilya could make out being a pair of yellow eyes. It was less than a foot from where his hand rested on the ground.

Ilya recoiled, flinging himself away from the body, and white fangs pierced the darkness as the snake struck, missing Ilya by mere centimeters, the jaws closing with an audible snap. The snake hissed at him as Ilya crouched on the ground, ready to run if the snake made any move. Down the hall, coming ever closer, Shoji laughed.

“Do you think you can run?” A black and gray striped head emerged from the sleeve of Shoji's suit, its body sliding out and dropping to the ground where it slithered forward to join the other. “I don't think you want to go around that corner. This was all planned you know.”

Ilya looked down the hallway, to where it turned to the left. There was no way of knowing what lurked there.

“Sadly, someone has tied together all the curtains in this hallway, making it very

difficult for your friends to join us.” As he spoke, another snake poked its snout out of his jacket, a dark red and leathery looking forked tongue kissing the air. “I didn't want to kill a stranger; I wanted to make sure it was someone you'd met at least once.” Shoji stepped over the man's body, walking between the two serpents to crouch down next to Ilya.

He only had eyes for the snake in the Oriental Boy's jacket. “I-I don't even know his name.”

“Neither do I, but I saw you talking with him during the masquerade, and now he's dead because of it. Are you ready to take me into the attic and show me what you've found? It's the blood-beast, isn't it?”

Ilya weighed his options. He got to his feet, withdrew the pistol from his pocket and pointed it at Shoji, whose eyes registered first surprise and then fear. Ilya pulled the trigger as Shoji flung himself away from Ilya. Nothing happened. The Snakes hissed and placed themselves between Ilya and Shoji who looked up at Ilya in shock.

“You tried to kill me,” he whispered, stunned.

Stupid piece of antique junk. Ilya locked eyes with Shoji for a second, as the other boy's expression hardened. Then Ilya turned and ran.

“Kill him!” Shoji shouted. “Bite him all over!”

But Ilya didn't go around the corner and into the trap, he turned at the last second, toward a bedroom and flung the door open, stepping into the darkness and slamming it behind him. He threw the latch. The snakes were too big to get in through any gaps. He

turned the light on, illuminating the bedroom. It was almost a mirror of the one he'd used during his unfortunate ledge experience when he'd brained the Gamekeeper. The door shook as Shoji threw his weight against it.

Ilya frantically pushed a small wooden desk, a sort of woman's vanity, across the door as Shoji flung himself against it. Then the onslaught stopped.

“Ilya? There's no way out of that room. Why don't you open the door?” Shoji asked calmly, a semblance of his smooth, pleasant demeanor returning. “If you do, and you help me, we can go back to being friends and I'll forget all about what you just tried to do.”

Ilya said nothing, bracing himself against the desk, not trusting him for a second, or giving him any indication that he was still in the room. He should have taken his chances around the corner. Here it was only a matter of time until he got in, then where could Ilya go? The ledge outside the window, where he could jump five flights down? Wait, he'd already crawled to another room before, why not try it again? Because it was a disaster last time. All the windows had been locked and he couldn't get in. Well, he'd break the fucking glass now. This was a serious enough situation for that, wasn't it? There was the string to summon a servant. That would only kill another acquaintance or friend of his. The phone. There was one in every bedroom. He could call for help...except the only people in the house that could hear were Shoji and Aleksander. Sure, his friends were here, but they would never be able to get inside. He could call Aleksander, and that was it. Everyone else was deaf.

“You were just scared, that’s all. You didn’t really want to hurt me, did you?”

Silence greeted Shoji’s statement. “Did you know that snakes can control the amount of venom they inject when they bite someone? I could keep you alive for days, with my snakes biting you all over. Locked away in one of the disused servant's cottages, just you and my adders...” His voice was only a whisper through the keyhole. “You'll wish you were dead after a few minutes. But the little venom they inject will keep you too weak to leave. They could start to feed on you, taking your fingers. Though it would take them some time to gnaw them off, they'd get there. And you wouldn't bleed to death either, because their venom has a natural cauterizing effect. Then they could eat your toes, ears, cheeks, nose, and of course, your eyes. Or we can be friends. I know how much you want a friend. You don't really have any do you? Or lovers...”

Shoji had made a mistake. Ilya had friends. He had Soldier, Cook, Orryn, Klimov, and Elem. They might not be close friends, but they would be over time. As for lovers, it was only a matter of time with Tabitha. He did not need the Oriental Boy, nor his body. It was easy to think this without looking him in the eye.

“Don't you remember when we were in the pool together? I touched you, and you touched me. We kissed and you enjoyed it. Don't you want to put your hands on me again? Touch me, use me, fuck me. I know that's what you want, isn't it? To be the man? I would just lie there and you could do anything you want to me. I would scream for you if you wanted that. Or maybe gasp and moan. Tell me what you want Ilya, and it can happen. Isn't that better than us fighting?”



Ilya came to a decision. Never had Shoji been more repellant to him. If he slept with the Oriental Boy, he would become like Aleksander, shackled to him, trying to fulfill his every whim with only an illusion of freedom. No. Ilya made his choice and headed for the window, grabbing a metal bookend in the shape of a goat from a shelf, so that he could break in the window of another bedroom. He unlatched the window. Behind him, Shoji continued to elaborate on filthy, dirty Greek Things in a seductive whisper. It would have been more effective, Ilya supposed, if he hadn't outlined that torture scenario beforehand.

He pushed the window open, praying it wouldn't squeak. For once luck was on his side. Then luck came to an end. The heating grate squeaked and for a moment, Ilya thought Soldier had come to his aid. He looked back and saw yellow eyes peering from through the brass bars. The snake struck at it again and the bars rattled. It lacked the hands to undo the latch, like Soldier could. But soon, the thin, flimsy piece of brass would snap and the snake would be in the room. The creature struck again and the latch shook with the impact. Ilya climbed through the window.

“Ilya, if you move the barricade and open the door, they won't bite you. You don't have to be afraid,” Shoji said, unaware that he was now talking to an empty room. Ilya, balanced precariously on the ledge, leaned down and pulled the window shut as the snake snapped the latch on the grate and practically flew into the room, making a beeline for the window. It seemed like less than a second before it struck at the pain of glass where Ilya's hand rested on the other side. He scooted away from the furious creature, as a crack

formed in the pane, heading further down the ledge. Hopefully, the snake couldn't verbalize what it had seen to Shoji. Ilya couldn't talk with Orryn, except in dreams, even if the bird could understand him. It would take Shoji a little while to figure out what the snake was trying to tell him.

The pane of glass shattered behind Ilya and the adder, blood coming from its nose, slithered onto the ledge. Lovely. This snake apparently was too pissed off to report back. It was taking matters into its own hands and coming after Ilya. And there was nothing Ilya could do, desperately clinging to the wall behind him on twelve inches of ledge, but watch the yellow eyes shimmy toward him. It was bigger than the other adders, too, by at least a foot of length. His attempt to flee the snake's advance was much, much slower than its own advance. Distantly, Ilya heard a harsh cawing from far away. He looked out toward the swamp and saw a speck of black launch itself from a spindly tree, near the shore of the lake. The vulture was flapping madly toward him. Ilya realized the bird was raising the alarm, and in the swamp beyond, dozens of black shapes were rising into the sky.

Orryn had the foresight to have the house watched. Thank God the vulture was on Ilya's side, because he was much, much smarter than Ilya. The snake was not immune to what was transpiring, and it seemed to make the creature even madder, it covered the last several feet of distance between them as Ilya heard a crash come from the room he'd escaped from. The snake struck at him and Ilya barely moved his foot away in time. He couldn't dodge the next strike, but he could shove the boot into the creature's face, and its

fangs ate leather, but Ilya could feel them brush his toes within. He was grateful that he always changed into them when going into the secret wing. The adder reared back before Ilya could push it off the ledge, and the creature pulled its tail forward to allow it to reach greater heights with its next strike, as it eyed Ilya's jean-covered shin.

Before it could strike, the vulture was upon it. The snake reared back, flinging itself backward to avoid the talons. But because of how close the snake was to the wall, the vulture could not get directly overhead of the creature. It became a game of snapping jaws and slashing talons. Ilya took advantage of the snake's distraction to move further toward the next window. Yellow eyes were locked with red in a careful dance of death. The snake was striking to kill, while the vulture was merely hovering and distracting the snake. But the moment it tried to move toward Ilya, it was forced to turn its head away from the bird. Then the vulture would move in with lethal blows. It was a standoff the snake could not win. It could not retreat or move forward. Ilya smashed in the window of the next room and reached inside to undo the latch as Shoji's head appeared outside the window.

“Get away from her,” he roared, throwing a book at the vulture, who easily avoided it, but it gave the snake the opportunity to turn around, heading back toward her master. Shoji threw another book as the vulture tried to slash at the rear of the snake. Ilya didn't see what happened next as he jumped down into the room, the cawing of the vulture reinforcements becoming quite loud. He ran across the room and flung the door open. The hallway was deserted. He ran down the hall and around the corner. He didn't

see any more snakes. He didn't stop until he was outside the house. Several vultures were still circling overhead, and a dozen of them sitting on trees around the house.

Ilya felt reassured by their presence. Exactly why they had chosen Ilya as their champion, he wasn't sure. But it felt good to know that they had his back. They probably didn't have any choice, since Ilya was only one of two Oracles here. He grinned, insanely satisfied at being not just special, but oracular. Ilya shivered as he walked back to his cottage, glancing at the empty ones around him. That was where Shoji had planned to imprison him, where the deaf servants wouldn't hear his screams as the snakes slowly chewed parts of his body off. Then he'd launched into a seduction attempt, which seemed to Ilya like he'd gotten those things in the wrong order. Shoji had to get his priorities straight. If he'd just waited outside of the attic and attempted a seduction, Ilya had very little doubt that the outcome would have been quite different. For some reason, Shoji seemed to be getting increasingly desperate.

Once he was safely ensconced in the cottage, he made sure every door and window was securely locked, and there were no holes that adders could sneak into. He gave Masque a good scratch and then took a shower, washing the un-named servant's blood from his body. He was the first, but he wouldn't be the last to die because of Ilya. He needed to kill the man. He'd tried to shoot him, a fact that still made Ilya shudder. Because of Shoji he'd tried to shoot another living being in the face with a pistol. He was a murderer. Just because he'd failed, didn't make it any different in his eyes. The intention had been there just the same. Like the Tatar boy at the execution yard, whose head had

almost popped like a balloon, showering the wall with blood, Ilya had tried to be an executioner.

He could call it self-defense, but that was irrelevant and no more than self-interest. No matter the excuse, murder was murder. His plans weren't up to the Snake's abilities. He'd been saved from him by the vultures twice now. Eventually they wouldn't be around. There was only one option he could see. There was no one he could tell about this, who would believe him. Unless Aleksander had been brought into the secret on his sixteenth birthday. It made Ilya laugh hysterically, and he flung himself down on his bed. His only hope was now the man who'd been the bane of his existence since he arrived at Neimasaurus. There was no phone at the Cottage; Demetri had no use for it, with a teletypewriter at Neimasaurus.

He couldn't travel so freely anymore. Word would have filtered throughout Shoji's scaled minions about what happened earlier. Ilya had the feeling there was going to be a full scale war between beaks and fangs before too much longer. He needed Soldier. Venom had no effect on wood, but his bayonet and sword could easily deal with a snake if he could kill a cat the size of Arsenic. Ilya felt a twinge at his first cat's death. He got up and went over to his desk. He tore off a small piece of paper and wrote a short note to Soldier.

*Soldier, I was attacked by snakes upon leaving the attic. It's too dangerous for me to go to the house alone. I've decided to tell Aleksander everything, because he's the only*

*one who might believe me, and get rid of Shoji. I want you to deliver a note to him, in that wonderful beautiful handwriting of yours, to meet me, alone, at the mausoleum at midnight. Make sure he gets it when snake boy isn't around. I'm nervous alone at the cottage, so please come down once it's dark, and you've delivered the note. See if you can filch some food for Alexei and use the dumb waiter to get it to him.*

*I'm counting on you,*

*Ilya.*

*P.S. Burn this note!*

Ilya rolled the scrap of paper up as tightly as he could, and found a piece of string to tie it with. Then he went over to his window and peered out of it, making sure no adders were resting on the sill, or below it. As far as he could tell, the coast was clear. He opened the window as far as it would go and stuck his head out, shading his eyes against the late afternoon sun.

“Hey vultures,” he called out, spying several black shapes in nearby trees.

They looked at him curiously. One of them took off and flew toward the window. Ilya stepped back to give the carrion eater room to maneuver. The foul smelling black beast had to tuck its wings in to make it through. It took purchase on the end of Ilya's bed frame, gripping the metal bar tightly. It looked him over curiously, the blood red eyes rather unpleasant up close. It was much smaller than Orryn, who would have never been able to fit through the window safely.

“Hello,” he said, not sure how to start a conversation with the beast. “You can understand me, right?”

The bird ducked its head in an imitation of a nod, made a little difficult by its long gray neck.

Ilya held up the note and the string. “I need you to take a message to Neimasaurus for me, because it's a little dangerous at the moment for me to go walking around inside it. I'm going to tie it to your ankle. Is that okay?”

The bird cawed, and Ilya jumped at the sudden sound. But it ducked its head again. It pushed its wings back and slid one of its talon to the side, so Ilya could reach it easily. He stepped forward nervously. He placed the little roll of paper against the hard but surprisingly warm talon, and tied it as securely as he could.

“Do you know the room in the attic, where I go so often? It has a rectangular window, and it faces—”

The creature cawed again, nodding, and cutting off Ilya's further clumsy attempts at describing the attic study window.

So they were watching him through the windows of Neimasaurus, eh? “Anyway, it will look empty, but there will be a small toy soldier about six inches tall and made of wood. The message goes to him. Wait and see if he has a reply. If he doesn't then you can go.”

The bird was about to nod, but then it stopped and tilted its head at Ilya, as if questioning the boy's sanity.

Where the hell did a sentient vulture get off questioning Ilya's grasp of reality? “Yes, it's weird, but aren't you a little bit...odd yourself?” Ilya shrugged. “Hell, so am I,” he said, pointing at his eyes and smiling.

The bird flexed its wings a bit and nodded, as if in agreement. Then it tensed.

“Thanks,” Ilya said, as the vulture launched itself through the window. Vulture post? What crazy shit would Ilya try next? He shut the window and headed into the kitchen for something to eat. He washed his hands thoroughly, vultures being notorious for carrying all manner of bacteria and diseases, such as the plague, and then slammed the refrigerator door shut in frustration. He'd pretty much emptied it out for Alexei the other night. He settled for some crackers and pickled herring, which Masque quickly made a shared meal of between them. He figured he'd leave at around ten for the mausoleum, to ensure he had plenty of time to give Leonya Kirkuk's bones a proper burial and then spill his guts to Aleksander and hope for the best. At least Soldier would be there to poke him if he got all handsy.

It was hours before anything happened. Demetri came home at half past five and grouched about how there was so little to eat, and how Ilya was going to eat Demetri into bankruptcy. If only he weren't so hungry during the rant, it might have resonated. Eventually, Demetri found some pasta to make, and diced up and sautéed some mushrooms to put in a sour cream sauce with it. It was surprisingly, good, Ilya thought. A sort of vegetarian Beef Stroganoff. Demetri washed it down with some hard liquor while Ilya had milk. When he was done, he headed back to his room to see Soldier on his bed,



his legs crossed and his hands behind his head.

*How did it go?* Ilya signed.

*I delivered the note in my hand, telling him to come alone to the mausoleum at midnight and tell no one, but there's no guarantee he'll do that. Alexei got a pineapple and two bananas I swiped from a tropical fruit platter. Hopefully that'll hold him over until things settle down.*

It was half-past eight at night. There were still ninety minutes to kill until he left for the mausoleum. He took the pistol out of his pocket and threw it on the bed. *This doesn't work, either. I tried to shoot Shoji with it and nothing happened.*

*Good for you,* Soldier signed, getting to his feet and walking over to it. *You're not so paralyzed with fear now, are you?*

Ilya puffed his chest out a bit. That was true. He hadn't wet himself, either. If he'd been under six years of age, he'd be proud of that, too. *Nope, I'm almost brave.*

Soldier turned the pistol over and examined the gun carefully, releasing the catch and exposing the firing chamber. *And you cleaned this gun carefully?*

Ilya nodded. *Yes, I read up on how to do it in a book and asked Demetri for tips. And being the stickler you are for doing things by the book, you removed the bullets so there wouldn't be an accident while you were cleaning, right?*

*Right,* Ilya signed. Then he hung his head for a moment before walking over to the desk and picking up the six bullets from where they sat in the ashtray where he'd put them. He had to move away several papers which had buried it from sight. When he

turned around, the pistol's centrifuge had been pulled open to facilitate his reloading of the pistol. Soldier lounged on his side, his head resting on one hand, eternally grinning face upturned toward him.

*Shut up!* Ilya signed, before Soldier could gloat anymore. He snatched the pistol up and reloaded it as the silent spasms finally took Soldier and he was rolling on the bed clutching at his sides, his shoulders shaking in silent laughter. *Did you see any snakes on your way here?* Ilya signed, to change the subject.

Soldier nodded, regaining his composure and sitting up. *Yes, but I think they have trouble detecting my presence because I give off no heat and don't smell like anything they associate with life. Anyway, there were two that I could see, one hidden in a pile of dead leaves, watching the front door, and a second one hiding in the tall grass to see anyone going or coming from the cottages to Blood Manor. It makes it more exciting when I call it that doesn't it?*

Ilya rolled his eyes. *If there's one thing my life needs more of, it's excitement.*

*Exactly, you're just lazing the day away in here, while I'm working my ass off feeding blood-beasts and sending secret messages,* Soldier signed.

The ninety minutes were upon them, a little too soon for Ilya's taste. Soldier had an easy way of making the time fly for Ilya that the boy was grateful for. He got the bag of bones out of the closet and hefted it over one shoulder. Fortunately, Demetri was going over to another cottage to play some cards. He'd invited Ilya, but he'd declined, saying he still felt weak from his mushroom head ordeal and wanted to get some sleep. Demetri

didn't buy it and had no way to prove Ilya was lying, so let it slide. Ilya put on a pair of sweat pants over his jeans, in case of any snake bites, and made sure he wore his boots again. He would be relying on Soldier, who was down at their level, to stop any snakes. Ilya had no idea how good vultures saw at night, but they weren't known as night hunters. Fortunately, since Ilya was going out to the mausoleum to bury bones, he would carry a shovel, along with the electric torch. There was no better anti-snake device than the shovel; its wide blade was perfect for cutting things in two, like a snake's body.

It was awkward, heaving the bones on his back and with his hands filled. He was relying on Soldier to get him to the mausoleum, since he had no idea where it was, and to warn him about any encroaching snakes. In the end, despite Ilya's best attempts to work it up as a trip into the heart of hell, where snakes would be leaping out at him every five seconds, lurking under every rock and responsible for every swaying blade of grass, it was slow and uneventful. It was a good ten minutes' walk from the house down a packed dirt road, then cutting through a patch of forest, and up a hill along the same road.

It was cloudy tonight, which made it very dark. Ilya didn't dare turn on the electric torch, otherwise everyone would see. So he had to make do with his less than stellar night vision. Oracles weren't good in the dark, nor were they good at seeing long distances. What else had Zdansky said? Light sensitivity, too. It was hard to be as special as he was.

## CHAPTER 24: A MAUSOLEUM AT NIGHT

Despite his endearing visual difficulties, once he and Soldier were through the woods the large and imposing structure on the hill could be seen in silhouette. It was at least two, possibly three stories tall, and as wide as an apartment block.

*Most of the tombs are dug down into the hill,* Soldier signed, which involved Ilya squatting down so he could see his little fingers.

*Most of them? You mean we can't even see all of it?* Ilya signed back.

*Well, it's been here almost four hundred years, hasn't it? It's much older than the house, or the old one before that.*

Ilya shivered slightly. *You don't... You don't think there's anyone alive in the tombs do you? Some old Neimasaurus that drank the blood and was buried here by accident? Or maybe imprisoned here when they became too inhuman looking?*

Soldier shrugged. *You probably should have asked Alexei about that. I thought you were afraid of ghosts, anyway. Now stop being a little girl bitch, and let's go.*

*That's kind of sexist,* Ilya signed, slightly embarrassed.

*What's that?*

*Never mind, you're too old to get the concept.*

The walk up the hill was a little exhausting for Ilya, since he was the kind of guy who in gym class would fall to the ground after a few minutes, clutching his leg, saying it hurt, not bad enough to go to the nurse, but just enough to sit out the rest of the period,

sir. He wished that Soldier hadn't reminded him of ghosts. It was the last thing he needed on his mind. It took five minutes for them to crest the hill. The first thing Ilya noticed was the sound of bubbling water in a small stone fountain within a carefully maintained garden in front of the monolithic temple.

Ilya's vision was getting well acquainted with the darkness now; he could see Soldier climbing up on the stone ledge around the fountain, standing in front of the statuesque form of a woman pouring an urn of water into the pool below. Soldier stood in silhouette to the stream of water, his hands going to his groin, in a crude imitation of urination.

*Hey Ilya, he signed. Look, I'm peeing!*

*That's great, Ilya replied, and it's not disrespectful of the dead at all. Ilya walked past the rude little toy toward the building. How do you get into this thing?*

*Well, in layman's terms, you walk through the door. Soldier pointed toward an open archway, to the left, with a metal gate closed in front of it. Ilya squinted in that direction and saw little more than a blur. Upon closer inspection, Soldier racing ahead of him, Ilya saw that the gate was locked and chained. Damn it, we can't get in.*

Soldier looked up at him for a moment and then stepped through the space between the bars. He waved to Ilya. *Yeah, I don't know how I'll make it through!*

*You know, once it's dark, you're much more of a dick.*

*Night is when I really come alive, you know. The moon shoots down its crazy rays and I get drunk on them. Now, stay here while I scout around and see if there's another*

*way in that I can open.*

Ilya nodded reluctantly, setting the bag of bones on the ground, as Soldier walked into the smooth marble opening. He needed to make sure in the future, that he wasn't around the toy while he was “feeding” on moonlight.

Soldier turned back—*Keep an eye out for snakes!*—then he disappeared into the darkness.

Ilya gripped the shovel with both hands tightly, his eyes scanning the bushes and flower beds nearby. They were, if one could pardon the expression, potential hot beds of snake activity. There was nowhere he could put Leonya around here. He could hardly shove the bones in the bushes. What kind of resting place was that? Ilya sighed, leaning on the shovel. If it weren't for the fortress of death at his back, and the snakes massing just out of sight, this place might be kind of nice. Maybe even a little peaceful.

A few minutes passed accompanied by the soothing sounds of the fountain. Ilya wandered over to it and looked down in the waters. The design seemed familiar to him somehow, but he couldn't quite place it. Something bumped into his foot and Ilya shrieked, whirling and striking out at the creature attacking his foot. The shovel crunched down hard on a femur bone. He looked over at the pack by the door, and Soldier waved to him, the perpetual smile even more diabolical than usual.

*Hi, the Toy signed. Just trying to get your attention.*

Ilya picked up the femur bone and stalked back over to the pack, shoving it back in through an open flap. *Well?*

*There's a back door I can let you through. All you have to do is walk around to the back of the building. By yourself. Through tall wavy grass and big piles of dead leaves and muddy—*

Ilya cut him off. *You have no idea what's back there, do you?* he signed.

*Of course I know. I've lived here for eighty years. There's a garden on the sides, with cute walkways and benches and a hedge maze around the back. Just keep the building in sight. It's a small white door near the entrance to the maze, which you probably shouldn't explore given how poorly you see at night.* Soldier stepped through the bars and disappeared into the mausoleum.

Ilya picked up the pack, slung it over a shoulder, and made his way down a path along the side of the building, wishing he'd come during the day to see all the pretty flowers. Were those topiary animals? How much money did this family spend on just maintaining this garden? Probably more money than Ilya would ever see. He passed a carefully maintained tiger, which really wasn't doing anything good for his nerves, when the hedge maze came into view. Sitting atop the head of a nearby topiary elephant, which almost impossibly was actual size, was what appeared to be a large bird. Ilya squinted up at it, trying to tell if it was part of the display or not. How could he tell if a black bird was green or black in the darkness? Why would someone sculpt a bird onto the top of an elephant, anyway?

As if sensing the inner debate within Ilya, The bird cawed loudly, and he jumped at the sound. Had that been Orryn's dulcet tones? It took flight suddenly, the massive

wingspan further proving its identity to Ilya. Orryn landed on the back of a wooden bench a short distance away and Ilya saw the door just beyond. He'd been so busy staring at topiary animals that he'd almost missed it. It seemed to be made of wood and metal, and as he neared it, swung open ominously with an audible creak. Soldier peeked around the door and looked at him curiously.

*Why are you just standing there? Come on!* Soldier motioned him into the tomb.

Before Ilya could step across the threshold into the house of the dead, a black shape tinged in grey shot past him through the door. Ilya glanced back at the bench to see it deserted. A caw came from down the dark corridor, so Ilya stepped inside, shutting the door behind him. He threw the latch in case of burglars. Ilya, at least, had no intention of stealing from the dead. He could make no promises for Orryn or Soldier. He could assume in the case of Orryn that the bird had an agenda.

*Is that the magic bird?* Soldier asked, as Ilya's electric torch picked out the vulture amongst the tools in the storage room where they found themselves. Orryn was perched on the end of a shovel, his long and rather unpleasant looking talons actually digging into the metal slightly. Ilya found himself for the first time questioning the bird's appearance. He had seemed like a large, rather old vulture. Now, after seeing what the blood had done to Alexei, Ilya found himself wondering at the milky white pupils of Orryn's eyes, the talons that could so easily dig into metal and shred a woman's face like confetti. How long had the vulture lived in the swamp subsisting on the blood of the fountain? Ilya shivered, and smiled uncomfortably at the bird. No wonder it was so intelligent. Most



vultures didn't have centuries of experience to draw upon.

Orryn looked down imperiously at the toy, his white eyes regarding him dubiously.

“Orryn, meet Soldier,” Ilya said nervously. “I don't think the bird knows sign language, but he seems to understand what I say,” Ilya added, looking down at Soldier.

As if to emphasize the point, Orryn cawed loudly, the sound echoing off the hard stone walls. The acoustics were terrible in a tomb. All these hard surfaces and nothing soft to absorb the sound waves. How were the dead supposed to sleep in such a place?

Soldier shrugged, looking up at the carrion eater with obvious distrust. *You should never trust a vulture, Ilya.*

*He saved my life a couple times.*

*So have I. Do you trust me?*

*Of course! Ilya signed it without thinking. Why shouldn't I?*

*You shouldn't trust anyone, Ilya.*

Orryn looked between the two of them, his eyes narrowing.

“Soldier says I shouldn't trust anyone, including you and him. That's what we're talking about.”

*Don't tell him that, you idiot! I don't trust him!*

Orryn cawed again, and his head bobbed up and down on his long gray neck in unmistakable agreement.

“See, he agrees. You guys deserve each other.”

*We have wisdom and age on our side. You'll be disappointed with people. You'll be betrayed, used, and hurt if you blindly trust.*

Wow, someone's had a bad life. Shall I translate that? Before Soldier could reply, Ilya repeated what he'd signed and Orryn nodded again. Then the vulture cawed again, this time not so loud, and gestured toward a wheel barrow in the corner.

“What?” Ilya said.

*I think he's suggesting that you put the bag of bones and the shovel into the wheelbarrow, Ilya.*

“That's a good idea.” Ilya unloaded the backpack and shovel. He looked around at the implements on the wall. It was rather like a medieval torture chamber in terms of selection. Ilya found a hammer and chisel to his liking and threw them in. Before Ilya could move the contraption, Orryn launched himself from the shovel and flew down to the pack and settled himself comfortably onto the pile of bones. If he could speak, Ilya imagined he would be saying “Drive on,” right about now.

*Wait for me!* Soldier signed, not wanting to be outdone by the vulture. He leaped into the wheelbarrow and took the electric torch from Ilya. He situated himself in the front with his back against the bones, shining the light ahead. Unmistakably, Orryn rolled his eyes at Ilya. Soldier reached back with one hand and signed. *Forward.*

The contraption lumbered forward under Ilya's not considerable muscle power, pushing through the pair of swinging doors into the mausoleum proper. Spooky wasn't the word for it at all. It was like stepping into another world, one of cool, pristine white

marble floors and walls, illuminated only by moonlight from the glass roof overhead. The clouds must have cleared. The stench of fresh flowers mingled with the cloying odor of decayed ones wafted through Ilya's nostrils. He supposed it was better than smelling corpses. On either side of Ilya, the tombs on the walls stretched up three stories, with brass plates in front of each one, identifying the occupants. The moonlight was too faint for Ilya to make out names, which he was thankful for. It would have been pleasant, were it not for the seven-year-old boy standing against the wall halfway down the corridor dressed in aristocratic finery from a hundred and twenty years ago. A small toy was clutched in his hands and his body was unmistakably ravaged by tuberculosis. He stared at Ilya malevolently, his sunken yellowed eyes narrowing. Ilya glanced at him for a second and then looked away. It was like looking into the eyes of an adder. He was careful to ignore the ghostly child as he pushed the wheelbarrow down the corridor. The child's gaze never wavered as Ilya neared where he stood. As he passed by the boy, the spirit shrieked at him:

“Go away! Go away! Go away!” The voice was nearly indecipherable, a choked, mangled, high-pitched squeal of a child from vocal cords ruined by the debilitating illness that had taken his life.

Ilya tried not to flinch at the sound as he pushed past the boy, intent on finding the lower passages to the basement where he could bury Leonya. He knew there would be ghosts at a mausoleum, and he couldn't let on that he saw them, or every ghost in the place would mob him. For a fraction of a second he looked at the ghost up close and his

eyes widened slightly. The toy clutched in the dead boy's hands was unmistakably an exact copy of Soldier. Ilya hurried around the corner.

“Stay away!” the child shrieked down the hall. “Stay away!”

The voice of the child cut into Ilya like a knife. He had to do something, didn't he? It was his job, wasn't it? He had these eyes for a reason. He was still for a moment, not moving. He was completely unsure of what he had to do, but his heart said don't abandon a child, it's inhuman.

*There's a ghost back there, Ilya signed, after he had Soldier's attention.*

*Yes, it's a tomb, Ilya.*

*This one has a phantom image of you clutched in his hands.*

Soldier spun his head around to look at him. *That's interesting.*

Quickly, Ilya signed what he'd seen. *Why is he just standing there?*

Soldier shrugged. *How should I know? From what you said, his name is Wlad. He wasn't quite seven when he died. I kept him company to the end. He's who I was bought for and why I originally came to Neimasaurus. I used to be a famous toy, you know.*

Ilya picked Soldier up, and whispered to Orryn, “We have to deal with a ghost.”

The bird seemed unsurprised by this, and set about preening itself. Ilya took a deep breath and stepped around the corner. Wlad hadn't moved. He stood in the same spot, the toy clutched tightly in his hands, and glared at Ilya.

“Go away! Go away! Go away!” Wlad shrieked. But it wasn't anger, now that Ilya was really listening and looking at the child. It was all-consuming terror.

“I know you're afraid,” Ilya said, taking a step forward.

Wlad's yellowed eyes widened, and he screamed at the realization Ilya could see him. He closed his eyes and held out the phantom copy of Soldier, as if it would protect him, and shut his eyes tight. “Stay away!”

Ilya turned the electric torch off, and explained what the ghost was doing to Soldier.

*He was always shy,* Soldier signed.

“Did you see what I have in my hands?” Ilya said calmly.

“Stay away!” Wlad shrieked, shaking the phantom of Soldier at Ilya as though it would ward him away. He refused to open his eyes.

“I have Soldier right here,” Ilya said, holding the Toy out in front of him.

*He called me Marcher.*

“He just told me you call him Marcher.”

Wlad looked out of the corner of his eye at Ilya, suspicious. “I've got him here,” the boy said, shaking the phantom he held that was only a projection of himself.

“But mine can march,” Ilya said, setting Soldier down on the ground.

The toy stood up straight, placing his rifle in the crook of his arm and did a staccato march across the marble. The phantom disappeared from Wlad's hand and he stared down in wonder at Soldier.

Now Ilya understood. *He doesn't know he's dead,* he signed to Soldier.

*Am I marching toward him? I can't see him!* He signed back frantically.

*You're fine. He's by the purple vase with the wilted flowers.*

Shyly, Wlad took a step toward the toy, keeping a wary eye on Ilya. “Marcher! I fell out and now I can't get back in.” Wlad crouched down on the ground.

Ilya translated for Soldier, who stood at attention, doing his best to look in the direction of the ghost.

Wlad looked up at Ilya. “Go away!” the boy shrieked again. “Marcher's here.”

“He can't see you,” Ilya said patiently.

“Why not?” the boy asked suspiciously. “He's magical.”

“It's not the right kind of magic,” Ilya said, pointing up at his eyes. “You see them, how they're orange? It makes me special and lets me see ghosts.” Ilya was translating to Soldier as he spoke, using one hand to sign as much as he could.

The boy wrapped his arms around his knees. “Ghosts? I'm only sick, I'm not dead.”

“Is it tuberculosis?” Ilya asked.

Wlad nodded.

“People don't survive that illness.” Ilya was lying to the boy, since plenty of people did now. Back then, they didn't. This way was easier. Soldier nodded to emphasize what Ilya had said.

Wlad looked down at the toy and then up at Ilya. His expression hardened, became almost inhuman looking, a mask of sunken eyes and a shadow slit of a mouth, more akin to a snake than a boy. “No! I'm sick! I'm sick! I'm sick!”

“Doesn't it hurt to have tuberculosis?”

“Yes! A lot,” the boy shrieked.

“Are you in pain now? Or do you feel nothing?” Ilya asked, holding out his hand.

“Why don't you let me help you back to where you fell out from?”

“It's my room, up there,” Wlad pointed up above him to one of the tombs. “I'm in a hospital, but I can't get better because I'm not where my parents put me. I fell out.” The shadows and sunken features were fading now, and Ilya could see tears welling up. “I'm going to get better,” the boy begged, looking down at Ilya's hand. “I want to get better. She said I would.”

“This isn't a hospital. You're in the Neimasaurus tomb, up on the hill, looking down on the house. That's your last name, isn't it? Look at the names on the walls and you'll see I'm telling the truth.”

Soldier took a step forward and pointed to Ilya's hand. Wlad started to cry, and as he cried, the tuberculosis melted away from him. His eyes were blue, not yellow, and his skin had lost the jaundiced hue. The boy reached out and took Ilya's hand.

“I don't want to be dead,” Wlad whispered. “Mama said I wouldn't.”

“You're only dead for a moment, and then you pass on. Do you see anyone else here in this tomb? They've all passed.”

“You mean heaven?”

Ilya bit back a retort about his opinion on religion and simply nodded. He didn't know what happened, except he knew that Wlad wasn't supposed to be here. Everyone

could not be ghosts, or the world would be hip deep in them by now.

Wlad flung himself toward Ilya, wrapping his arms around him. “I want to go there.”

“Then I'll help you to get back up there. When you get inside your tomb, I want you to lie down and go to sleep. When you wake up, you'll be there.” Ilya shivered at the boy's chilly embrace and hoped what he'd just said was true. “Now, what level are you on?”

“The top,” Wlad whispered against his shoulder. He set the boy down and found the rolling ladder at the beginning of the hall. There had to be a way to reach there to put flowers on the little pedestals in front of the name plates. He rolled it over next to the purple vase with the wilted flowers, the wheels squeaking in the grooves making a cacophony in the silence.

“Get on my back,” Ilya said, squatting down.

Wlad clambered onto his back and put his hands around Ilya's neck. Ilya climbed up the ladder slowly, regretting the fact that he was afraid of heights and suffered just a touch of vertigo. At the end of the ladder, he came face to face with a brass plate engraved with the words “Wlad Neimasaurus, 1852-1858, a son much loved and taken too soon.”

“This is it,” Ilya said. “Everybody off.”

Wlad disappeared into the burial chamber behind the plate. Ilya hoped what he'd said was true as he carefully crawled down the ladder, not looking down to see how far



he was along, until his feet touched marble. Soldier was waiting for him in the wheelbarrow with the electric torch. Orryn looked at Ilya for a second and shook his head slightly.

Then they were off, once again looking for the stairs. When they came to a fork, Orryn cawed and gestured to the left passage. Ilya shrugged. Who knows, maybe the bird had been here before and knew where he was going. Orryn cawed and jerked his head in the direction of the glass ceiling. Or he'd flown over it and seen some stairs. This mausoleum probably smelled like a restaurant to vultures. Five star dining if they could get past the stones for when the food was fresh. They probably watched like hawks from the roof top every time a new corpse was wheeled in, waiting for an opportunity. More importantly, why had the vulture invited himself along on this trip?

It didn't take too long to find the steps with Orryn's guidance. There were no other ghosts so far, which Ilya was relieved by. He felt good about what he'd done for Wlad, but he'd prefer to never encounter the specters. One was heartbreaking enough. He didn't need to worry about how many ghosts in the world had been waiting and suffering for centuries for someone like him to give them five minutes of their time. It made the world seem like a fundamentally cruel, unfair place. Ilya had never thought of the world as such before, even when his parents had been taken from him. He'd believed in the basic fairness of the universe. Why had one ghost changed that? No, two ghosts. Sacha was no different. He was just older and handling it better than Wlad had. Alexei's imprisonment and starvation... There was so much injustice in the world. Ilya couldn't believe it was fair

anymore.

They had to abandon the wheelbarrow to go down the steps, and a subterranean wetness hung in the air as Ilya hefted the bones and took the flashlight from Soldier. Orryn launched himself down the black steps into the unknown. Reluctantly, Ilya took a deep breath and followed, shining his torch down the black steps. There was no electricity anywhere in the mausoleum. It was meant to be a timeless structure of stone, metal, and glass to endure time. And... No one was supposed to be here at night. Soldier walked down in front of him and Ilya descended the marble steps to the next floor, where Orryn waited, resting on the bannister. The white marble stretched into blackness in both directions, and the stairs continued down, deeper into darkness. Orryn flew down the stairs, and Ilya reluctantly followed, penetrating deeper into what was not just a mausoleum, but a necropolis, a veritable city of the dead.

They went down three flights of stairs until the floor became dirt, with granite and wood supports overhead. There were holes dug into the dirt walls, as though they were waiting for bodies, like the family was already preparing for the necropolis above to be filled, no matter how many generations in advance it was. It seemed odd to Ilya, since the Neimasaurus family currently numbered three. Ilya suspected Aleksander might not give his parents too many grandchildren, either. This was a good enough spot for Leonya. He hefted the pack into one of the sepulchers on the wall. Then, he picked out a piece of wood from a nearby pile. He set to work with the hammer and chisel, which was much easier than trying to chip stone, and wrote out crudely, "Leonya Kirkuk, died in

unfortunate circumstances at Neimasaurus, mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.”

Orryn perched on a pile of wood and watched Ilya work. Soldier appeared to be standing guard. Ilya supposed it was force of habit for the toy. Ilya carefully fitted the board into the hole, hammering it into place until it was firmly wedged in. He stood back to admire his handiwork. That had gone easier than he'd thought.

Orryn cawed loudly and Ilya looked up. The bird gestured down the tunnel with his beak.

“What?”

Orryn cawed again and jerked his head down the corridor.

“I suppose I'm supposed to go down there, aren't I?”

*Even a fool would understand that,* Soldier signed.

Ilya picked up the electric torch from where he'd set it in an open sepulcher while he worked and clutched the hammer tightly in the other hand. What could there possibly be for him to see down there? “I'm going,” he snapped, as Orryn cawed again. Ilya stalked down the dirt tunnel, shining the torch back and forth until it came to an end.

Orryn swooped over his shoulder and landed on the ground next to a piece of wood and nibbled on it with his beak for emphasis.

With his old friend, Sinking Feeling, Ilya walked over to the wood and saw that it had a handle. Damn it. He brushed some of the dirt off it. It was a trap door. Orryn watched him work, his milky-white pupils staring un-seeing at Ilya. Ilya pulled the hatch open. Within was blackness, and a rickety wooden ladder descending into it. The sound

of dripping water could be heard coming from within, and faintly, the ghostly sounds of a woman crying. Ilya stepped back from it with his hands up in front of him. Orryn cawed at him, jerking his head toward the ladder.

“No.” Ilya flatly refused. “There's no way in hell I'm going down there.”

The sounds of grief from within the pit ceased. Orryn backed away from the trapdoor. Ilya reached out and slammed the door. As his hand pulled away from the handle, he heard a voice, harsh and imperious, reminding him uncannily of Alina Neimasaurus, saying:

“Who's there?”

Ilya backed away from the door and Orryn took flight down the corridor. Ilya glared at the bird.

*What is it?* Soldier asked, looking from Ilya to Orryn flapping away into the darkness.

“There's a ghost down there,” Ilya said, stepping away from the door. Then the trapdoor banged open loudly. Ilya whirled around and saw nothing but the trap door splintered down the middle from the force of the impact.

“My love, have you returned for me?” Movement could be seen in the shadows of the pit. Someone or something was rising toward the light.

Ilya ran, snatching Soldier up as he went. He had a suspicion who the ghost was now: Amaranth Neimasaurus.

“Alexei!” The woman screamed, and it was a million times louder than Wlad had

ever managed. “Don't leave me, I'm sorry!” One of the wooden beams cracked as she screamed, Ilya flinched away from it and kept running. Ghosts weren't supposed to be able to affect material things. Ilya practically flew up the stairs to the mausoleum and didn't stop until he was in moonlight. Orryn waited for him, perched on the end of the wheelbarrow.

“Thanks for that,” Ilya gasped out as he bent over, wheezing for air. There were no sounds of his pursuer coming up the steps at least. “Now I know of yet another place I can go when I want to die.”

Ilya pushed the wheelbarrow back toward the back door, guided by Orryn's imperious nods of the head. The bird seemed entirely unfazed by his chastisement. As they rounded the final corner, Ilya's heart broke in two. Glaring malevolently at Ilya from halfway down the corridor, no trace of recognition in his sunken, ravaged face, was Wlad. Ilya looked down at the ground as he walked. He didn't jump at all as they passed the boy, and he screamed,

“Go away! Go away! Go away!”

A tear fell from his cheek onto Orryn's head below him. The bird looked up at Ilya and over at Wlad, and again, shook his head slightly. He'd known. Somehow, Orryn could see ghosts too, and he knew what Ilya had tried to do was a failure. As he went around the corner and toward the double doors, he heard Wlad scream at him:

“Stay away! Stay away!”

Ilya would. He would never set foot in this place again. He pushed the

wheelbarrow through the double doors. And then he lost his composure and flung himself toward the outside door, unlatching it. He was out into the night. He ran toward the hedge maze, and once he was inside it, he collapsed on the ground. Everything he'd done had felt so right with Wlad. He felt like he'd done something good and now it was even worse than if he'd never done anything. At least he wasn't sobbing. He was a failure at this whole oracle thing, but why was that a surprise? He was a failure at most things if he stopped to think about. He was a failure as a rescuer, because Emernon was still sitting in the cathedral. He was a failure as a footman or any kind of servant and would have been fired long ago if people didn't feel sorry for him. He was a failure as a son for obvious reasons. He heard footsteps behind him, hesitant.

“Ilya? What are you doing out here?” Aleksander asked, squatting down next to him.

Ilya wiped at his face furiously. “Obviously, I'm crying in the hedge maze,” he snapped.

Aleksander grinned at him. “I meant, what are you doing out here at midnight?” Aleksander reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a folded note. “I got this note, that's why I'm here,” he handed it to Ilya, as if to prove he had just cause to be here.

Ilya snatched it from him and unfolded it. He switched the electric torch on to better read it. Written in Soldier's tiny cramped script, was the following:

*If you value the secrets of your family, then come to the mausoleum at midnight. I*

*have information regarding a certain... pillar and an artifact of the swamp. Come alone, or not at all. Forces are massing against your family. The snake is rearing back to strike at you. Your Grandmother's death was only the beginning of The Dark Design.*

Ilya rolled his eyes. Dark Design? How the hell was he supposed to explain all the cryptic nonsense Soldier had put in there? “You're meeting me.”

“I thought it was you, from the way the note was written.”

“I don't talk like that.”

Aleksander tilted his head at him. “You don't babble nonsense?”

Ilya tore the note up and threw the pieces away. “No! Everything I say makes sense!”

Aleksander laughed. “Anyway, one word got my attention in your note.”

“I didn't write it.”

“Really?”

“Yes! I had someone else write one and deliver it to you, because it was too dangerous for me to go in the house by myself,” Ilya said, getting to his feet and brushing the dirt from his knees.

“Why was it dangerous?”

“Shoji wants to kill me, because I won't help him get into the cathedral in the swamp.”

“What? How do you know about that?” Aleksander looked incredulous.

Ilya's suspicions had been correct. He had been told on his sixteenth birthday. Ilya's hat was off to him. Ilya would have never suspected that he knew if Alexei hadn't told him of the family tradition. Aleksander did such a good job of acting the part of the clueless cad, that it was impossible to suspect hidden depths to him. Reluctantly, Ilya told him a heavily edited version of what had happened to him here. He concentrated on finding Amaranth's diary and taking a trip out to the swamp, leaving Soldier, Alexei, and Orryn out of the story completely, omitting all mention of ghosts, too. Aleksander settled down on one of the benches, looking shocked. He probably couldn't believe how proactive Ilya had been, almost immediately stumbling onto the family secrets. Ilya ended his story with Shoji trying to get information out of him and admitting they were the same because he wore contact lenses to hide his eyes. He finished with Shoji's murder of the servant, the setting of snakes on Ilya, and how he barely escaped from Neimasaurus alive.

When he was finished, Aleksander was silent for a moment or two, looking away from Ilya and up at the moon, his vision flitting to a tree in the distance where Orryn sat with half a dozen of his fellow vultures, before looking back at Ilya. He looked sad.

“I didn't believe him when he said you told him about the cathedral, or how he caught you going out the swamp. But it's all true, isn't it? You're after immortality.” Aleksander covered his face with his hands for a moment, before looking up at Ilya's face in shock. “Now I have to kill you, don't I?”

Shoji had already prepared Aleksander, and thrown the blame on him, knowing



Ilya would have to make this move at some point. That... that snake! He arranged things to make Ilya look guilty. “But he killed a servant!”

“There's no dead servant, Ilya.”

“I saw the body,” Ilya said, trying to hide his shock. The body had been there, he was sure of it. He saw Soldier dart beneath the bench that Aleksander sat on and looked away quickly.

“And who was it?” Aleksander said, sounding tired and defeated.

“That guy... from the masquerade. He was kind of young and had brown hair. He was complaining because one of the guests had grabbed his ass.”

“Ilya, that could be one of a dozen men hired for that party.”

“His body has to be somewhere. You can hide anything in that house, it's huge.”

Aleksander shook his head. “I can't believe the stupid story my mother told me is actually true. I thought it was fun to have a legacy, but I didn't think when I promised to protect it no matter what, that I would actually have go through with it.” Aleksander wiped a tear away from his cheek. “And I really liked you, too.” He got up from the bench and Ilya backed away from him, his eyes going to the entrance to the hedge maze. Aleksander followed the movement with his own eyes. “You won't make it there before I get to you. Besides, I've been through it a thousand times.” He held up his hands in a placating gesture. “I want you to know that I fell in love with you the first day we met in that hallway after you'd fallen and cracked your head. You had me the moment you started babbling about PH levels.”

Ilya took a step away from him. “I'm telling the truth. Why else would I ever meet you somewhere like this alone? Shoji knew I would have to confess to you, and he headed me off.”

Aleksander reached into his jacket and withdrew a pistol. It was an automatic, not some old revolver like Ilya's, which was sitting on the desk back in the cottage, because its owner was a complete fool. “Could you turn around? I-I don't want to shoot you in the face.” Aleksander's voice stumbled over the words, and he took a deep breath. Soldier crept out from beneath the bench and behind Aleksander's leg, his bayonet raised to perforate the Young Lord's Achilles tendon. The vultures took flight from the tree and began to circle overhead.

Ilya looked at them warily. “Wait! Just give me a chance to prove I'm not after immortality.”

Aleksander shook his head. “How? I just don't see what you can do, Ilya.”

“Well, for starters, I'm not the one who's about to die here.”

Aleksander shook his head again. “You still have your head in the clouds, even at a time like this.”

Ilya smiled. If only Aleksander had his head in the clouds, he would see the danger. “Your grandmother, she was attacked by a bird, wasn't she?”

“They think so, yes.” Aleksander suddenly looked up at the circling vultures.

“Well, she was trying to kill me and Orryn—he's the big one with the white tips on his feathers up there—and he tore her face off.”

“I can kill you before they get me,” Aleksander said, his resolve hardening. “And being responsible for my grandmother's death doesn't make you look less guilty.”

Ilya hung his head for a bit. “I suppose it doesn't. But she was trying to eat my eyes. She has a bit of a history about that. Don't you remember what Zdansky said about the other boy who had eyes like mine, and the police cover up?”

“That's...” Aleksander stumbled over his words for a moment. “Just a coincidence, Ilya.”

Ilya wanted to scream in frustration. A coincidence that two one in a million genetically aberrant young men were attacked at Neimasaurus? One attack was one in a million, a second was one in a trillion. At least Aleksander was hesitating, with the barrel of the gun shaking a bit. “Did Alina ever mention a Soldier?”

“Amaranth's eternal Soldier, who guards the secret of the attic?”

“Well, what if I could produce him? Would you believe what he has to say?”

“But I don't even know what he looks like.” Aleksander was keeping one eye on the vultures circling overhead. “How do you control them?”

“I don't. They're my friends. Now, Amaranth trusted him, do you?”

“I guess,” Aleksander said grudgingly. “I didn't think it was meant to be taken literally.”

“Everything your mother and grandmother said was meant to be taken literally. Now, look down at your feet and see Soldier.”

Aleksander looked down, and Soldier looked up at him, lowering the bayonet. The

pistol slipped from Aleksander's hands in shock, and fell into the grass as Soldier marched around to the front of him.

*Everything Ilya says is the truth*, the Toy signed.

"He knows sign language?"

"He can't speak; he's got no vocal cords."

The vultures diverted away and went back to their tree, preening. Orryn landed on the top of the mausoleum, looking down on them.

"He doesn't have any ears or eyes, either. That doesn't make any sense,"

Aleksander said, leaning down to examine the Toy. "You stabbed the hell out of me the other day, didn't you?"

*You had it coming*. Soldier's eternally grinning visage was very appropriate at the moment.

Aleksander laughed. "I suppose I did." He picked the pistol up out of the grass and walked back over to sit on the bench. "Now what do we do?"

"You have to stop Shoji," Ilya said. "It's your family duty."

"But he's a killer, and he controls poisonous snakes."

"He doesn't control them. They're his friends. Anyway, I have a sort of plan." Ilya sat down on the bench next to him and bit his lip before speaking. "We can feed him to the blood-beast."

"Oh. My. God, is that true too?" Aleksander said, as though he'd just been told the boogeyman was real and lurking beneath his bed. Which in the case of his family, was

pretty damn accurate.

“Yeah, he's your... Great Uncle Alexei?”

“The one who went to America to become a doctor?”

“Sure, if by went to America, you mean was sealed between the walls of Neimasaurus after drinking the blood of Emernon.”

“What does he look like? Are the stories true? Is he a monster after drinking from the fountain?”

Ilya rolled his eyes again. Aleksander was turning into an excited twelve year-old given a new toy at the prospects of a monster related to him by blood. “He’s a broken down old man who’s tried to kill himself repeatedly, but keeps coming back to life.”

“Cool!” Aleksander was actually smiling, utterly unable to emphasize with the plight of another human being. Then his expression darkened. “That bitch! I can't believe he's been lying to me all this time,” Aleksander said suddenly, getting to his feet and pacing back and forth. “Still, I guess we do have to kill him.” He looked down at Soldier. “What do you think?”

*Kill him*, the Toy signed, without hesitation.

For the first time this evening, things were starting to look up for Ilya. He had Aleksander on his side now, he had Soldier, he had Orryn, he had Alexei, and what did Shoji have? Only snakes, and nothing more. Ilya had friends and numbers. It didn't matter what promises the Oriental Boy hissed through key holes. Aleksander would tell his parents and the whole might of the Neimasaurus family would be turned against him.

\*\*\*\*

What he did not know, and what no one there knew, was that near the wall of the mausoleum, beneath a hedge, sat coiled a serpent, dried blood still upon her nose, and several of her children hidden through the area, where no vulture, man, or toy would find them. She had no ears with which to listen, so she watched their lips and her eyes stared unblinking at the gathering. Things would not be simple for the oracular boy. Her children would prevail. Her human son would not be so easily dispatched. She would make certain of it. Then, they would have the blood, as much of it as she and her children could drink. Disease and sickness would become a memory, just like death.

## CHAPTER 25: THE PHOENIX UNCHAINED

Alina's funeral was in two days, and a sense of finality was creeping upon Ilya. After his illuminating discussion with Aleksander the night before, they had agreed to meet early the next morning, since Shoji was a late sleeper. Alexei would be introduced to his great nephew. When they'd parted at the mausoleum, Ilya knew he'd gained an ally, because the Young Lord had only made one pass at him at the end, and Ilya could tell his heart wasn't in it. What Aleksander had wanted to do, was go back to the house and beat Shoji to death while he was sleeping. Ilya had dissuaded him from that. He suspected the Oriental Boy was never alone in his room.

As it turned out, the more Ilya thought about it, the harder it was to get rid of Shoji. They could kill him whenever they wanted to now, but how would the snakes retaliate? They would want revenge. Ilya and Aleksander couldn't be watching their feet and ankles for the rest of their lives. Ilya suggested that he simply break up with Shoji and kick him out, pretending to have lost interest in him. After his early morning meeting with Alexei, that was exactly what Aleksander had planned. There was one other thing that had been bothering Ilya. Aleksander claimed that he'd never been taken into the chapel, which Ilya realized made sense, since the room with the statue had been bricked up at some point by Amaranth and not uncovered until Ilya came to Neimasaurus. Perhaps she had not enjoyed her visit there, or believed in her religious zeal that it was the devil incarnate.

For whatever reason, Ilya could not stop thinking about the place, and the nagging feeling that in his fragmented memory of his first visit, he was forgetting something important. At four a.m., Ilya got out of bed. Soldier, who'd been sitting on the shelf above the bed next to his parents, since it gave him a lovely vantage point from which to spot any slithery friends trying to cuddle up to Ilya while he slept, looked down at him curiously.

*I thought we weren't meeting Aleksander until half past five?*

Ilya shrugged as he rooted through his drawer for some clothes for the day. "I'm not that tired, so I thought that I would go down to the chapel." He tried to make it sound totally normal, and that it wasn't as though some supernatural force was compelling him.

*What?! After everything you told me about what Alexei said? You want to pull your own intestines out like confetti?*

"Oh, that was only metaphorical. Stop being so dramatic." Ilya struggled into a maroon sweater. His mother had bought it for him at a department store in downtown Petrograd, which made it a very expensive, ugly maroon sweater. "Besides, I feel like I'm forgetting something important."

*Didn't Alexei even warn you not to go back there? Didn't he say something about it summoning you?*

"Look, I'm trying to do something brave, and that's hard enough without you bringing logic into it, all right? It's calling me and I have to answer. I don't even care what happens to me now." He was going to go to the chapel no matter what. Because it was



calling him. No one else could hear it. Except Shoji, but maybe the chapel didn't want to chat with him. How awkward would that be if they both showed up at the same time?

*Fine, but don't expect me to go in there.*

“I thought you went in there all the time with Amaranth?”

*Well, yes, that's technically true. That was back when I didn't think there was anything there and it was just some stupid Christian shrine where Amaranth could ask for forgiveness for wanting to have sex with the gardener or some other nonsense.*

“Did she like the gardener?”

*She had an affair with him; it was quite scandalous, except no one ever knew about it but them and me. Sometimes she felt that I was judging her.* Soldier smiled at him from the shelf and Ilya just knew that despite appearances, it was one of his unpleasant ones.

“I'm sure you did nothing to make her think that.”

Soldier jumped down onto the bed. *Exactly! That's the most effective method to make people feel guilty, because it's all in their mind, and they can invent all manner of terrible thoughts from silence, especially religious people, because then it's not just me silently judging them, it's God doing it through me, get it?*

“That's... Really nice, Soldier.” Ilya tightened the belt on his pants, while shaking his head. He supposed when you were effectively ageless, you had to do something to alleviate the boredom.

*It passes the time. With you, I like to make you panic. I'm rather proud of you for*

*standing up to me, just then. I even tried to paint a picture in your mind of you pulling out your own intestines.*

“You're the best, Soldier.” But Ilya was pleased with what the Toy had signed, nonetheless. It was still pitch black outside, and Ilya had his shovel and Soldier's keen eyes on the ground for his journey to Neimasaurus. The trip was uneventful. Until he got to the house. Then, Ilya's first prophecy came true. Maybe he was a seer after all. As he turned the corner into the east wing, he saw Shoji facing out front of the door to the chapel, dressed in some black silk pajamas. He ducked back around the corner before he was seen. The Oriental Boy seemed to be mumbling to himself. Ilya strained his ears to listen, as Soldier peeked around the corner.

“No! I don't want to go in there.”

*He's talking to something in the front of his robes, Soldier signed.*

Ilya clutched the shovel in his hands tighter.

“I know he's not on my side anymore, but that thing in there isn't, either.” Shoji's voice was nervous, devoid of its self-assurance and smug pleasantness for once, stripped down almost to a fearful whine.

There seemed to be an odor coming from down the hall, almost of decay, an earthy, natural, but unpleasant odor. Ilya sniffed the air again, trying to make it out. He peeked around the corner and saw, rising out of the front of Shoji's black robe, a snake of gray and black, it reared back, not to strike, but to brush the Oriental Boy's cheek with her tongue. It was the snake that had chased Ilya out onto the ledge. He could tell because

it was so big and Shoji had said, “Get away from her,” when the vulture had attacked.

“You can't make me do it. Maybe I should just tell the truth.” He paced back and forth, agitated. “You mean kill him now? I could, couldn't I?” Shoji stopped, and the snake flicked her forked tongue across his lips. “I can kill him and force our misbegotten guest to show me the way, this very morning.”

Ilya realized that the man Shoji planned to kill was Aleksander, who lay sleeping upstairs. But the misbegotten guest... Had he found out about Alexei? Or was it the man in the west wing? Damn it! He should've asked Aleksander about him last night, but it had slipped his mind.

“Even if he's telling the truth, how hard can it be to find a tower in a swamp? But I don't know how to get into it. Ilya knows, I'm certain of it. He's still being watched down at the cottage?” The snake flicked his cheek again with the points of her tongue. “Maybe I should go down there and force him to talk. His uncle is deaf; he won't hear Ilya's screams.” The snake actually nodded to him.

Ilya felt a chill go down his spine. They were watched. Had they been followed here? He looked back down the hallway they'd come down. It was dark. He couldn't possibly see down it without switching on a light, but Soldier was squinting down its length. *What do you see?*

*I don't think I see anything. But they're hard to spot. I'm going to check it out.* Soldier lowered his rifle and stalked into the darkness. Ilya peeked back around the corner.

“No, I'm not going to kill anyone else. When Aleksander comes for me to throw me out, I'll tell him the truth. It's all I can do.”

The snake hissed loudly and reared back from Shoji.

“I know you don't trust anyone, but humans are different. He'll have to take me there, and once I know the secrets,” Shoji reached out and stroked the snake's back, “you and your children can drink as much as you want. There will be no limit to how large and intelligent you can grow.” Shoji got a listening expression on his face. “If he says no, then we will kill everyone here. Make sure your children are ready, because it will need to happen immediately, before he can throw me out. And you must spare Ilya and Aleksander. They might have the information we need. All pretenses will be done. We will torture them for as long as it takes. But this won't matter, because he'll help me. I know Aleksander better than you. He always does what I want in the end.”

Shit. How many snakes were there, to kill everyone at the same time? Sadly, his subconscious readily prepared an answer. His compulsive watching of the discovery channel as a twelve year-old readily gave him all the information he needed. A single female snake could lay dozens of eggs. In a single year. How old was she? And how many other of her offspring had lived long enough on the bloody water of the swamp, to become intelligent? If one snake laid twenty-four eggs and half of those laid twenty-four eggs the next year, and half of those did the same the next year...that would be one thousand, seven hundred and twenty eight snakes in three years. Jesus Christ, he was in a lot of trouble. But the swamp's eco-system couldn't support that many snakes, could it? A

single swamp couldn't support millions of snakes... or even hundreds of thousands.

Maybe just ten thousand or so. That wasn't so bad...

Ilya sighed. If only this were a bad sci-fi movie, then Ilya could kill the queen right down the hall with his shovel, and all the other snakes would instantly perish. He didn't think he'd be that lucky. Realistically, what the hell could he do against thousands of sentient, venomous snakes? Orryn's flock definitely didn't even number over a hundred. A sudden thumping sound made Ilya jump slightly. He looked behind him and saw nothing. Then the thumping sound came again. He peered into the darkness, the shovel firmly clutched in his hands and ready to attack. After several moments, nothing happened. He looked back around the corner and saw the retreating figure of Shoji heading the other way down the corridor, but he was in no particular hurry. He seemed quite pleased with his evil plan. He turned back around and saw Soldier appear out of the darkness, the thin point of an adder's tail over his shoulder, as he slowly pulled it toward Ilya.

*This thing's heavy*, he signed with one hand. Ilya switched on the electric torch. He recoiled at the sight of the three foot corpse of an adder that Soldier had perforated the head of with his bayonet.

"I don't want it!" Ilya said, trying to control his voice. "Get it away from me!"

*He's dead. I stabbed him in the head. Unfortunately for the snake, his venom has no effect on wood.*

*Good.* Ilya looked around and spotted an ornamental urn decorated with ancient Greek dancing girls on a table nearby. It had probably been in the family for a couple

millennia. "Let's put it in there." He pulled it off the shelf and opened it. He scooped the snake up with the shovel and flopped it inside. He put the lid on and set it back on the table. "Let's go, before someone sees us." He ran down the hall toward the Chapel. "You think that was the one watching us?"

*Yes. If there was only one, we got him.*

Ilya stopped in front of the door to the chapel, the shrine as Alexei called it. Ilya preferred to think of it as a chapel, where the deluded would come to pray to their own imagination for words of wisdom from within, or simple justification for selfish, limiting acts. A shrine, on the other hand, housed something. It was the *something*, which Ilya disliked. All he remembered from his first visit was the feeling of wrongness and something moving in blackness, beyond his vision or memory. He felt nothing standing outside of this door. What was inside the shrine was for an oracle alone. To all others, it was madness and a warning against making the beyond a part of one's life.

He reached out and touched the worn brass door knob. The effect was immediate and enormously painful; a worker flung the door open, carrying a bucket of paint and roller in one hand, and the door caught Ilya in the face. He saw stars and was flung aside like a rag doll. The man, dressed in stained overalls, with a thinning pate of sandy blond hair, looked down in confusion at Ilya.

"What are you doing, standing in front of a closed door, at this hour? That's just asking to get hit." The man shook his head as Ilya got to his feet, using the wall for support. "That's just dumb," he said, and walked down the hallway.

Ilya shook his head and was disoriented for a minute, his vision going black. He didn't know what he could have said to the man. Maybe this: I'm just trying to sense the aura of an extra-dimensional entity who has summoned me to its presence. That would not have improved the man's estimation of him. What the hell ever happened to respect for prophets? Weren't people supposed to hang on Ilya's every grave pronouncement and actually worship him? Instead he got slammed with doors the moment he got contemplative. What the hell was the man doing at five o'clock in the morning painting, anyway? When he could see again, he saw Soldier looking up at him.

Soldier signed slowly: *Are you all right?*

Ilya glared after the man, and looked down at the Toy. *Go get him.*

It was impossible for Soldier's smile to become more pronounced, but in Ilya's mind it did. *Just a little slip?*

Ilya nodded. *Nothing too drastic, just karmic payback.* So what if that wasn't actually how karma worked. It made him feel rather pleased. *Maybe a certain vase should fall on him...*

Soldier was gone, racing down the corridor, almost like a blur, practically gleeful at the thought of sanctioned mischief. It was odd. Ilya suspected that his appearance was more than just a matter of what had been carved. Left to his own devices, the Toy would do very little, but he could be ordered to do anything, and would obey without thinking about it. Ilya shivered a little at his next thought: *I'm the puppet master now.*

But he was just delaying his visit to the shrine, wasn't he? Ilya flung the door

open, before anyone could smack him in the face with it again. It clanged against the wall noisily. The room beyond was empty. A slight scuttling of insect wings could be heard, but besides that, silence reigned. The room had been stripped during the refurbishment, or was that what the entity within projected as reality to the workers? The walls and floor were all painted white. The alcoves on the walls were empty. At the head of the room sat the phoenix statue, the offending wall that had closed the thing off for so long completely torn away and removed by the workers. The room was lit by a large stained glass window in the ceiling that cast a multitude of colors around, almost as though brightly colored Christmas lights lit the place. Ilya sensed nothing untoward. Other than the fact that neither he, nor anyone else he talked to remembered a stained glass window in the place.

He stepped across the threshold and his perception altered. The room was wrong. It was evil. He would die, after suffering horribly. It became a certainty to him in less than a second. Fatalistically, Ilya shut the door behind himself. If it were inevitable, then he might as well see what he could find out. As he turned back, he noticed the floor was dirt. Of course it was. It always had been. The walls were still white, the worker having painted them, because they were actually there. There was no phoenix. There was no statue. There was a pillar of black basalt, or was it obsidian? No, it was blackness. An Oracle's eyes could not lie and soften the blow as a mortal's could.

The pillar was a void of shadow, a shaft of chaos piercing the tangible matter of Ilya's ordered world. Beyond it was the pit, a gaping maw of darkness. There were no steps as Alexei had deluded himself into thinking. It was a pit of darkness so dark, so



perfect and uniform, that the flitting shadows within the pillar made it stand out in relief.

It was the only way Ilya could tell where one ended and one began.

He sensed movement behind him and whirled around, but the shadows flitted away, and he followed it, turning with it as the shadowy tentacles slipped back within the pillar. It was writhing. The more Ilya looked at the pillar, the more alive with dancing darkness it became, and the more darkness he saw around him. There were more tentacles of shade enfolding the room. The song of cicadas suddenly arose from the pit. Within, movement could be seen, dancing little gray bodies poured out of the pit, covering the walls. Ilya shut his eyes, praying that in here, the trick would still work. He could still hear them massing around him.

*Welcome again, Oracle.*

The voice emanated throughout Ilya's body, a quiet roar from all directions. And Ilya could see the room again. His eyelids were no match for the place. Before he could move, the swarm came at him. A keening wail came from everywhere, and he covered his ears. The bugs shattered into mist and flowed back into the pit.

*Have no fear of them here.*

Ilya opened his eyes, not that it changed anything. He didn't know what to say. This thing could read minds, couldn't it? Ilya thought to himself, what are you? No thoughts came from the pillar of shadows. "Can't you tell what I'm thinking?"

*No. You are an Oracle.*

"Wh—why did you want to see me?"

*You are an Oracle.*

Damn it. Apparently, Ilya was supposed to know what to say and do here. “What am I supposed to do here?”

*The rules are as follows: To aid in guarding The Beyond from The Here, I was placed here. You may ask me six questions freely. If you wish to ask more, then you must offer a sacrifice. You have already used three questions.*

Ilya was starting to get a clammy sweat. The creature's voice was almost like a shout. The sense of wrongness around him was becoming more palpable as the shadowy tentacles enfolded him, creeping over his skin. He'd wasted three questions. He needed to consider carefully. He could ask what sort of sacrifice he would need to make to ask more questions. But.... Ilya had a feeling he wouldn't be willing to make it, whatever it was. That left one obvious question that Ilya had to ask, thanks to his interest in Greek myths. It was a waste, but he needed it to go on. “Do you have to answer truthfully?”

*I have free will. But the rules are the rules. Look to what I have already said, to guide you.*

The Beyond and The Here. The creature had said it was here to guard The Here from The Beyond. If Ilya lived in The Here, then was it the job of the pillar to keep them separate. Were the supernatural qualities of the blood part of The Beyond that had leaked into The Here? Hadn't Soldier called the supernatural beyond normal? If that was true, then the pillar would Help Ilya in resolving the problem. First, he needed to verify this and get more information in one question. There was no time for stupidity or hasty

words.

“If the Blood is from The Beyond, tell me what it does.” This was a gamble. If Ilya was wrong, he would get no answer and only have one question left.

*The blood is everything; Sangraal of life, the cup of eternity, and a poisoned chalice. It grants the wish of unlimited life to ephemeral beings... After a fashion. To imbibe directly from the source carries the most acute sublime rewards and hellish plagues. But this is only what man has made of it by transposing shallow desires onto it. It takes those intentions, and twists them beyond recognition. It makes a shadow of everything Man would have of it.*

Ilya could feel snot running from his nose and his vision spun. The voice cut into him like a knife. It was like standing in front of a speaker at a rock concert. Not that Ilya would ever dream of doing such a thing because one could permanently damage the inner ear doing that, but it seemed like a good comparison. More importantly, he'd gotten two answers back by simply getting an answer. One question left. He had so many he wanted to ask, but one was the final solution.

“What will happen if I free the boy from the cathedral?”

*When you take him from the cathedral, what will you do with him? You must answer this before I can give you a true answer.*

“I'm going to help him,” Ilya said instantly, without even thinking about it.

*The natural order will re-assert itself; everything the blood is causing will be undone, but not what it has caused. Such is the way of things.*

There wasn't as much detail as he would have liked, especially if Ilya considered the interpretation the guardian had of The Here. It sounded like what he wanted. Since the blood had almost no effect on him, the effects of his plan would be minimal to himself. But it would be another matter for Alexei. Would he be normal again, or would he die? Either option would give the man what he wanted. But if it were so easy, why hadn't someone done this before?

“What would you ask of me as a sacrifice, for another question?”

*I would ask you to place your right hand within me.*

Ilya looked at the swirling mass of darkness, perfectly confined into a six foot pillar, and recoiled. “No thanks.”

*A wise decision, Oracle.*

The pounding in Ilya's head was constant now, and he felt wetness on his cheeks. He wiped the tears away. There was no point in continuing to suffer if he couldn't ask anything else. The room was creepy beyond measure, and the pervading sense of wrongness couldn't be shaken. Except... It made sense now. Of course the room felt wrong, because it shouldn't be in The Here.

*What was the question you wished to ask?*

“How do I free him?” Ilya held his breath. Would the extra-dimensional entity give him a break? It wanted Ilya to succeed.

*I cannot give you an answer, but I will grant you a boon. The answer you seek can be found by asking another, if you consider carefully.*

“Alexei, should I ask Alexei? Is that what you mean?” More tears were leaking from his eyes, and the pounding headache that Ilya got from being in the creature's presence was getting worse.

*It is time for you to depart my presence, before you end.*

And then Ilya was within the shrine, empty white walls freshly painted, newspaper on the floor to catch the drips. Except where Ilya stood. There, little red drops had fallen upon the paper. Ilya looked down at his hands. It was automatic, to confirm his suspicions. He did it before realizing he had no desire to see them confirmed. They were bloody. He had not been crying. He had been bleeding from the eyes. His runny nose was probably not snot, either. He felt the familiar wave of nausea wash over him, and he felt light-headed. He took a deep breath and shut his eyes, counting to ten. He listed slightly and felt his extremities go faint. Then the nausea receded. He opened his eyes again. He'd done it. For once, he hadn't fainted at the sight of his own blood, probably because he'd been confronted by it so many times at Neimasaurus, his body was sick of fainting.

The door opened about a foot and Soldier leaped from the knob down to the ground and looked up at Ilya.

He gave the Toy a thumbs up. “I didn't faint,” he said proudly, noticing that his thumbs were rather red. He looked away quickly.

Soldier was still for a moment, probably in shock. *Are you all right? Should I get Cook?* Soldier signed.

Ilya supposed he was a gruesome sight to behold. He wiped his face on his

sweater. Wearing maroon had been a stroke of luck. People would only notice the stains up close. “Am I still bleeding?” He looked up at Soldier.

*I don't think so. Let's get out of here.* Soldier slipped through the door and Ilya gladly followed. *I told you not to go in there.*

*It wasn't that bad. I just thought I was crying and had a runny nose for a bit.* He shut the door behind himself. *It was really quite interesting.*

*What happened? Do you remember it?*

That was a little odd. He remembered it all perfectly. He'd forgotten about it before, only recalling enough to make him curious about the place. Maybe he hadn't been ready last time, too fearful to comprehend, and his mind, or the guardian, had blocked it out for him.

*Ilya?* Soldier poked him with a bayonet.

*Sorry, just putting my thoughts together.* Ilya told Soldier what had happened, trying to recollect every last detail.

*I don't trust it.*

*You wouldn't trust your own mother.*

*Damn right I wouldn't. She's a liar.* Soldier was of course, smiling up at him. *I never caught her at it, but I just knew, you know?*

Ilya shook his head. *It gives us the answer we need. It will undo everything it is causing.*

*Yeah, so?*

Ilya resisted the urge to feel superior. *All those long lived snakes, vultures, and people will—*

*Oh. They'll all age and die, won't they?*

*We can but hope, can't we?* Ilya didn't mind dealing death to the snakes, and Alexei wanted to die as well. But Orryn and his flock... Did he know what would happen? He was trying to help Ilya and knew his goal, and he seemed to know everything else and enjoyed being a tight-lipped enigmatic know-it-all, so he had to know this, too. That meant Orryn wanted to die. Dawn was creeping through the windows. Depending on the see-sawing nature of Shoji's mass murder or don't hurt a fly whims, that if Aleksander was still alive, he should be waiting for him upstairs in the attic. But the snakes would be getting into positions throughout the house, so Ilya had to be quick.

## CHAPTER 26: INFERNO

He reached the hall in the attic as the sun crested the horizon and light flowed through the windows. There was no sign of Aleksander. He had better not be sleeping in, or dead. Ilya loitered, waiting impatiently, when he heard a door open and shut. He poked his head out and saw Tabitha coming down the hall, a bundle of dirty linen under one arm. He stepped out of the alcove.

*Hello! Is it time for our second kiss?* Ilya signed happily at the sight of her.

Tabitha rolled her eyes. *No. What are you doing here this early in the morning?* As she neared him, she squinted at his sweater. *Is that your blood again?*

*Yeah, my eyes were bleeding for a bit, but then they stopped,* Ilya signed smoothly, his mind racing for a plausible explanation for why that might be, now that he'd already signed it.

*What?!*

*Oh... It happens to people with Ceritikonus sometimes.* Ilya paused in mid-sign, trying to think of why that might be, but managing to keep an impassive yet slightly pleasant expression on his face. *Usually when the weather's a little too warm.*

*Really?* She was suspicious. Ilya could read the signs by now; the slight cocking of her head, the almost imperceptible narrowing of her eyes, and the quick look up and down.

*Do you think I'd make something like that up?* He smiled slightly and then



instantly smothered the expression, allowing the baby scowl to take its place, this time making it seem ever so slightly imperious.

She made the symbol for annoyance. *I wish you could keep your blood in you for at least one day.*

Ilya shrugged. *Sometimes a luxurious mansion is the hardest place in the world to live*, he signed, sliding up closer to her. *You know what would make it bearable?*

*I have my suspicions.*

*Would you like me to confirm them?* She couldn't resist him. Even if he appeared to be standing around in a hallway to surprise her, dressed in an ugly sweater stained with his own blood. Well... Maybe she could after all.

She took a step back from him and looked over his shoulder at the attic door. *I thought I told you not to go in there.*

*I'm not, I'm right here.* He let nothing show in his expression, except a slight quirking at the corner of his mouth that he couldn't help. He silently prayed that she hadn't noticed the stolen key.

"Ilya, I know I'm late. Did you miss me too terribly much?" Aleksander called, as he strolled down the hall, almost looking like he was about to go spelunking. In addition to his jumpsuit like attire, he even had a hard hat with a head lamp on it. He was carrying a second one under his arm.

*You're meeting him?* Tabitha signed, giving him a suspicious look, before curtsying to Aleksander.

Ilya shrugged haplessly. *Am I supposed to curtsy to?*

*No, you're supposed to bow.*

Ilya sort of half ducked at the knees, caught momentarily between the differences in bowing and curtsying.

Aleksander sauntered up and put his arm around Ilya. *Hello servant woman, have you been detaining my head-in-the-clouds boyfriend?*

Ilya gritted his teeth. *It's not true.* His protests were largely voided as Aleksander set the extra hard hat on his head.

Aleksander gave him a rather proprietary look. *Nonsense, don't you want to go upstairs to the attic where we can be alone together? If you've changed your mind, then I'll just go back to my room.*

*The joke's on you, dickhead. Tabitha knows about the secret wing.*

Aleksander's shoulders slumped. *It's not much of a secret then, is it? Fine, we're going to explore the secret wing, but then we're going to make passionate love once we're done, right?*

Ilya disengaged himself from the Young Lord. *Whenever you ask me about passionate love, I want you to keep this answer in mind forever: I'm flattered, but no thank you, your Lordship.*

*You know, your social standing would only improve after a liaison with me,*  
Aleksander signed.

*I don't mind being lower class.*

*Have fun, Tabitha said. I'll call out the dogs if you aren't seen again by the evening.* As she turned to go, she leaned over to Ilya and kissed him deeply. By the time he had the good sense to bring up his arms, she was halfway down the corridor.

“Well, someone's marking their territory.” Aleksander looked at him and smiled.  
“I wouldn't—”

“No.” Ilya had the foresight to see just where Aleksander was heading, even without his oracular abilities. Running down stairs and sticking his hand in the pillar of shadows in order ask the Guardian what Aleksander wanted from him seemed like a completely unnecessary act in this matter.

Aleksander reached out and hit the black switch on the side of the light on Ilya's helmet. “That's how you turn it on.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you sure you don't—”

“Yes.”

Aleksander stalked toward the attic door, took a key out of his pocket, and smoothly unlocked the door. “Now keeping in mind what you said about passionate love, I'm willing to give that up. So would you like to fuck like rabbits sometime?”

“Yes...” Ilya waited to let Aleksander's expression light up. “But not with you.”

“That was mean.”

“Your harassment?”

Aleksander didn't reply and stalked up the stairs. Ilya picked up the shovel and

walked through, closing and locking the door behind him with his own key.

“I liked it better when we weren't friends, then I didn't feel like a rapist for stealing kisses,” the Young Lord said as they entered the study.

Soldier climbed up on the desk and opened the drawer, disappearing from sight.

“I do have something more serious to talk about,” Ilya said, broaching the subject of what he'd overheard before he went into the shrine. Aleksander was less than pleased about it.

“Kill me, just like that? What a fucking prick!”

“And everyone else, apparently.”

“But he was going to kill me first,” Aleksander said, stuck in his own, infinitely small and infantile narcissistic existence.

Ilya sighed. Did his arrogance know no boundaries? “I know you think the world revolves around you, but other people's deaths are just as real.”

“I think my own death would have much more of a lasting impression on me actually. Cool!” Aleksander sounded suitably awed as the panel ascended into the ceiling to reveal the iron door. “My great aunt wasn't fucking around when she had that made, was she?”

Ilya ignored him and started cranking the wheel. “From what I know of her, she didn't understand the concept of half-measures. It was a black and white world.”

Aleksander nodded. “Mmm-hm. Much like me. We Neimasaurus don't mess around.”

Ilya stared at him for a moment and then just shook his head. He pushed the door open and stepped through into the secret wing.

“Ilya that was a joke!” Aleksander called after him. “You're supposed to laugh.” He hurried after Ilya into the darkness, with only their head lamps to light the way.

“You brought the food, right?” Ilya asked, as they walked down the brick tunnel.

Aleksander patted a knapsack over his shoulder. “Of course, I had Cook make me some sandwiches.”

“At five in the morning?”

“Yes. He's a servant. That's why I pay him. Did you expect me to make it myself?”

It took Ilya a second to realize that Aleksander was completely serious.

“I wouldn't even know where to find the stuff that you use for the top and bottom, I think you bake it, but I can't remember what it's called...”

“Bread?” Ilya asked, incredulous. How in the world could he have gone through life not knowing what bread was?

“I'm joking.” Aleksander smiled at him. “It's kind of spooky in here, isn't it?” He withdrew the black semi-automatic pistol from his pocket.

“Nothing in here will be killed by that,” Ilya said.

“Nonsense,” Aleksander said dismissively. “It will die, at least for a bit, right?”

Ilya was reminded for a moment of the old Aleksander he'd spent weeks trying to avoid. “I guess. It seems like a mean thing to do, though. Watch your step, we're coming

up on the bone pile.”

“Hmm?” Aleksander said, looking ahead curiously. “They seem big for a person, don't they?”

“They're not human bones, at least not anymore.”

“Spooky.” Aleksander sounded overjoyed.

Ilya kicked his way through, but Aleksander stopped to sift around, examining them. The beam of light from his head lamp illuminating little motes of dust sent into the air.

Ilya tapped his foot impatiently. “There's something much more interesting in the lab up ahead.” Ilya was blinded for a moment by Aleksander's light.

“What?” he asked, looking away from Ilya and further down the corridor.

“Just look inside the room.”

Aleksander shined his headlamp through the doorway and watched the dying dog show with an expression of disgust and then fascination, as the cycle played itself out. Ilya stood beside him, not tempted to look in the slightest. He knew what was there and had no desire to see it.

“I thought you were lying or exaggerating about this stuff,” Aleksander said, “I didn't really think it was true. I just gave you the benefit of the doubt because of Soldier... But this, it's the curse my mother told me about.”

Ilya shrugged. “I've seen much worse.”

“What?” Aleksander didn't look away from the dog.

“Like your Great Uncle Alexei, who starved to death and came back to life only to starve to death again. He did that for seventy-eight years. It took a toll on his body.” Ilya resisted the urge to smirk. Aleksander was finally getting the picture.

“Cool, let's go see.” Aleksander turned and hurried down the hall toward the rusty spiral stairs.

“No, it isn't!” Ilya shouted after him. “It's not cool, it's horrifying.”

Aleksander's light shined back at him. “But I like horror movies.”

“Can't you try to imagine what it was like for him?”

“Why would I do that? It sounds terrible.” Aleksander shined his head lamp down into the abyss. “You know, all of this reminds me of Dante's Divine Comedy. Not The Purgatorio or Paradisio parts, but The Inferno.”

Ilya nodded without saying anything. He'd tried to read it, but it had been too negative for him. He'd metaphorically stopped his journey at the gates of Dis.

Aleksander blinded him again. “Have you read it?”

“No,” Ilya admitted grudgingly. “I started but didn't finish.”

“I've actually read a book you haven't! My expensive education has paid off.”

“I don't like poetry,” Ilya mumbled. “It doesn't make any sense.”

Aleksander smiled at him. “What was that? Could you speak up?”

“Nothing.”

Aleksander turned back to the stairs. “Come, let us descend to another circle of hell. I'll be Dante, and you can be a lackadaisical Virgil, guiding me to the next horror.”

If it weren't for the fact it would be fatal, Ilya would have pushed Aleksander down the stairs just to see his big, fat swollen ego and cranium bouncing off the iron, with his head lamp to chart his progress toward death. "What circle is the cathedral in the swamp?"

"Silly, if you read the story, you would know."

Ilya was silent for a moment as they began their descent down the squeaky stairs. Apparently, Aleksander wasn't going to say unless asked, and his curiosity thoroughly prevented him from any other course, besides asking. "Just tell me."

"At the final circle of hell there is a frozen lake, and in the middle of it, lay Satan. If memory serves, when Dante is led into Satan's presence, he is chewing on the souls of the truly damned."

"There's nothing religious about what's happening here," Ilya said nervously.

"Of course not. You can prove that, can't you?"

Ilya glared at the back of his head, his free hand coming up to almost push him. "Failure to prove what something is not, does not make it that thing."

"I love teasing you." Aleksander reached out for Ilya, but the boy was too quick and ducked out of his reach. Aleksander sighed. "One day..." He turned and resumed his walk down the stairs.

Ilya smiled. "What circle of hell were the Sodomites in?"

Aleksander threw his back and laughed. "I don't remember. What circle is my uncle in? Didn't you say he shared the family... habit?"



Ilya scowled at his back. “He's nothing like you. He fell in love with someone. I don't think you even understand what that means.”

“That really stings coming from a virgin who couldn't put two sensible words together in front of a pair of lesbians. Really, Ilya, you've cut me to the quick!”

“That's only because they were wearing bikinis.”

“I didn't seem to be affected by your choice of swimwear at the pool.”

“My choice?” Ilya spluttered incoherently. “You picked that and you told me it wasn't see-thru, you... You... Fucking liar!”

“But you know I'm a liar and wore it anyway. I did exactly what you thought I would, didn't I? You can hardly be indignant about that,” Aleksander said triumphantly.

Ilya certainly could, and planned to do that, with healthy helpings of loathing, self-righteousness, and disgust.

“You know, we never did talk about that afternoon, did we? I was shocked to see Shoji pressing you against the wall of the pool kissing you, while an extremely visible and not altogether unimpressive erection poked against his leg.” Aleksander turned to look back at him. “Talk your way out of that one.”

“Erections can be caused by anxiousness, anxiety, nervousness, and other feelings, besides lust. A clinical study I read about in 1984 showed that nearly 35% of all er—”

“Yeah, yeah. You were anxious all right. You were anxious for Shoji to relieve you of your virginity.”

Ilya scowled, imagining a dagger in his hand, and it sinking into Aleksander's

back over and over again. He could practically smell the smugness emanating from the Young Lord. “He had some kind of power of seduction. It was like I would have done anything for him.”

“I’m sure that was it. He has a magical power of seduction. You know what it’s called Ilya? It’s called being unbelievably hot. Every man and a good portion of women fall prey to it. What is amazing is that he supposedly tried to kill you a few hours earlier, and then there you were making out with him. That’s pretty gay, Ilya.” Aleksander was starting to work himself up now. “You know what’s really unfair? I save you from him, and what do I get? Nothing. Not even a blowjob. Or a kiss... Or even a handshake, or a thank you. No, what I get is you recording one good deed against my other infractions in your great book of personal slights.” He stomped down the stairs and they creaked dangerously.

Ilya clutched at the handrail in panic, waiting for the whole thing to come apart, for the steps he was on to collapse and send him skidding to his death below. What if Aleksander saved him? That would be even worse than dying, because then he would have to have sex with him. He would rather die. But what sort of person emotionally blackmailed someone into sleeping with them? It wasn’t right, and Aleksander was always trying to guilt him into doing just that. Sleep with me, or I’ll fire you. Sleep with me, or I’ll fire you and your uncle. Sleep with me because I saved your life... Sleep with me because it’s the right thing to do... That bastard. He was doing it again. Aleksander wasn’t mad. He was pretending to get Ilya to feel sorry for him. How many times would

the man pull this trick? It must have worked on someone at some point, but it had no effect on Ilya. It made him feel bad, but that was it. He could call his bluff and make it as unpleasant for him as it would be Ilya. No, it was too risky, because Aleksander would do it anyway, no matter how awful Ilya made it seem.

Aleksander was almost a whole flight ahead of him, so Ilya hurried to catch up with the man. Wait a minute, saved his life? Wasn't that stretching things a bit? He blundered upon Shoji in the act of torturing Ilya. There had been no rescue, only the Oriental Boy's unwillingness to show his true nature to Aleksander. Ilya wondered if the Young Lord had been hurt by Shoji's betrayal. He hadn't given any indication to Ilya. But he wasn't the type to show pain. It would get in the way of being a douchebag, wouldn't it?

“Are you jealous that he wants me and not you?” Ilya blurted it out before he could think better of it. It was true, Shoji had wanted to be terrible together with Ilya, but he'd never had any room in his plans for Aleksander, other than the moment when he would push him aside.

Aleksander didn't say anything. And that said everything to Ilya. Then, he spoke: “And I want you, and you don't want me.”

“As you pointed out, I'm no expert on relationships, but maybe if you weren't trying to force me, I wouldn't feel so threatened,” Ilya said reasonably.

“Then you would be completely oblivious,” Aleksander said bitterly.

“Chasing me through the woods to my house, making it quite clear that if you

catch me you're going to rape me, might have been coming on a little too strong.”

“I was only going to kiss you if I caught you!” The beam of light from Aleksander’s head jumped back and forth as the man shook his head. “I was never going to force you.”

“That’s still mouth rape.” It sounded stupid, even to Ilya.

“People don't always tell the truth, but you always think they do.”

“Only at first. I like to think the best of people.”

Aleksander reached the bottom of the stairs and sighed. “We don't have time to talk in circles about this. Right now, we have to find out what Alexei can tell us about the cathedral and how to get to it.”

“Wait!” Ilya suddenly remembered. “What about the man in the west wing. I meant to ask you about it.”

“Who?” Aleksander looked confused.

“The maid, Yaisha, said that you and Shoji and some of your friends were keeping someone locked in the west wing. Shoji even said so this morning, that he would use the man to take him to the cathedral.”

Aleksander looked perplexed. “I don't know what you're talking about. I don't have anyone imprisoned in the house. Who would they be?”

Then Shoji had kept the visitor a secret from Aleksander, somehow. He'd done this for several weeks, too. He should have asked about it sooner. There were just so many things he needed to ask, that he couldn't remember all of it when he needed to. “I... Don't

know.” In the silence that followed, scratchy sounds of music could be heard faintly from the doorway into the study where Alexei resided. The flickering light of the lamp was visible, spilling into the hall. Aleksander looked in the same direction as Ilya.

“Is that where he is?”

Ilya nodded.

“Well, let's go chat with my uncle.”

“Let me go in first, so he doesn't panic,” Ilya said, stepping around Aleksander and walking toward the door.

“I can hear both of you.” The harsh whisper of Alexei's voice easily carried to both of them, as the sound of the needle scratching a record could be heard, and the music stopped. “Come in Ilya, and my blood relation.”

Ilya took a deep breath and stepped into the study. Alexei had been hard at work cleaning the place, and it was much, much better looking. He must have had a source of water somewhere, and had brought up several buckets at least to clean the floor and the walls where he could reach. Alexei had gotten a gramophone from somewhere, some other room down here, and put it on the desk in the corner where he stood next to it, dressed in the clothing Ilya had brought. He'd also availed himself of the spare bandages. None of the black blood was visible on them anymore, but he still resembled a mummy. As he turned to face Ilya, Alexei's eyes had returned to their natural blue. They were not completely natural looking, as they almost seemed to glow and flicker, along with the light from the single lamp in the room. Alexei shaded his eyes against Ilya' lamp.

“Sorry!” Ilya hastily switched it off, as Aleksander stepped into the room, his lamp already dimmed.

“He's not anywhere near as bad as the dog,” Aleksander whispered to Ilya.

“You didn't see me before I was saved by Ilya,” Alexei said, sitting down on the day bed. Ilya curled his nose as he saw what sat on the table next to the lamp. It was the bottle of vodka Ilya had rinsed out and filled with water the second time he'd come here. Now it was filled with blood. Alexei was well enough to traverse the stairs on his own now.

“I don't think you should be drinking that,” Ilya said, as Alexei took the bottle and poured himself a glass from a crystal goblet sitting next to the bottle.

“Oh it's far too late for me, Ilya. I stopped having a choice in the matter long ago.” Alexei took a sip of the poison before setting the goblet back down. He tilted his head at Ilya, as though momentarily confused. “I swear, your head looks smaller than yesterday.”

Aleksander snickered, and then quickly suppressed the noise as Ilya glared at him.

“It's the same,” he said quietly.

Alexei shrugged. “Now, tell me, who is this with you?”

“I am Aleksander Neimasaurus,” the Young Lord said, slightly pompously.

“One of the Bitch's whelps?” Alexei asked, looking over at Ilya. Aleksander looked confused.

“No, Alina's,” Ilya said. “Amaranth never married and had no children.”

Alexei laughed bitterly. “I suppose that doesn't surprise me. If she couldn't have

me, then she'd marry no one.”

“I went to the chapel—”

“What? I told you not to go there.” Alexei half rose from the day bed, concern etched into the grimace on his bandaged face.

“He does what he wants,” Aleksander said, looking over at Ilya, who looked away quickly.

Alexei watched the two of them for a moment, his eyes darting between them.

“Well? What happened?”

Slowly, in order to make sure he didn't forget anything, he repeated what the Guardian had said.

“So it was responsible for those damned insects,” Alexei snarled, his rasping voice taking on the metallic twang that Ilya associated with the blood-beast.

Ilya crossed his fingers. Now was not a good time for his alternate personality to assert itself, especially now that he was so much healthier. But the moment passed, and Alexei settled back into the day bed.

“Uncle, is it true you were in love with another man?”

Ilya rolled his eyes. There was a mad man upstairs gathering hundreds of snake to kill everyone in the house as a prelude to taking bloody immortality from the blood of a sick boy, and in turn become an undying monster. Clearly, who his uncle was sleeping with was the important thing. Damn Greek Things...

“His name was Dano. I destroyed his life and he went to an asylum for several

years. Then he died. But I loved him with all my heart. Does that shock you?"

Aleksander shrugged. "No, I've fucked lots of men, I was just wondering if that sort of thing ran in the family."

"Apparently it does," Ilya said impatiently. "Can we talk about important things?"

Alexei nodded. "Yes, I can take you to the Cathedral, and I trust I need not warn you not to drink from the fountain?"

Ilya nodded emphatically, but Alexei was not looking at him, he was staring intently at Aleksander.

"Of course I won't. I made a promise to my mother not to ever do that."

Aleksander withdrew the pistol from his jacket. "I would shoot myself in the head before willingly cursing myself."

"But what about what the Guardian said, that you could tell me how to free him?"

Alexei shook his head. "I'm sorry Ilya, I don't know any of that. All of that knowledge would have been passed to me when my father died and The Book of Shelesh passed to me, but I never got it. I was imprisoned here instead. I only know how to get there because I stumbled upon it as a child, when I used the blood to cure Dano's snake bite."

Ilya sat down in the chair by the desk heavily. "We're screwed."

Aleksander was less defeated than Ilya. "Why don't we just use some dynamite to blow it open?"

"The Calviarri would hear that miles away and they would all be on us in no



time.”

“Who?” Alexei asked.

“Crazy Italians my family employs to guard the swamp.”

With a sense of impending doom, and certainty of the answer he would receive, Ilya spoke: “Who would the book have passed to, if it didn’t go to you?”

Alexei thought for a moment. “The bitch.”

Ilya flinched at the words. He had known. Orryn had made sure he knew where to find the mad ghost of the woman. Because he already knew that Ilya would have to seek her out.

“A dog?” Aleksander asked, confused.

“Amaranth,” Ilya said loudly, trying to drown out Alexei’s harsh laughter.

“Oh, then from her it passed to my grandmother Alina. When she started suffering from dementia, it passed to my mother,” Aleksander said suddenly. “I haven’t seen it yet.”

Ilya almost laughed with joy. The vulture had been wrong; he didn't have to go back to the mausoleum. “We can just ask her.”

Aleksander smiled sheepishly. “No, we can't.”

Ilya's joy evaporated like morning mist before the sun. “Why not?”

“I called her last night and told her what was happening. She told me to use my own judgment for the situation and that she was taking the first flight home in the morning.”

“Oh. That's not so bad. How long is the flight?”

“Twenty-two hours.”

“Damn you,” Ilya spat. But he didn't mean Aleksander. No, he was damning a certain bird and the utter certainty of his plans for Ilya. “Not you,” he said, as Aleksander hung his head. Quickly, he told them what Orryn had done to him.

“She likes you. Maybe you can come with us and talk to her, and she won't split us apart like wood,” Aleksander said, as though it were the perfect solution.

Alexei chuckled, and it sound ever so slightly like a cat choking on a razor blade. “Oh no, I wouldn't dream of such a thing after what she did to me. No, her suffering is like a tourniquet to the blood flowing from my heart. Ten thousand years from now, I want to know that she's mad and living in the catacombs of the mausoleum begging me for forgiveness. It actually makes life worth living for me.” Alexei laughed and it had a nasty sound to it, of madness, joy, and sadness all at once. “I never thought I'd find another reason to stay alive.” He laughed again, even worse than before. “Thank you for this gift, Ilya.” Then he laughed again, almost hysterically.

Ilya shivered at the sound and he wasn't the only one. He got the feeling there was no point in arguing with him. Madness did not bow to logic no matter how concise it might be.

“Thanks. When I'm dead at least I'll have the satisfaction of knowing you made someone else suffer,” Aleksander said.

“You're very welcome, nephew. When you're as old as me, you'll understand the

rich, heady feeling of revenge. After all, what is there in life for an immortal but to make others realize how much they suffer?”

“But we've only tried to help you,” Aleksander said, still not understanding how madness worked, or still trying to figure out that it wasn't possible to figure it out.

“That's why I'm willing to take you to the Cathedral.” Alexei took another sip from the goblet. He was so giddy some of it ran down his chin and stained the bandages. “If only I had some wine, you could join me in a toast to her pain,” he fretted, looking around the room, in case he'd misplaced a bottle somewhere.

It was done. They would get no help from Alexei in regards to Amaranth. Now he had to go there and somehow convince her to help him. “But how do we get there from here, without Shoji catching us?”

Alexei smiled at Ilya, or at least the bandages creased on his face indicating a smile, the blood staining his chin making it a macabre sight. “You take the tunnels, of course.”

## CHAPTER 27: AT THE SOUND OF SCREAMS

“Tunnels?” Aleksander asked. “My mother always told me avoid them,” she said they weren't safe anymore, because the swamp was flooding them.”

“Floods or being bitten to death by snakes.” Alexei weighed each decision with hands like the scales of justice. “Your choice seems obvious.”

“Floods,” Ilya said without hesitation, remembering the yellow eyes of the adder as it struck at him on the ledge. What was a little water in his lungs, compared to that? “The necrotizing venom of adders causes immediate and intense pain, followed by swelling, tingling sensations followed by numbness, and occasionally lymphangitic lines.” Ilya was warming to his unpleasant subject now, recalling the same article that told him of the massive reproductive capabilities of the species and the relatively moderate effect of their bites. “Lymphangitic lines are caused when the toxin inflames your veins. You can actually see the poison spreading through your nervous system,” Ilya explained at Aleksander's baffled look. He made that part up, but it sounded logical. “Necrosis is the final stage of the venom, causing part of, or the entire limb to die, but not usually. Fatalities are almost unheard of... Unless you're allergic to the venom.” Ilya looked grimly at Aleksander. “I have a clear history of severe allergic reactions to animals, as you well know, so one bite ought to do it for me. They might have to bite you three or four times, though.” Ilya paused for a moment, before delivering his finishing blow: “Of course, these adders are intelligent, and I bet they know how many times

they'll have to bite us for it to be fatal.”

Aleksander gave Ilya one of his trademark unpleasant smiles. “I want to thank you for sharing that, Ilya, It will make everything so much easier, now that I know.”

Ilya could tell from his tone of voice that Aleksander did not appreciate knowing the truth. Not even the teensiest bit. “If you're lucky, the doctors might be able to amputate your necrotized limbs.”

Alexei laughed. “It's like having a speaking encyclopedia, but it only tells you things that you don't want to know.”

“I know!” Aleksander said, moving to stand beside his great uncle. “It's so cute when he goes off on some tangent. I once got a five minute lecture on the conservation efforts of the Siberian Snow Leopard. That last little rant wasn't so nice.” Aleksander gave Ilya a proprietary smile that made his skin crawl, but not as much as it would have a few weeks ago. He didn't even need to imagine a metaphorical wire brush scraping the dirtiness from his flesh along with the top layer of his skin. Not anymore.

“I can see the appeal, if I were, what? Eighty years younger?” Alexei shook his head.

Ilya scowled at them both. Clearly they were blood relations, of that he had no doubt. “The situation of the Siberian Snow Leopard is quite precarious,” he said darkly, “and not a laughing matter...”

Aleksander's laughter drowned out the last half of his sentence, and even Alexei chuckled a bit. It didn't sound anywhere as grotesque as his other fits of mirth had been.

Perhaps because this one was genuine and not bitter. Even though Ilya was being laughed at, it made him happy to see Alexei laughing, and not about how he could make the ghost of some woman suffer for an eternity or because his life was such hopeless misery. It seemed a shame. When Ilya helped Emernon, he suspected that when the effects of the blood were reversed, one of two things would happen: Alexei would return to normal, and look just like he did when he first took the blood in his early twenties, or... Ilya felt this was much more likely: Alexei would age to nearly a hundred, and almost immediately die of old age.

Orryn too, but the bird had as much as admitted to Ilya that he knew that, simply by virtue of knowing everything. They all wanted to die, Orryn and his flock. They hadn't known what they were doing when they flew to the island and dipped their beaks into the fountain; their simple animal brains had only realized it was a free source of nourishment that would keep them alive. They hadn't known that they would never die, no matter what. Now, four centuries later, they were no longer stupid animals. They had so much experience and wisdom to draw upon. It allowed them to realize that they were ready to die before they became too twisted.

The adders, along with their mother, didn't know what it would do to them over time. Ilya would guess that they hadn't been able to get to the fountain directly, and maybe the vultures were responsible for that. For some reason, they needed Shoji to secure for them the blood. That had to be it. The snakes were only on their way to becoming what Orryn and his flock were. Ilya had only seen significant intelligence from

the mother; the others seemed brilliant as far as snakes went, but not up to the standard of the vultures. Aleksander tweaked his nose. Ilya almost slapped him, but refrained.

“Have you been listening to anything we've been saying?”

“Yes.” Ilya scowled at him, or baby-scowled. Damn it. That wasn't what it looked like! Now even he was thinking about it like that.

“Ilya, can't we skip this game, for once?” Aleksander said with a sigh.

“Just summarize it for me,” Ilya replied, aloof.

“I was saying to my nephew that in the attic there's actually two ways in and out of it.” Alexei was unperturbed by Ilya's wandering attention. He was probably desperate for conversation of any kind. “There is an elevator, or at least there was eighty years ago, I told my nephew where, and you can take that down to the third level of the basement. In the bowling alley—”

“There's a bowling alley here?” Ilya said. He'd always wanted to try. It seemed like, mathematically, there should be a way to get a strike every time. He was certain it would be the one sport he could excel at, if he could just try.

“There was eighty years ago, and my nephew says it's still there. Behind it is a small storage room and there is a trap door in the floor that drops you down into the tunnel. You want to go right to the mausoleum. If you go left—”

“It takes you to the lake, right next to the swamp,” Ilya said, several pieces of information sliding into place. That clever bird. He'd shown Ilya that rusty door almost a week ago. How had he known it would be important now? Sadly, Ilya reflected that he

had a long way to go before he was as good of an oracle as a vulture.

“How did you know about that?” Aleksander asked suspiciously. “I’ve lived here my whole life, and you’ve only been here a few weeks.”

“I’m an oracle...” Ilya let the words hang in the air, without elaborating. There was no need to mention the Orryn connection. They could trust him. Maybe this was how an oracle operated; he never really told the future, he just stole the wisdom of supernatural entities and passed it off as magical insight. Ilya could get used to that sort of life. It made the mythical so easy, that all he had to do was sit back and wait for it to fall in his lap. There was the small matter of bleeding from the eye sockets when he talked to the Guardian...

“Well, why didn’t you tell me about it then? Why did we have to come and talk to Alexei about it?” Aleksander said.

Ilya gave Aleksander an imperious look, or at least tried to. “I merely required verification of what I had long suspected.” Ilya looked away, smiling slightly.

Aleksander tapped him on the shoulder. “Did the pillar tell you, or the bird?”

Ilya gave Aleksander a look that said a question like that would never be dignified by a response.

“All right, then tell me with your oracular powers, whether or not my feelings for you are genuine,” Aleksander said finally.

“They are.” With horror, Ilya realized what he’d done a fraction of a second too late. “No! I meant to say that you will never understand true love and are only motivated



by aberrant sexual urges.” But he knew, he wasn't sure when, that he'd faced the reality that Aleksander wasn't just trying to screw him. He'd pushed away that unconscious thought as being perhaps even more uncomfortable than an unwanted sexual advance.

Alexei stood up from the day bed, shaking a little and leaning down on the table. “Aberrant? I didn't think I would hear such things from you, Ilya.”

He looked away. The words aberrant, unnatural, deviant, disgusting, and sodomite, were all that stood between him and Aleksander's advances. He couldn't give them up so easily, even if he didn't really believe in them. With an internal grimace, he picked up his metaphorical shovel and prepared to dig himself deeper.

Aleksander winked at him. “It's all right, he doesn't mean it. He falls back on this sort of thing, whenever we get into territory that takes him near the truth. The more technical he gets with his insults, the more amusing it is. I'm waiting for him to say something like same-sex attraction is biologically undesirable for the species and blah, blah, blah...”

“Well it is,” Ilya said, “if everyone did it, there would be no children and the human race would die out within a single generation. Does that sound like a good thing to you?” He wished this conversation would go away or that someone would snatch the metaphorical shovel out his hands before he could dig himself any deeper.

There was silence for a few moments. Then Alexei whispered. “The only good thing in my life for many years, was my love for Dano. We fell in love as children and I spent most of my life trying to save him. If that was wrong, then my whole life was. It

was the only thing that ever made me happy.”

The rebuke stung. He had nothing to say to Alexei. It would be wrong to use on Alexei all the words that he put up between him and Aleksander. “We don't have time to talk about this. Shoji's not procrastinating, is he?”

“Fine! Let's go get necrotized.” Aleksander reached up and clicked his headlamp on. “I probably deserve it for my aberrant and ungodly sexual practices, anyway. I ought to make you go to the mausoleum and talk to her yourself.”

“You can't see her anyway, can you?” Ilya shot back.

“No, but I'm her sweet little nephew that she doted on, because she didn't die until I was eight. She'll divulge the secrets to me, even if she has to do it through you. How about that?” Aleksander said triumphantly.

“Oh.” Ilya smiled awkwardly at him. Maybe it wouldn't be so awful to talk to her after all. “Thanks.” He switched on his own headlamp.

“We'll come back to get you when we're ready to go to the cathedral,” Aleksander said, turning to go.

Alexei sat back on the daybed and opened the knapsack Aleksander had brought for him. “Before nightfall,” he said, “after that, and the insects will be on me. I will need to be completely insulated against the sun.”

“Why? Are you a vampire?” Aleksander asked, with a chuckle.

Ilya gave him a superior smile. “All supernatural beings are damaged by the sun in some way. That's why the bugs don't come out until it is dark.” There was no need to

explain to Aleksander that Soldier had told him nearly everything he knew about beings beyond the normal.

Alexei nodded. "I had deduced as much from my studies. I lacked the tools to determine why, eighty years ago. I'm sure with modern scientific equipment, the answers would be obvious."

"How come the snakes and vultures don't have to hide from the sun?" Aleksander asked.

For a second, Ilya was stumped. "Because their skin is covered in feathers and scales." Ilya wondered if it was true.

"Oh. Huh, I guess that was kind of obvious," Aleksander said.

After departing the study, Ilya took the lead up the spiral staircase, hoping that Aleksander would not return to the previous subject, even though he couldn't stop turning it over in his mind. He would have to face some facts; if Shoji hadn't revealed himself to be psychotic, Ilya couldn't say with certainty that he could have resisted his advances. Even if Ilya was in love with Tabitha. He had to admit, after that day by the pool, he hadn't been as disinterested in the other guys as he should have been. A bit of confusion for someone his age was normal, wasn't it? He wasn't getting anywhere he wanted to go with these thoughts. There were more important things on the horizon, anyway.

"How far through the basement do we have to go?" Ilya asked, wondering if they were really taking a safer path. "Wasn't the basement and a tunnel just the sort of place that snakes liked to lurk?"

Aleksander shrugged. "If they know the tunnel exists. No one goes down in the basement much anymore. It's mostly me and my friends, when we go bowling and other things. The snakes should be busy plotting the deaths of everyone else. With any luck, we'll be able to slip out unobserved."

Ilya nodded. "Shouldn't we warn them, or something?"

"I thought about that. There's nothing we can say to anyone that would make people believe us."

"We're just leaving them to fend for themselves?"

"I thought we were hoping to get this problem resolved before that happened."

The stairs creaked precipitously beneath Aleksander's heavier feet, and he clutched at the handrail.

Ilya stopped. "They're going to die, aren't they?"

Aleksander stepped up next to him. "The moment Alexei said he didn't know how to get into the cathedral, I knew our time had run out, Ilya. I've known most of them my whole life and there's not a goddamn thing I can do to help them, except what we're doing. Now move!" He pushed Ilya roughly up the steps.

It was just like his parents all over again. He'd been in the mausoleum last night, Orryn had shown him the way, but he'd run away. He could have questioned Amaranth then. Demetri. Tabitha. They would both probably die now, because he'd been a coward last night. He didn't cry, probably because he was sick of doing that, and it never did any good. "No." He said it quietly.

“What?” Aleksander asked, as he moved by him.

“I won't let them die.” He pushed past Aleksander and ran up the stairs as fast as he could. It was the only thing he thought he could do. The stairs groaned beneath his feet. Over and over again he saw the blood washing down the drain at the execution yard, saw the bullet rip through the boy's head in mid-sentence, his mouth just hanging open for a second before the guard pushed him back with one boot. Then it was his mother, at the corner store, doing their weekly shopping. Ilya was in the back where the rest room was. His parents were going up to the front to pay, carrying baskets of food, toiletries, and other goods, their heads hidden beneath the tall shelves which stretched nearly to the ceiling stuffed to the gills with canned meats, breads, and liquor. Ilya was washing his hands in the small bathroom. He'd touched something sticky in the meat department. When he turned the tap off, he heard the shouting and the screaming from outside.

They were shouts and screams his parents would not hear, and they would not see the assailants beyond the tall shelves. What had Ilya done? He stood in front of the mirror, paralyzed for a few moments. Then he reached toward the door, and touched the knob. He was still for a moment. Then he locked it. When the shooting started, he hid on the other side of the toilet, away from the door. That was where the police had found him cowering fifteen minutes later.

The rest was conjecture that he'd heard at the trial. His mother had been shot first. The bullet had blown a hole through her throat and neck and she'd choked to death on her own blood in a matter of minutes. But she'd lived long enough to see her husband, Ilya's

father, crouch next to her, and had seen the boy with the gun walk up behind him and shoot him in the back of head. He fell on top of her, while the other boy, the one who hadn't killed anyone, ran away. His partner, the killer, reluctantly left.

Ilya was in the bathroom. He covered his ears and tried to hide from the sounds. But he could hear someone choking and gurgling. He didn't know until later who it was. It wouldn't be guns this time, it would be snakes. It would be an attack Ilya knew was coming. Demetri and Tabitha knew nothing about. He had to do something, and all he could do was run as the grim scenario played out in his mind. His visits to Alexei had prepared him for the stairs, but he was sorely out of shape for running. By the time he reached the top he was gasping for breath. He ran on, ignoring the stitch in his side as he flung himself over the pile of bones. He was aware of Aleksander running behind him, and knew that he was shouting at him, but Ilya could not devote any attention to it.

As he turned at the junction, he saw the open door in the distance. He almost tripped on the baseboard and caught himself on the desk before he could fall.

*Ilya?* Tabitha said, getting to her feet from where she sat in the corner.

*Tabitha!* Ilya signed with one hand, as his other clutched the desk and he gasped for breath. He was relieved to see her. He looked down at the ground in a panic. *Did you close the attic door behind you?*

She nodded, and helped him into the chair by the window.

Aleksander stepped through the panel a moment later. *What are you doing here?* *Did you follow us?* he signed suspiciously.

Tabitha rolled her eyes. *I was worried about Ilya in the secret wing.*

The drawer door exploded open and Tabitha jumped slightly as Soldier leapt onto the desk to point an accusatory finger at her.

*She was spying on us several days ago too, and I swear on my life, she's not deaf!* Soldier signed toward Aleksander, his beady, unblinking gaze never wavering from her.

For her part, Tabitha took the revelation of the Toy fairly well. Her mouth hung open a bit, as the Toy stared at her in a way that seemed quite belligerent, despite the permanent smile.

He sighed. *She was just worried about me, she can't he—* Ilya began, only to be cut off.

“All right! I'm not deaf,” Tabitha said. “I really needed this job and my mother couldn't hear so I knew how to sign. I just pretended because your family only hires the deaf.”

*Lies!* Soldier signed. *She's after the blood too.*

“What?” Tabitha seemed baffled by Soldier's accusations. “I knew something was going on when I got that note when you got your head bashed in. I heard you talking outside the door later that day so I stopped to listen. You seemed to be talking to yourself. So I looked through the key hole and saw you talking to that.” Tabitha pointed at Soldier.

“Yeah, he was there. My foot and ass remember it well,” Aleksander said, smiling, as Soldier's head spun in his direction for a moment. “No hard feelings,” he added.

Ilya smiled pleasantly at the memory. That had been a happy day, compared to

now.

“I thought, he really is mad, until I saw it raise its arm and sign to him,” Tabitha finished.

“We don't have time to talk about this now!” Ilya shouted. “Tabitha, Shoji's going to kill everyone. You have to go get my uncle and get out of here in his truck.”

“What?” She looked uncertainly at Ilya. “That's not possible.” She looked over at Aleksander for confirmation of Ilya's lunacy. When she got none, she looked over at Soldier.

“He's got some snakes he's going to use.” Ilya floundered. He didn't know what to say. There was so much he would have to explain, and the time for that had long run out.

“Look, it's all impossible and it's true,” Aleksander said, taking control of the situation with sheer force of personality. “If you don't do what he says, you'll be bitten to death by adders. Don't think, just do it. Don't walk, run to Demetri,” He strode over to the door and flung it open. “Now go!” he said, with authority.

For a moment, she hesitated. Ilya held his breath. It had sounded good to him.

“But why aren't you coming with me?” she asked turning back toward Ilya.

“I have to save someone in the swamp.” It was the shortest reply he could think of.

“The story?” she asked.

When she'd first confronted him about the attic, he told her about the legends and she'd dismissed them. Maybe now she believed. He nodded to her and she went pale.



“Don't die,” she said, and hurried from the room.

Ilya could hear the sound of her shoes clicking on the wood as she ran down the hall. He hoped that she would be all right. “The elevator,” he said, picking Soldier up off the table.

Aleksander ran into the hall and Ilya followed. “Maybe he changed his mind again,” the Young Lord said as they passed through the darkened hallways on the side of the house where the sun's horizon had not yet reached.

Ilya had only been through this part of the attic once, in his initial explorations. A thick layer of dust covered everything, and it made Ilya's eyes itch, but allergies were the least of his concerns. He would have to hope he wasn't sensitive enough to dust for an anaphylactic attack. “It could be even worse.”

“Or better. Maybe he decided to just go for the cathedral, and ignored everyone else. I thought you liked to look on the brighter side of things,” Aleksander said.

“Not anymore,” Ilya said. “At least not with Shoji.” He trusted Aleksander more than he had before. People had to prove themselves now. He would not trust by default any longer. He clicked his head lamp on to see in the gloom, and the transparent shape of a long dead boy reared up in front of him, and Ilya almost screamed.

Sacha shaded his eyes sleepily. “Hi, Ilya,” the ghost said. “You should be careful. There are snakes all over downstairs.”

Ilya came to a halt in front of him and spent a moment or two catching his breath. “Sacha, I need you do me a favor.”

The boy smiled up at him. "Let me see... I don't think I'm busy. What can I do?"

"I need you to go downstairs and find Shoji."

Aleksander came walking back down the hall and looked at Ilya, baffled. "What the hell are you doing?"

"But I don't like snakes, that's why I came up here." Sacha tilted his head at Ilya. "Do you like snakes?"

"No. I hate them, but Shoji's going to use them to kill everyone in the house," Ilya said, resisting the urge to reach out and shake some sense into him.

"I said what are you doing?" Aleksander asked loudly, scratching his head.

"No, you said what the hell are you doing?" Ilya spared him a look that said in no uncertain terms: *Fuck off*. "I'm talking to a ghost and he might help us." He turned back to Sacha, who was distracted and passing his hand back and forth through the back of a wooden rocking chair. "I need you to go downstairs and find him, see if you can find out what he's doing, and then go to the bowling alley and wait for us."

"But the snakes..." the insubstantial boy whined.

"Their fangs will pass right through you, like that rocking chair." Ilya gripped Sacha by the shoulders. "Please, I need your help."

"Oh...Okay," the ghostly boy said serenely, smiling up at Ilya again and then sinking into the floor boards.

Ilya turned back to Aleksander. "He'll help us."

Aleksander nodded. "I'm going to pretend that you aren't mad."

It took another minute of searching to find what they were looking for. “I haven't been here since I used the elevator as a boy, when I was exploring every nook and cranny. I didn't find all of the exciting things you did, though,” Aleksander pushed a cardboard box out of the way of a large oaken door, and Ilya saw the faded brass fixture next to it, identical to the elevator in Alina's tower.

“I read about all of it in a book I found in the attic,” Ilya said, as he helped clear debris out of the way of the elevator door.

“Yeah, I was about ten and I had no interest in old dusty books.”

“Unlike now?”

“Of course.” Aleksander grinned at him and pushed the brass handle down. The gears of the elevator ground to life.

The gears must have been directly overhead, because the sound was quite loud. Hopefully, the sound would be muffled downstairs. Snakes couldn't hear that well, could they? No, but they sensed vibrations enormously well. They could probably feel this a mile away, since Ilya could feel it in his heart. The sound of gears stopped and Aleksander slid the door open by the corroded brass handle, revealing a large freight elevator, dimly lit from above by a single yellow light bulb.

They stepped inside and Aleksander slid the door shut. He twisted a brass knob with B3 engraved in it, and the elevator began its slow descent. Ilya hoped that Sacha could find Shoji and that he actually knew who the Oriental Boy was. The elevator's progress was not quick, but it was vastly superior to wandering around the house in an

attempt to get where they were going. Ilya had a moment where he could slow down. What in the world was he going to say to her? Maybe he should leave it to Aleksander, and just act as, what did they call it? A medium? Hopefully Aleksander knew what to say to his great Aunt.

Halfway down the shaft, the screaming started. It was audible over the grinding of gears, and the sound was easily recognizable to Ilya. Deaf people didn't scream the same way as those who could hear. The sound was almost un-natural in its timber, very airy and deep sounding, not designed for volume but physical sensations that the deaf could feel. It was like the sound his father had made right before he died. He could hear it back in the bathroom, over his mother's gurgling. He closed his eyes and put his hands over his ears. It had been at least ten minutes since Tabitha left. She could have made it down to the cottages in time. So long as Demetri didn't slow her down, they could have escaped.

With his eyes closed and the sound muffled, he thought of the other people dying that he'd failed to save. Chief among them was the Cook, a man who'd saved his life several times and whose name Ilya could never remember. Right now he was dying along with Tabitha's friend, Yaisha, the Gamekeeper, who had tried to take Ilya under his wing that first day, but given up at Ilya's complete and utter failure to interact with minks. He couldn't even keep their dinner of rabbits secured. He'd let them go, like he'd wanted to escape. They probably died in the swamp, at the hands of unusually intelligent adders. The Archivist would die as well. Ilya's mouth quirked as he tried to resist smiling at the thought. Undoubtedly she would find the experience as unappealing and disagreeable as

everything else. But still, he didn't want her to die. The Lesbians would die as well. His eyes popped open and looked up at Aleksander, who was looking grimmer than Ilya ever remembered seeing him.

“The lesbians, are they still in the house?” Ilya asked, taking his hands from his ears.

He shook his head. “No, I sent all my friends away yesterday afternoon, when I thought I would have to kill you and bury you somewhere in the mausoleum. I didn't want them around on family business. Do you remember their names?”

“Shut up.” Ilya covered his ears again. They were safe and that was important because beyond their beautiful, tall, bikini-clad bodies, replete with heaving bosoms, they had been nice to Ilya. Though they'd had no call to heave, Ilya imagined that they would have no trouble with the heaving, and could picture it quite clearly. “The light haired one was called Tania?” It almost sounded like a question the way Ilya said it. “I only met them once.”

“Ivan, Misha, Karocai, and Locai are safe, too.”

“I guess that's nice.”

“Misha had a crush on you, you know,” Aleksander said, trying to distract him.

Ilya could barely remember the man. Hadn't he been with Ivan? “He was a sort of big muscly blond fellow, right?” Ilya took his hands from his ears. There were no other sounds beyond the grinding of the gears now. Maybe it was all over. He needed to think about something else.

“Yeah, but don't let his looks deceive you. He might be tall and built and a little bit stupid, but in bed, his ample frame was always on all four—”

“I understand!” Ilya said quickly.

“Everyone else thought your personality was a good match for his dopey slowness. They didn't believe it when I said you just seem stupid, but you're actually quite intelligent. Shoji believed it, sadly.” Aleksander's tone went bitter at the mention of the Oriental Boy, the Snake he'd let into his home.

Ilya ignored his inner turmoil. “Tania thought I was dumb?”

“Yeah, shy, awkward, stupid, and oddly cute.”

The only two words Ilya heard were *oddly cute*. It was true, wasn't it? His head was slightly too large, and his ears stuck out perhaps a little too much, but overall, he was cute, wasn't he?

“I told her you weren't shy or stupid. You just needed to be confronted with a situation that you couldn't run away from. And see? You're not that shy now, are you?”

Ilya made no comment to that, and retreated into a fantasy of heaving bosoms and his odd cuteness having a meeting. Fine, it was true. He'd been comfortable running away from things and doing everything he could to avoid confrontation. Here, he hadn't been able to. The Young Lord stepped closer to him and Ilya pressed himself against the wall, turning his head away from Aleksander, sensing the incoming mouth-rape.

“Is the wall interesting?” the older man asked.

“More so than anything else in the elevator.”

“You don’t hold back anymore, do you? Not now that we’re friends.”

Before Ilya could reply, the elevator ground to a halt. Aleksander turned away from him, his hand grazing Ilya's ass in a move that didn't seem like an accident to him in any way. The Young Lord pulled the elevator door open to a dimly lit corridor with faded green carpeting and a rather hideous floral-themed beige wallpaper. Who was it that had said, on their deathbed, *either I go, or this wallpaper goes!* Ilya couldn't quite remember. He hoped that he didn't end up playing the part of the dying man.

“The bowling alley isn't that far from here.” Aleksander stepped into the hall and Ilya closed the door behind them. No snakes slithered out to attack them, and they proceeded as fast as they could, while keeping an eye on their ankles at all times. There was a musty, earthy smell down here, and things were ever so slightly dusty, indicating that the servants were only occasional visitors.

“How often do people come down here?” Ilya asked.

“This is the very bottom level. It's used mostly for storage and stuff. Besides the bowling alley and the bath house, no one really comes down here.”

“Bath house?” Ilya hadn’t even known there was one in the house. It must be expensive to heat in the winter.

Aleksander smiled. “Yeah, I could spend days there with my friends.”

“I...I don't need to know anymore,” Ilya said, but his imagination was probably more graphic than anything Aleksander could conjure with words. There was an awkward silence, but he supposed it was only awkward for him. Aleksander never seemed

apologetic about himself.

It took another minute or two to get to the bowling alley. Aleksander flipped the light on and illuminated the two lanes and several dozen pins. This room was not dusty, since Aleksander and his friends frequented it. Ilya spotted a small door to the right, which probably led into the back and the machinery for straightening the pins. Aleksander walked over to it and pushed it open. He groped around in the darkness for a moment before finding the light switch. As he stepped into the room, Ilya looked back. He'd hoped that Sacha would be here before they even left for the mausoleum, since he could float through walls and move much faster than Ilya could, but there was no sign of him.

It had been a while since he'd heard any screams, so he assumed the attack was drawing to a close. Ilya tried to put what was happening out of his mind. It was his fault. If he'd been just one day quicker...

"Ilya?" Aleksander waved to him to get his attention. "I think I found it."

Ilya ducked into the room and shut the door behind him. The room was cramped with old cardboard boxes and cobwebs. The unpleasant smell of smoke wafted through his nostrils, as the dim incandescent bulb above them warmed up and burned away the dust covering it. Aleksander had moved away several of the boxes to reveal a wooden trap door in the floor. Soldier poked his head out of Ilya's jacket and looked down as he opened it. Ilya had forgotten he was there, he'd been so quiet. Ilya had learned that he frequently hid himself when painful emotions manifested themselves. He hadn't been



willing to confront Alexei, a man he'd ensured suffered a horrible fate for seventy eight years, and he'd not wanted to deal with the emotions that had manifested in the elevator.

Aleksander opened the door to reveal a black pit. The smell of decay and mustiness washed out of it and the sound of dripping water could be heard. Ilya shivered, remembering the last time he'd blundered around in the dark, thinking he was in water. Nervously, he reached up and clicked on his headlight. It illuminated a moldy ladder descending about eight feet down, then it disappeared into black, still water.

“I wonder how deep it is,” Ilya said, without the faintest trace of enthusiasm to discover it for himself. His panic and desperation to get there as fast as he could had been completely checked by his self-preservation instinct. Climbing down into a flooded tunnel beneath a swamp in the dark when killer snakes were on the loose suddenly seemed like the stupidest idea in the world.

## CHAPTER 28: THE DEAD LADY OF NEIMASAURUS

“It can't be that deep. The tunnel seems pretty tall already,” Aleksander said slowly, looking over at Ilya. They sat in silence for a few moments, staring into the abyss.

Soldier looked between them and shook his head. He climbed out of the jacket and jumped down to the ground next to the door. *Why don't I go first?* the Toy signed with every last scrap of condescending he could muster. Then he jumped. Ilya and Aleksander leaned over to watch so quickly, that they almost bumped heads. Soldier landed in the water with a tiny splash. He disappeared from sight for a moment, black ripples on the surface the only indication he had been there. Aleksander clicked his own headlamp on so they could scan the area thoroughly. After a second or two, Soldier broke the surface and gave them thumbs up. *It's about eight inches deep.*

Ilya didn't move. Aleksander sighed and began his descent down the creaky, mold-covered ladder. Soldier, meanwhile, swam in lazy circles around the ladder, looking bored. When the Young Lord got to the last step, he paused for a moment, then gingerly lowered one foot into the water. Then the other was lowered and he took a few steps forward experimentally.

“It's not so bad. The water's not that cold yet.” Aleksander smiled up at him. “In another month, it would be impossible to walk around down here.”

“Oh good,” Ilya said sarcastically. He lowered himself down to the ladder, and

grasped the inside handle of the trap door. He shut it as he lowered himself down. He didn't want snakes finding their way into an open door. "Are you sure there are no snakes?"

"No," Aleksander said, as the beam of his lamp shined up the ladder and over Ilya, lingering on his backside. "You should wear tighter pants. Those are a little baggy. It's hard to make anything out."

Ilya glared down at him.

*I don't see anything, Soldier signed. Come on in, the water's fine.*

"Doesn't someone say that in Jaws?" Ilya slowly started shimmying down the ladder. "It's the mayor, isn't it? When he's trying to lure everyone to the beach so he can make some money, and then the shark eats someone."

Aleksander started down the tunnel, shining his light from left to right as he went, while Soldier looked up at him.

"You're probably lying too, just to get me down here," Ilya mumbled as he climbed down to just above the water. Even if there weren't snakes, the hygiene considerations made walking around in this water prohibitive. What if there was some kind of shellfish in there? Could he have an allergic reaction just from that sort of contact? Some people allergic to peanuts could have a reaction to baked goods made with a machine that had processed nuts previously. Was this the same sort of thing? This water was thoroughly questionable.

*Ilya, you have to hurry.* Soldier smiled at him, but then again, Soldier had no

choice with the smile.

“You're the damn mayor of Amity,” Ilya snarled, and slowly lowered himself into what had increasingly become a deadly eight inch layer of water filled with snakes, shellfish, mold, and algae, not to mention all the bacteria, germs, viruses, and diseases floating in the stagnant, warm water.

“Hurry up!” Aleksander called from further down the tunnel.

Ilya shuffled forward, his headlamp trained onto his feet. Soldier easily swam along beside him. But his footsteps disturbed the surface of the water and made it impossible to see if anything was within it. He gave up trying to see an attack before it came and looked up into the tunnel. It was remarkably similar to the brickwork of the secret wing, with the dark brown stone and mortar holding the tunnel together, with a frame of rather fragile and water damaged wooden timbers helping to shore up the roof. The longer he walked, the more pedestrian the place became to Ilya.

If the snakes had been down here, they would have swarmed him already. Since his feet weren't swelling up like balloons, there probably weren't any shellfish. The bacteria could take days of growing on and eventually into his skin before he had to get his feet amputated. There was probably methicillin-resistant staph down here.

“Ilya, come on! This tunnel has to be at least half a mile long to go all the way to the mausoleum, it's going to take you forever like that.” Aleksander's headlamp swiveled in Ilya's direction as he spoke.

Ilya dragged his feet through the water faster, sending out big ripples that forced

Soldier to grab onto Ilya's pants or be swept away. He climbed up to his hip and Ilya picked him up in his hand. After a minute or two, he had caught up to Aleksander. The next thing he had to consider was where did this tunnel come out, and could he remember the way back to the passage where they'd found her last night?

“What are you going to say to her?” Aleksander asked, slowing down so they could walk side by side.

“I thought I would translate for you. Like you said, she knew you and she'll tell you. We just have to find her in the mausoleum.”

“I thought you said she was hiding down a trap door at the bottom?”

Wait... a trapdoor, and within the sound of dripping water. He stopped in his tracks. “She's going to be at the end of the tunnel,” he whispered.

“Well, that's good. We won't have to look around for her,” Aleksander said, as though it were a fortuitous coincidence. He didn't understand what she could do.

Amaranth wasn't like other ghosts at all.

Ilya could only assume that she had at least a small dose of whatever had made Emernon what he was. She'd cut her feet on broken glass after her parents died in the tornado, and then she had bled for three solid days and the doctor had been certain she would die of blood loss. What should Ilya call it? The Stigmata gene? “There's no way we can run away from her down here.”

Before Aleksander could reply, they heard it. The sound of a woman crying very faintly, echoed down the tunnel. Ilya froze. Aleksander didn't even pause in his stride, he

simply grabbed his arm and dragged Ilya down the hall. The Young Lord couldn't hear it.

“I can hear a woman crying ahead,” Ilya said, yanking his arm away from Aleksander. Then, between one step and the next, the tunnel gave way to a natural stone cave, and the sounds of grief grew louder.

“So this is what supports the mausoleum,” Aleksander said, shining his light around what looked like granite and marble rock formations, as the cave opened up into a small cavern. Ilya looked around with his lamp, seeing other cave openings around him. The chamber was about forty feet across. Against the far wall were three marble tombs, almost like the sarcophagi of Egyptian pharaohs.

“Why did they bury her down here?” Ilya asked, as he found the ladder going up about twenty feet to the trap door at the top of the cavern. It was still splintered and broken. Without warning, the sounds of crying ceased.

“We didn't,” Aleksander said, perplexed. “My mother took me to visit her grave above next to my great grandfather. I saw the name plate.”

“No, she's buried in one of those tombs.” Ilya was certain of it. “She knows we're here. She's stopped crying.”

“Oh.” Aleksander seemed a little dismayed by that. “Where is she?” Maybe he was finally catching on that this wasn't going to be a joyous reunion.

“I don't know! I can't see her.” Ilya walked toward the tombs. He wanted to see who else was buried here. Maybe the other two had been dangerous in some way, like Amaranth, with a touch of the family curse. The floor of the cavern had been sanded and

polished until it was smooth and easy to walk on. At some point in the cave, they must have started traveling upwards, because there was no water in the granite cavern, but the sound of water dripping echoed out of the cave they came from.

The tombs were nearly identical, made of sculpted stone about seven feet long and three feet wide, with a large piece of polished white marble lowered down onto them. Chiseled into the marble were the names and dates of death of those within. Amaranth's was the one farthest from the ladder, and the most recent. The other two being men, were from a hundred and fifty, and three hundred and fifty years ago, respectively.

“I guess she was buried here,” Aleksander said, leaning over to read the inscription. “It's from the Book of Judges,” he said. It was difficult to read because the marble was partially reflective, causing their headlamps to obscure it.

Ilya squinted, “I can't make it out, what does it say?”

“It says: There came hence unto Canaan a boy. And this boy's name was Emernon, son of Shelesh. He was shunned for his abominable appearance, for he was plague stricken. The men of Israel left him to die, refused him shelter or food. Yet Emernon would not die, and so the men of Israel smited him and he bled but still did not die. And so it was that Emernon became a curse on the people of Israel for he never stopped bleeding.”

Ilya nodded. “It was in Amaranth's diary. There were some other passages, too, about the forbiddance of drinking blood.”

“Why did they put that on there?”

Ilya shrugged. “I told you, Amaranth had a touch of what Emernon had. Maybe all three of them over the last four centuries had the same tendency, and so they buried them down here, in case anything um... happened?”

A figure appeared in the reflective marble, a haggard looking old woman, dressed in a faded purple dress, her funeral veil still over her head leaving the features indistinct, except for a pair of bright blue eyes. “What are you doing here?” her voice barely contained her rage and sounded positively inhuman.

Ilya gasped and whirled around, coming face to face with Amaranth Neimasaurus. He was at a loss for words. The blue eyes starred at him with depthless loathing and hatred.

“Speak!” she shouted in a voice eternally powerful and overwhelming. Ilya felt a force against his chest, squeezing his rib cage.

Aleksander looked over his shoulder at Ilya, a little curious. “Is she here?”

Ilya nodded, as he gasped for breath. “I-I’m here to talk to you,” he got out, before the force knocked him down onto the marble.

“I can guess what you’ve come for,” she said, stepping closer, to glare down at Ilya, as she crushed the life out of him.

Aleksander turned around, looking right through Amaranth. “Where is she? What are you doing? Ilya, get up. We have to talk to my great aunt.” He spoke as though Ilya were embarrassing him and tripped over the tomb.

The force on his chest vanished as Amaranth looked into the face of Aleksander



Neimasaurus. "Alexei..." she whispered slowly, reaching out to touch his shoulder. "You came back to me..."

Aleksander brushed at the ghostly fingers, as though he could almost feel them.

"Ilya, what's she saying?"

"She thinks you're Alexei," Ilya gasped, sitting up. "Amaranth, he's not."

"No, I'm your great nephew, Aleksander, aunt Amaranth." Aleksander took a step forward, passing right through her, like she was a trick of the light. He shivered unconsciously. "You remember me, don't you? I was only a child when you died, but I still remember you."

"You just walked through her," Ilya said.

"Damn it! You have to tell me these things," he said, spinning in place. "I can't see her."

Amaranth looked from her nephew to Ilya, the cold blue eyes raking between them, until she reached out to almost touch Aleksander's cheek. Then she pulled her hand away, as though she'd been burned. She let out a piercing wail and Ilya felt crushing disappointment so intense it made him stagger. He quickly covered his ears. "She's upset you aren't Alexei."

She turned from Aleksander and Ilya and took a few steps into the shadows, leaning against a rock. "Go away. This is not a place for you, Aleks."

"Do I look like him?" he asked into the empty space where she had stood a moment ago.

“Very much like when he was a man of eighteen summers,” Amaranth whispered. “He was so beautiful to me. He might not have been as tall or quite so big, but I didn't care.”

Ilya jerked his chin in her direction, and Aleksander scowled and turned to face her. “What's she saying,” he whispered.

“You look like Alexei, but not as attractive.”

Aleksander bristled. “I find that hard to believe,” he whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

A bitter chuckle clawed its way out of Amaranth's insubstantial throat. “That sounds like something he would say.”

“Aunt?” Aleksander said, a little uncertain. “There's a man here who's trying to get into the cathedral. He can talk with snakes, and he's... well, he's killed everyone at the house and he's probably on his way to the swamp by now, but he doesn't know the way. We think we can beat him there, but my mother never told me how to get into the church.”

The blue eyes turned back to her nephew. “And what will you achieve by going in there?”

“She wants to know what you'll do in there,” Ilya said.

“I don't want to go in there, you do!” Aleksander spluttered. “Tell her why, Ilya.”

Amaranth's piercing gaze fell upon him. It was like having the sharp edge of sapphire digging into his flesh.

Ilya took a deep breath. “I am an oracle, and I communicated with the force in the chapel, just like I can talk to you,” Ilya said nervously, looking over at Aleksander for support. The Young Lord gave him a thumbs up, which wasn’t reassuring at all. She drifted closer to Ilya as he spoke. “The being within said that if Emernon’s wounds were healed, then everything his blood is causing, will be undone, but not what it has already done.” Ilya grew more and more nervous with each step she took toward him. “He’s just like you, remember? When you cut your feet on the glass and they wouldn’t heal because you were so unhappy? You thought that your selfish act had killed your parents—” Ilya’s voice trailed off for a moment, when he realized that she had suffered a situation so similar to his own, but on the outside looking in, he could see that she hadn’t been to blame at all. His situation wasn’t similar at all. He was to blame. “Emernon is the same way, only a million times worse. If we can just get into the church to help, everything will return to the natural order of things,” he finished, disconcerted at the parallel which had occurred to him. She was now standing no more than a few inches from him.

“Tell him exactly what I say, oracle,” she said with deadly calm.

Ilya nodded with absolute obedience.

“Do you trust this boy?” her gaze traveled over to Aleksander.

“Do you trust this boy?” Ilya said slowly and calmly, trying to not let his fear show through. “She means me.”

Maddeningly, Aleksander said nothing for a moment. “Yes, I do,” he said to the thin air to his right.

Ilya nodded to the space in front of him, where she stood, staring at her blood relation.

Aleksander's eye twitched as he turned toward her again. "He saved my life. If he hadn't told me what Shoji was planning, I would have died with everyone else."

Amaranth nodded slowly. "In the fountain, there is a statue of a bleeding angel. Look where the angel stares and you will see your answer. Three clockwise turns are what is required." She laughed quietly. "If I were you, I would let this Shoji go in first. What's inside won't care about snakes at all."

"What—What's inside?" Ilya had the feeling he didn't want to know.

"The Patriarchy." She laughed again. It had a nasty quality to it, much like Alexei's laugh when he'd discovered the suffering of Amaranth's soul. "They sleep in the pool of blood beneath their God who rains his essence down upon them." She smiled at him. "To them, death is an illusion, and humanity is just a distant memory."

"How do I get past them?" Ilya was quite certain there would be no satisfying answer.

"I would try reasoning with them. If they give you a chance. They have pledged themselves to containing the evil forever. They were too twisted when the decision was made five hundred years ago to stop ingesting the blood. They could no longer pass for human, so they volunteered to be the jailors." She laughed again, throwing her head back. "Enjoy," she said as she drifted away, disappearing from sight.

"What did she say?" Aleksander asked.

“If we look where the statue in the fountains looks, we'll find a mechanism to open a concealed door with three clockwise turns.” Ilya made an executive decision to omit the bad news. It wasn't Aleksander's problem anyway. It was his. Why did he think that? The Young Lord was going with him to help. Why didn't Ilya think he would go in the cathedral? It was odd, but Ilya was quite certain he wouldn't.

It took them much less time to make their way back down the tunnel to the trapdoor. As Aleksander began his ascent, Soldier popped his head out of Ilya's jacket and looked up at him.

“Why didn't you say anything while we were talking with Amaranth?” he asked, but he knew the answer. Soldier always hid from facing his emotions.

The Toy shrugged. *I didn't know what to ask. Besides, she used me to make sure that no one would save Alexei for seventy years. But don't try to confuse the issue. What aren't you telling Aleksander?*

Ilya leaned down and whispered what Amaranth had told him into Soldier's wooden ear, which seemed silly when he thought about it, but he seemed to hear better than Ilya. Light flooded the tunnel as Aleksander pushed the hatch open and climbed out. As there was no adder waiting to strike at his face, Ilya decided that their little trip probably hadn't been noticed yet. By now the snakes had to be scouring the area looking for them. Ilya climbed up the ladder, grateful to be out of that terrible place and not looking forward to another trip in the other direction, after they got Alexei. What were the chances the snakes wouldn't feel the vibrations of the elevator, as they used it twice

more?

## CHAPTER 29: HELL TO PAY

It was good to be above ground. Ilya decided that he really had no interest in ever exploring caves or doing anything subterranean again. He could happily leave that to more adventurous people like Aleksander. As they made their way out of the storage room and into the bowling alley, they, or at least Ilya, was confronted by Sacha, looking a little bored and passing his hand idly through the ball return on lane one.

“Ilya,” he said, his expression lighting up. “I did what you said, but it took me some time to find him. He was with this creepy guy wearing a black cloak. Did you know everyone's dead upstairs? It's sad I guess... Though I think there's some people barricaded into the pantry in the kitchen, but they're probably dead by now, too.” The ghost drifted over to him. “He's looking for you and him.” Sacha pointed languidly at Aleksander, who moved across the bowling alley toward the door, totally unaware of any ghosts Ilya might be talking to.

Soldier poked his head out of the jacket again. *What are you doing?*

“Wait,” he said loud enough for Aleksander to hear. “I'm talking to Sacha. He says there is some people barricaded into the pantry.”

Sacha smiled again, pleased to be the center of attention, despite being dead. “He says that he's making the scary guy in the cloak take him to some island, after he's found and killed you both. He's worried that birds might attack him in the swamp, so he wants to use you as a hostage until he gets there and then kill you. I don't think he's very nice,

Ilya.”

“No, he's not,” Ilya said.

“I think he's mad because he's dying,” Sacha added helpfully.

“What?” Ilya was caught off guard by the remark. Shoji wasn't dying, was he?

But... there had been that odd smell he'd detected in the corridor when he overheard Shoji talking with the snake. He'd smelled something earthy, like decay, and just assumed it was the snake. But he hadn't smelled it when the snake chased him onto the balcony, or later when he used the shovel to scoop up the dead snake and put it in the vase. What if it had been Shoji he'd smelled? He'd tried to resist honing his senses to those of a vulture, and Orryn had tried to dissuade him too, but what if it couldn't be helped? Could a vulture smell that sort of thing? It meant food to a vulture, so they were sensitive to it. There had been other clues. The day before the masquerade, when Aleksander had trapped him in his room and forced him to model his costume of the snow leopard, which was seriously endangered. What had he said?

*“Do you really think I would invite anyone more beautiful than you?” the Young Lord said, as Ilya struggled out of the white silk overcoat.*

*“Soon you won't be able to invite anyone to a party.”*

*The rest of the black suit came off in record time. But to Ilya's distress he heard a zipper being undone behind him. Ilya shot over to his own pile of clothes by the chair and gathered them up.*



*“You're not old!” the Young Lord said. “Where does this madness come from?”*  
*but from the other sounds Ilya was hearing, he doubted Shoji was in any position to*  
*answer.*

Of course. It made sense now. Both Ilya and Aleksander had assumed that Shoji was vain, terrified of aging and losing his beauty. But that hadn't been it at all. Shoji might be vain, but what he was terrified of was dying. Something inside that beautiful exterior was rotten to the core. It didn't make Ilya feel sorry for the Oriental Boy at all. He could understand him now, at least.

“How do you know he's dying?” Ilya asked.

“I can tell by looking at him. He's a little faint and indistinct, like he's not really there,” Sacha said, as though it were obvious.

“Who's dying?” Aleksander asked, coming up to stand beside Ilya.

“Shoji, he's sick. Now shut up. Sacha, where was he when you last saw him?” Ilya asked.

“He was going outside to check that everyone was dead in the cottages and make sure that you and Aleksander weren't there. He left the creepy guy in the foyer, because he didn't want him to go outside unless he had to.”

This was their chance, while he was checking the cottages, to go and get Alexei and escape out the tunnel. “Thank you,” he said to the ghost boy, and turned to go. “He's outside at the cottages. This is our chance to go get Alexei and put an end to this in the

swamp.”

Sacha grabbed his sleeve. “You're coming back aren't you? I don't want to stay in a house full of corpses and snakes.” He suddenly looked forlorn. Of course he was. His connection might die and leave him all alone. Then he would wander around a house that had become a tomb, and to quote Sacha, “forget a lot” because no one was talking to him.

He should have done something about Sacha by now. What if he did die in the swamp? Sacha would be left alone. And then the answer appeared in front of him. They were going to meet his murderer, a man quite remorseful at what he'd done to Sacha. Could he resolve this right now and send the boy on to wherever it was that ghosts went? “I want you to come with us to see Alexei.” He took a step closer to Sacha.

“Okay, who's that?” the ghost asked pleasantly, turning to float toward the door of the bowling alley.

“He's the man who killed you seventy years ago.”

“No!” Sacha screamed, an expression of terror washing across his face. He flung himself away from Ilya.

But he was too quick and grabbed the ghost by the wrist so that he couldn't escape through a wall. “Calm down, he's not like that anymore,” Ilya said soothingly as Sacha wailed.

The ghost reached out and slapped Ilya across the face as hard as he could. “Let me go!” Sacha screamed.

Which was pretty goddamn loud, Ilya thought, as he winced and heard a buzzing

in his ears. “Stop it!” Ilya tried to say with some authority, grabbing Sacha's other hand as the boy tried to claw at Ilya's eyes.

“I don't want to see him again, not ever!” the ghost spat, trying to head butt Ilya.

Ilya wrapped his arms around Sacha, pinning his arms to his sides and walked forward with him. “Well you have to!” he roared, almost as loud as Sacha, “If you don't you'll be here forever!”

“I don't care. I like being dead, its fun!”

“No, you don't. You've just forgotten what it's like to be a boy,” Ilya said in Sacha's ear as he carried him toward the door. He looked over at Aleksander and saw that he was laughing at him.

“I don't know what's going on, but it's like you're miming trying to give a small child a bath.” Aleksander held Soldier in his hands. Somehow, the Toy had gotten out of his jacket, probably by Ilya's contortions carrying an invisible child. Now the capricious piece of wood was pointing at Ilya, his shoulders heaving in silent laughter.

At least Sacha wasn't screaming anymore. Now he was crying and begging Ilya to let him go. He was still squirming and trying to bite Ilya's hand, so there was very little chance that he would comply. For a moment, Ilya thought about letting him go. But then he remembered Wlad, stuck forever in a mausoleum. Once Alexei was gone, which could very well happen later today, there would be no way for Sacha to move on. They were still laughing at him as he struggled with his burden.

“Will you shut up!” Ilya shouted at Aleksander, as Sacha jammed his elbow into

Ilya's nose.

The Young Lord tried to compose himself as Ilya doubled over, one hand around the ghost, the other covering his nose as blood started to leak between his fingers.

*You're getting beat up by the ghost of a ten year-old!* Soldier signed, and Aleksander lost his composure again and sagged against the wall giggling.

“People have died upstairs,” Ilya said with deadly calm, as he pinned Sacha's arms to his sides and the boy tried to head butt him again. “And you're fucking laughing at me as I try to save someone's soul. What the hell is wrong with you two?” he snarled. “And he's twelve!”

Aleksander straightened up and did his best to look contrite. Solider did too, but his expression didn't change one bit.

*Sorry,* the Toy signed.

Ilya didn't suspect for one second he was sorry. Neither of them were. It just wasn't in their nature. “Just open the damn door.” He threw Sacha over one shoulder and situated the boy so that his kicking legs wouldn't reach him.

“I hate you!” the ghost wailed at him. “I wish I'd never met you.”

Aleksander hurried over to the door and opened it into the hall and Ilya thought it would have served him right if a dozen adders had been on the other side. He had been laughing. Laughing while the servants he'd grown up with were murdered by a man he'd brought into the house. A man who had manipulated and used him as one would a dog. Every negative thought Ilya had ever had about the man—No, the boy—came rushing

back. Aleksander was even less of a man than Ilya was. People were fighting for their lives in the kitchen and their leader was laughing while one of his last living servants was struggling with a ghost.

He really didn't have time to deal with Sacha now, but he had no choice. His conscience allowed no other path. He couldn't help himself. Sacha wasn't a ghost to him; he seemed just as real as anyone else. Besides, the boy had helped Ilya not just today, but when he'd been lured to Alina's tower. It was Sacha who had warned him. He had a responsibility to see this done. He knew Alexei would be remorseful when confronted with him. Once Sacha knew that and knew that Ilya would bury his remains properly, he wouldn't be stuck wandering around by himself at night, staring at the moon and... Being alone. Because Ilya wouldn't live forever, at least he fervently hoped he wouldn't. He'd seen firsthand what actual immortality was like and wouldn't even wish it on Shoji.

They reached the end of the hall and Aleksander opened the elevator door for Ilya, who carried his limp burden over the threshold. At some point, it seemed like the ghost boy had run out of steam in his struggles, with his scissoring legs ceasing to fly back and forth through Aleksander's head and back.

“He blinded you with a knife, right?” Ilya asked, trying to get some facts straight before he confronted Ilya.

Sacha nodded miserably, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands. Aleksander looked over at him, an unreadable expression on his face as he closed the elevator door and twisted the knob for the attic. Like hell Ilya would translate the conversation for him.

“Then he drank your blood, didn't he? And he...” Ilya's voice trailed off. He couldn't bear to finish the sentence.

“He ate me,” Sacha whispered.

“He ate you.” Ilya only said it so that Aleksander and Soldier would hear. If there was even a hint of laughter, the Young Lord was getting a swift, sharp kick to the shins. “Your bones are still down there, aren't they?” Like the eaten clean jigsaw puzzle of Leonya Kirkuk left in a pile by a bloodstained mattress. At least Ilya had seen to that.

Sacha nodded, looking down at the floor. “He didn't eat me all at once. He took a piece at a time.”

The elevator ground to a halt. Aleksander didn't move. Ilya nudged him with his foot and he sprang into action, pulling the door open and walking ahead of him. Soldier leaped out of the Young Lord's hand and raced ahead of them through the dark attic.

“I'll find them when this is all over. I'll find your bones and give you a proper burial with your family, back in Muromets.”

Aleksander said nothing, his expression still unreadable as he glanced over his shoulder at Ilya. “Your nose is still bleeding,” he said, and Ilya could identify no emotion in his voice.

Ilya wiped at it in irritation.

“Sorry,” Sacha mumbled. “Kiril says my elbows are lethal weapons of war, because they're so sharp and boney.”

“He might have been on to something.” By the time they got to the study, Soldier

had already opened up the secret panel. They stepped through without delay. Ilya was thankful of the insubstantiality of his burden. Otherwise, he would have bashed the boy's brains all over a minimum of at least every door he went through. He didn't spare any thought to the ghost of Kiril, who was supposedly around somewhere, because there was no time to run him down. Hopefully, it wouldn't occur to Sacha. The ghost didn't say anything, so Ilya assumed he'd dodged that bullet. "Do you remember where he took you?"

Sacha shuddered. He pointed down the hallway that led to the rotten wooden stairs that Ilya had never explored, toward the room where Leonya wrote of an eerie red light and the sound of screams. He could deal with getting his bones later. As they turned the corner, the flickering light shown from the doorway into the bloody laboratory.

"Alexei?" Aleksander called out, pulling his pistol from the jacket. "Are you in there?"

Ilya set Sacha down on the dusty ground, just past the large pile of something's bones. He really needed to ask Alexei about that, but there was always something else more important. Without warning, Sacha lunged for the wall, but Ilya snatched an arm before the boy could disappear into it. He sulked in Ilya's vice-like grip as the sound of feet dragging themselves through blood came from the doorway.

"Yes," came Alexei's broken voice from beyond the doorway as he stepped into the hall dressed in a long black jacket, which was quite dusty, and a wide brimmed black hat, or perhaps originally brown, but time had not been kind to it. He held the lamp in one

hand and a length of rope in the other, along with Ilya's knapsack slung over one shoulder. It appeared to be bulging with God knows what. "I was just getting some things we might need for the cathedral."

Sacha tried to hide behind Ilya, but he ruthlessly pushed the boy forward, keeping one hand firmly on a wispy wrist. "I've brought the ghost of Sacha Muromets," Ilya said.

"Who's that?" Alexei said, holding the lamp in front of him and peering around Ilya.

"One of the people you blinded with a knife and then ate."

Covered in bandages and with the new coat and hat, it was almost impossible to tell Alexei's reaction, except that the hand holding the lamp shook. Only for a moment, but the shadows moved in that second. "Oh."

"You may remember the gecko costume." Ilya advanced on the man, dragging Sacha with him.

"Oh," Alexei repeated again, backing away from Ilya until his back was against the door frame. The lamp shook again in his hand, the oil splashing around in the dusty glass bottom. "I... Don't remember. I don't remember any of them. I don't know what you expect me to say."

"I WANT YOU TO DIE!" Sacha screamed, without warning, and with such force that Ilya released him in shock and covered his ears. The boy had never looked more unnatural than at that moment. Ilya could feel the anger and hate, long suppressed by his innate shyness and fear, finally bubbling to the surface, like a geyser of oil suddenly



released by a drill from a vast, invisible ocean of the stuff. “I want you to get cut apart with a hacksaw, I want you to be eaten alive, I want you to be blinded and scream until someone reaches into your mouth and rips out your tongue, and then, all you can do is listen as it's eaten right next to you.” Sacha turned back to look at Ilya, and the sleepy, peaceful eyes Ilya had become accustomed to were gone, the knife wound again visible across his face. “I want you to make him pay!” the boy said to Ilya, as more of his wounds manifested themselves. Sacha’s mouth filled with blood and ran down his chin as a chunk of flesh disappeared from his neck. A deep gash appeared in his right arm and slowly grew deeper and deeper until it fell to the floor and disappeared.

“I will. This is his last day alive,” Ilya whispered, not at all sorry at what would happen to Alexei now that he knew just how Sacha had died. He couldn’t stand to look at Sacha anymore, so he put his arms around the mutilated child and stared at Alexei.

“I...I'm sorry I don't remember who you are,” Alexei said slowly. “Please.” He fell to his knees, the lamp slipping from his fingers. Aleksander lunged forward to grab it before it could shatter on the ground. “I tried to stop myself. I tried to die.” Alexei bowed his head. When he spoke again, his voice was thick with the sound of tears, and it shook, its unnaturally ragged and raspy timber making it almost unintelligible. “I tried to hang myself, but I came back to life. I lost track of how many times I choked to death before I could get the noose off from my neck. I shot myself next, but it healed after a few weeks. I died hundreds of times then. I did everything I could to stop.”

“This place really is hell,” Aleksander whispered.

Alexei laughed bitterly. “No... That’ll be this afternoon, when we get to the red shores.”

Sacha looked down on Alexei with pure loathing. “Will he suffer when he dies?” He pushed away from Ilya to stand in front of Alexei, returning to his normal shape, the terrible wounds disappearing.

“I don't know,” Ilya answered truthfully.

Slowly, Alexei got back to his feet, the joints in his legs popping painfully. “I don't know if you're still here—”

“He is,” Ilya said.

“I know I'm going to die today. Ilya was kind enough not to spell it out for me, but I'm not a fool, and you and everyone else like you will get your vengeance.”

“Good!” Sacha shouted, his fingers raking though Alexei's chest like claws.

“Sacha,” Ilya came up and put his arm around the boy’s shoulders. “I'm not that smart with feelings and emotions, because I don't have that much experience, but I think this anger is what's keeping you here. If you don't let it go before Alexei dies, I don't know what will happen to you.”

“Please,” Alexei whispered, taking his hat off, and holding it in front of his chest, almost like a beggar. “You have to forgive me.”

A few moments passed in silence. Alexei shifted uncomfortably as the ghost continued to glare at him.

“We have to leave now,” Ilya said, giving the boy a hug. He was stiff and

unresponsive in Ilya's arms. He jerked his chin down the hall toward the attic, and Alexei and the Young Lord slipped by him, giving Ilya a moment alone with the ghost. He squatted down next to Sacha, so that he was at an even height with him.

“I won't do it! Not ever,” the ghost shouted.

“You have to, or you'll be like this forever. Is that you want?” Ilya said reasonably or at least in as close of an approximation to reasonable as he could muster. “Is it?”

The ghost looked away, “No.”

“Please, Sacha, you have to try. If you don't, every time I look at you for the rest of my life I will know that I failed, and that all of your suffering is on me.” Ilya choked, and couldn't say anymore for a moment, as his own vision blurred. “This is my fault. I should have realized what had to be done sooner. But there's no time for me to waste by trying to convince you, and I know I'm going to fail again. And there won't be anything else I can do. I always fail at the important things; just ask my parents when you see them. They're dead because of me.” Ilya laughed futilely. What chance did he have? He wouldn't free Emernon, either. Everything would continue unchanged, and the suffering of everyone would go on into infinity. “There's no way I can make it beyond the Patriarchy. I don't know what to do and they're going to kill me.”

Sacha reached out and touched the tears on Ilya's cheek.

“It's too late to run away. Shoji would kill me before I could get anywhere. At least try to forgive him, so I can know that one thing went right today,” he finally said.

Sacha nodded solemnly. “I'll... try.” Then the boy threw his arms around Ilya.

“Don't die,” he whispered. He sounded normal again, like the slightly sleepy, a little dopey Sacha that Ilya knew. Sacha backed away from him. “You promise to get my bones?”

Ilya nodded. “Yes. I'll make Aleksander help me, too.” He wiped his face on his sleeve. “We'll bury them by your parents in Muromets.”

Sacha nodded and then he slowly began to sink into the floor. “I don't think he deserves it, but... I'm going to try to forgive him.” Then he was gone.

Ilya wiped his face again and hurried back down the passage toward his own fate, heading inexorably toward the final hell and a battle he didn't see any hope in anymore. The Neimasaurus were too clever and fanatical in their plans, and the oldest ones were waiting for him at the Weeping Church, the ones who were no longer acquainted with humanity. There was hell to pay today, and Ilya would do his best to deal it out. He wouldn't escape his own hand, but that was okay. He was beginning to understand what his eyes had shown him. This was his responsibility. Someone, maybe God if such a creature existed, had decided that a long time ago.

For thousands of years, many people had suffered and died for the senseless torture of Emernon and a phenomenon that they didn't understand. Today, Ilya would do his best to put an end to it. He couldn't save his parents, he couldn't save Sacha, hell, he couldn't save anyone. He could hope that Cook was one of the servants barricaded into the pantry, at least. But Tabitha... She was probably dead, and so was his only family, Demetri. He was too stubborn to just leave with Tabitha, not after a long fight. He'd

failed to save anyone. Only one life was left to save. He was waiting for Ilya in the Cathedral, within a lake of his own blood.

## CHAPTER 30: THE WEEPING CHURCH

He rejoined the others waiting for him in the study, and it seemed to be a grim gathering. Ilya was afraid that they'd heard him with Sacha. He was supposed to be blindly optimistic. He wished that he could muster some of that stupid naiveté that he had arrived here with in abundance. On their way back down to the tunnel, he tried to muster some of it, and gave Aleksander one of his trademark wide smiles, which he hadn't done in sometime. The older boy didn't look particularly reassured by it.

As the elevator doors opened down in the basement, Aleksander cursed. Up ahead, on the ugly green carpet, Ilya could make out a pool of black in the distance. Then the smudge unspooled and undulated around a corner.

“Was it a snake?” Ilya asked, still trying to squint at the spot.

“Yes,” Aleksander said. “We’ve been made.”

“It was only a matter of time,” Alexei said, staring after the snake. He seemed a little distracted. “That’s so interesting, isn’t it? How he can use these non-sentient animals.”

“Yeah,” Ilya said. “Fascinating. We should probably hurry now, Alexei.”

They encountered no more on their race to the tunnel. Aleksander helped Alexei down the ladder, while Ilya and Soldier stood guard. *Once we're outside, we won't have to worry about snakes much.*

“Why?” Ilya looked down at the Toy.

*Because of vultures, stupid.*

Ilya nodded. "I suppose that's true. Maybe if we're lucky, Orryn will have killed Shoji when he went to investigate the cottages," he said wistfully.

*Don't count on it.*

"I'm not." He knew better now. The days of half-full glasses were done for Ilya.

The tunnel was much the same in the opposite direction, with water almost up to Ilya's calf muscle with the occasional drip of water from above, and thoroughly spooky. Of the four of them, Alexei seemed the most upbeat. Then again, he was hoping to die today. As far as worst case scenarios went, he was in pretty good shape. Lucky bastard. After about fifteen minutes of a wet and miserable slog, they made it to a flight of steps going up.

"This is where we'll come out by the lake," Alexei said. "The boathouse is only a short dash away."

Ilya nodded. He remembered the spot well, thanks to Orryn's none to gentle guidance. Then he remembered the rusted chains that locked the door in place. "It's chained shut. Aleksander, you have to force it open."

Aleksander walked up the steps and looked at the metal above his head.

*Use that thick skull of yours,* Soldier signed. Ilya smiled. He'd been about to say the exact same thing.

Aleksander used his forearms braced over his head. It took three good rams before the doors exploded outward, clanging noisily. "Come on, he'll have heard that,"

Aleksander said, jumping into the water and pushing the sand-colored reeds out of the way as he waded toward the shore. Alexei was next, and then Ilya, who hesitated for a moment before jumping in. There was no point in worrying about snakes in the reeds. Ilya would anyway. They waded to shore. Ilya looked up as a bird cawed overhead. A lone black vulture circled over him once and then turned toward the house, cawing again.

Ilya looked over toward the distant towering edifice of Neimasaurus from where it stood on a low hill. It was silent and still. He could see no one on the road coming down to the beach and the green meadow in between. But a snake in the grass was not visible, especially not at any distance, to Ilya's eyes. As they reached the beach, they could at least be sure of no snakes there because its barren striped sandy expanse left no room for anything to hide. The decaying, gently swaying edifice of the boathouse was only a minute or two away, if they could run. But Alexei, despite his miraculous recovery from his cadaverous state a few days ago, was in no position to. As Ilya looked at him, the man pulled his hat down tight, turned up the collar of his dusty coat, and worried at the bandages protecting his hands and face from the sun. Soldier had taken the precaution of burrowing deep into Ilya's jacket. He buttoned it halfway up just to make sure no errant ray got to the Toy.

Alexei swayed precariously and shaded his eyes with his hand. Ilya moved up to support him and the man wrapped a claw-like hand around his shoulders. "I...I'm outside," he said, seemingly shocked at his surroundings. "It's too bright. I have to go back in the tunnel." He turned and tried to walk back toward the water and the cool, dark



tunnel that was apparently inviting to the man after so long kept below ground in the dark.

“No.” Ilya dragged him along toward the boathouse. Aleksander was a good ways ahead now. “You'll get used to the sun.” He continued to support the man as they stumbled along.

“It's better now,” Alexei said, pulling away from Ilya. “I can see.”

Ilya glanced back at the house and saw a black shape moving toward them across the meadow. He squinted at it and saw that it was an umbrella. Beneath it was a young man with orange eyes, no longer bothering with the painful contact lenses, and long dark hair to match the umbrella. A figure wrapped in a black cloak shuffled along like a misshapen thing beside him. Shoji waved to Ilya, smiling. The grass blew gently in the breeze and Alexei shaded his eyes to look up at the approaching figures.

“Is that him?” he asked.

Ilya nodded.

“Who's that with him?” Alexei asked. “Some unfortunate creature like myself?”

“I don't know,” Ilya said, trying to make out the shape in the black hood.

“Ilya!” Aleksander screamed, suddenly.

Ilya's head whipped around to look at him as the man gestured frantically at the hill and the figures. “You fool! There's no breeze!”

Ilya looked back up at the meadow between them and Shoji, and the grass that was not moving in the wind, because it was being pushed aside by long serpentine

bodies. The adders were descending in a giant wave around Shoji, shielding him from vultures and about to trap them against the water.

“Watch where you step,” Shoji called out pleasantly, pointing to the boat house. “Especially in there.”

Aleksander withdrew the pistol from his jacket, pointed it at Shoji, and fired. But the Oriental Boy was too quick. He dropped to the ground, leaving the black robed figure to stumble and fall to his knees before Shoji pulled him down out of Aleksander's line of fire. Then Aleksander turned and ran toward the dock with Ilya on his heels, pulling Alexei along. The dock creaked precipitously beneath their weight.

“Careful, there's holes,” Ilya said to Alexei, as he stepped over the rotted planks. The lapping and red tinged waters of the lake beneath could be seen through the holes. Alexei nodded, doing his best to step on the boards that he thought would hold his weight. At the end of the dock and to the right, was the boat house. Ilya had never been here during the day, or he might not have had the nerve to walk on the decrepit dock. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Shoji was once again on the move and that half a dozen vultures were circling overhead now. But that did not matter now, because a flood of black was coming from the grass, slithering onto the beach in a wave of dark copper, black, and gray with yellow eyes and white fangs. There were dozens of them, maybe a hundred. Too many for the birds to do anything about.

One of the birds dived near Shoji, and a sea of reptilian jaws leaped out of the grass to meet the talons, and the vulture broke off, climbing to the safety of the open sky.

Aleksander shouted and Ilya whipped his head around. In front of the door to the boat house, snakes came out of the holes in the boards, first two, then three, and a fourth. Aleksander backed away as they came toward him, hissing. Shoji had been ready for them. Of course they would have to go to the boat house if they wanted to go to the island. They backed away as the snakes advanced, while their brethren were boiling onto the beach, turning it black.

“We have to rush them,” Ilya said, jerking his head back behind them.

Aleksander grimaced and fired at one, missing it by inches and blowing another hole in the boards. The vultures overhead dived at the snakes on the docks once they were away from the protective wall of the boathouse, and the four adders had a few seconds to comprehend their mistake before the gray talons rent eyes and heads. One of the snakes managed to get a hold of its attacker, burying its fangs deep in the vulture's neck. The bird gagged and cried out, attempting to fly away. The snake hung on as the bird careened into the water. The other vultures carried their mutilated prey high into the sky and then dropped them onto the beach.

Aleksander flung the door open with such force that it fell off the wall and slid into the water. As Ilya followed him into the boathouse, he turned back to see that the other snakes had almost reached the water in front of the boathouse. They weren't even bothering with the pier; they were going right into the water where the vultures would not be able to protect Ilya. They piled into the same boat Ilya had taken last time, and while Aleksander helped Alexei in, Ilya started the arduous task of getting the motor to start.

Fortunately, the gas can was still in the boat from his last expedition.

Lady Luck had decided to briefly grace Ilya with her presence and the engine started on the second pull of the ring, letting out a puff of oily black smoke which Ilya suspected would give him lung cancer later in life. They shot out of the boathouse, the exterior doors having long since rotted away. Aleksander rooted around in the boat and found the oar Ilya had used to fight off Giovanni earlier and clutched it in his hands, scanning the water around them for any black tentacles with fangs. Despite the issues with speed, the boat was still faster than a snake in water, which was not the adder's natural habitat. They could swim, but they preferred dry land and mud to open water. For once those nature programs did something good for Ilya.

Alexei shaded his eyes against the glare on the black water. "It doesn't matter which path you take through the mangrove forest, they all lead into the marshlands."

Ilya took the first stream he came too, weaving around the tentacle-like roots of the mangrove trees, a lot of which were whacked with an oar by the Young Lord because it was difficult to tell which were roots in the gloom cast by the branches, and which were snakes. So Aleksander hit anything the boat came near to. Perhaps all the snakes had been called in to attack the house and now they were behind Ilya.

"Take... Take the passage to the left, until we get to a pilot light." Alexei hunched down in the boat, adjusting his hat to keep the sun off himself.

"You mean the little lighthouses?" Ilya asked.

"They're not light houses. They burn the swamp gas off in a slow and steady rate,

so that it doesn't build up to dangerous levels," Aleksander said.

Alexei nodded. "My theory for why this is necessary is that the blood present in the water oxygenates it to an unnaturally high level and causes an abundance of life in both plants and animals, which in turn spurs methane production. The theory is that they are placed around the island, as that is the apex of the methane generation. Building his prison in the swamp might have made it inaccessible, but it caused a great deal of problems for my ancestors." Alexei started and looked over at the Young Lord. "And my descendants."

It took a good fifteen minutes until they reached the first pilot light. Ilya kept to the left, moving down little streams and islets of the swamp, with their line of sight blocked by long strands of mangrove bushes their own height. When they came into the clearing with the little island and stone tower, Alexei gasped. The fire was out. There was the thick smell of rotten eggs in the air, and Ilya brought his shirt up to cover his mouth.

"Does that mean there wasn't enough methane in the swamp to keep it going?" Aleksander asked, pinching his nose shut with his fingers.

"No, those fires were lit by shafts going beneath the swamp to a reservoir of gases. Don't fire your gun while we're here," Alexei said, he pointed one long, slightly clawed finger toward the right. "Go that way now."

"Is the cathedral at the center?" Ilya had suspected that the first time he'd been here.

"Yes." Alexei nodded his head. "But there is a spiral pattern that I must guide you

through in the last stretch.”

Aleksander shifted in the boat to look back at Ilya. “Do you think the Calviarri blew it out?”

Ilya aimed the boat toward the passage to the right. “Probably.”

Alexei worried at the bandages on his hand again, before stuffing them into his pockets. “Are these the cannibals you mentioned to me earlier?”

Aleksander grinned. “There's no proof that they're cannibals. We just like to call them that. Amaranth employed them to keep people out of the swamp.”

“Then they should obey you, if we encounter any,” Alexei said smoothly.

Aleksander looked doubtful. “Well, I've met them once with my mother, so they know who I am. But I think the best we can hope for is not to be killed, honestly.”

They rode on in silence for a few minutes, until they came out of the undergrowth. The red tinge to the water was unmistakable now. Ilya thought that soon they would come to the earthen dam where the Calviarri had stopped him before. Ilya wondered if that ring of packed dirt stretched across the area where the lake of blood was. As they neared the packed dirt, reeds grew on either side of the narrow channel. He'd gotten stuck last time, but he'd been going slowly. This time, he gunned the engine and rammed the boat through the narrow opening. Alexei clutched the side of the boat for support, but they made it through. On the other side, rising out of the swamp in the distance was a long finger of stone, sitting on a barren and desolate island in a lake where the waters were so red it could have been nothing but blood.

“Go to the left Ilya, we have to approach it like a spiral. There are dams underwater, designed to trap and break apart boats. We have to be careful not to get caught on them.”

Ilya turned to the left, slowing down and gradually guided the boat along an invisible channel, though it bumped into the wall beneath the water a few times and Aleksander had to push them off with the oar. The passage was slow and irritating to make. In the distance, Ilya could see the shore that Alexei had traveled to on foot with Amaranth and Dano, where he'd fed the blood to his love, thinking in his young mind that it was a sign from God.

Alexei caught Ilya staring at the beach. “That was where I first saw the island, standing there at eight or nine years of age. It started everything bad in my life.”

Soldier peeked out from the confines of the jacket at the Cathedral, then disappeared back inside. Ilya got a good look at the island as they slowly orbited nearer and nearer through a series of concentric circles. The shore was barren and bracken, almost as though the beach were covered in ash or volcanic glass. Further up it, small patches of grass grew through the black sand sporadically, and a handful of desiccated looking leafless trees grew, their bark nearly colorless with splashes of grey, their branches ending in needle-like points. From the distance they were at now, and it was difficult for him to tell, but it looked to Ilya that the trees were bleeding. Their sap was no natural color but instead a deep, rich red. Beyond the spindly trees was the tower itself and the fountain in front of it, just as Ilya had pictured in his dream.

The fountain was circular, about six feet across, and bone dry. In the center of it was a marble statue of a youth, naked with his arms bound above his head. The fountain was shaded by the intricate spider-web patterns of the branches of the trees, putting it in black gloom. All around the fountain and the tower was paved stone covered in mold and moss, its original white color almost completely hidden beneath dirt and decaying leaves.

Then there was the cathedral. The bird's eye view in his dream hadn't done the horrible thing justice. It was nearly four stories tall and at least as big as a house at its base. The grey granite with which the tower had been constructed was now completely covered in a thick layer of dark brown vines and grayish hanging moss, leaving very little to be seen. But above the screen of the trees the vines did not go, and the stained glass windows, covered in dirt and mold as they were, still seemed almost beautiful, as did the decrepit belfry at the top of the tower, the bell within appearing dangerously rusted. It would only be a matter of time before the rotting wood that held it in place would give way and send it crashing down to the bottom.

Ilya felt a knot of fear in his stomach at the sight of the Weeping Church. He felt like someone about to go on stage in front of thousands of people and perform a piano etude by Shostakovich, only he had no idea how to play the piano. It was the sense of impending failure. He still had no idea what to say to the Patriarchy. What if they were so old they didn't even speak Russian? What if they spoke Aramaic or Hebrew or some bizarre forgotten language from the Caucasus Mountains? Maybe they spoke Assyrian. It would be a miracle if Ilya could even talk to them. If he got out a few sentences of what



they would consider unintelligible gibberish before they killed him, it would probably be an accomplishment.

“Do you hear that?” Alexei said suddenly, sitting up. “I hear another boat approaching.”

Ilya gunned the engine. In no equation was another boat a good thing. Alexei lurched backwards as the boat jumped forward. There were only two spirals left to go now. Overhead, several vultures flew, who had followed their progress through the swamp. As they circled around the far side of the island, they couldn't see where another would enter through the dam, but two possibilities loomed large to Ilya: The first was that the Calviarri had someone watching the lake at all times and had come to kill them, or that Shoji had rustled up a boat somewhere and was even now racing them to the island. If only they would kill each other. It would, if Orryn would pardon the expression, kill two birds with one stone. Their path inevitably came around to the other side, and the other boat came into view. It was bigger than theirs, and much faster.

One man, a Calviarri by the looks of him, his long black hair tied back, controlled the motor. In front of him sat two figures, both extremely familiar to Ilya. One was a hunched over figure in a black cloak, looking rather sea sick, if Ilya was any judge, and the other was Shoji, looking as dignified as he could holding onto the side of the boat as his hair blew around. The mother snake was around his neck, her head swiveling in Ilya's direction and watching with her patient yellow eyes. There was one more man perched in the front of the boat.

Ilya knew him well. Giovanni sat in the front with his machete sheathed on his back, three knives in one hand, each jutting from between two fingers, as the sun beat down on his tanned and scarred skin. The snake bite appeared to have had no lasting effects. The man looked at Ilya, his face breaking into a grin. With his long, greasy black hair whipping in the wind, the missing teeth, and the leer, he looked like a dog leaning out the window of a car. He switched one of the knives over to his other hand. He wasn't foolish enough to shoot a gun, or perhaps he didn't have any.

“Oh that's nice, they're giving him a ride,” Aleksander said fatalistically. “You can't get good help these days.”

“How did he get them to do that?” Ilya said. “They should have killed him.”

“He's going to throw those knives at us when we're in range.” Alexei turned back to look at Ilya. “We are in the smaller circle.” Their own tight course would allow them, even at their slower speed, to easily beat them. If they stopped, then they would never reach the island. If they slowed down, the other boat would come up behind them.

“At least he has one for each of us.” Aleksander watched as Giovanni tossed a knife in his hand.

“Little Piglet!” Giovanni called out. “I knew we'd meet again!”

“Aleksander, get behind me,” Alexei said calmly. “The knives won't kill me. Not permanently.”

“Kill the Neimasaurus first,” Shoji called out. “We can make the pig squeal later. We might need him.” Shoji looked over at them as the snake rubbed her face against his

cheek and he smiled.

The boat lurched precipitously as Aleksander moved back next to Ilya, but before the move was completed, the first knife was thrown. It whistled through the air, the sound slightly muffled by the engines. It buried itself up to the hilt in Aleksander's left shoulder, and he fell against Ilya with a cry, knocking his arm and sending the boat skidding into one of the dams beneath the water. The boat groaned and Ilya felt the impact of rocks scratching out a message on their side. He pushed Aleksander away and steered the boat away.

“How does it feel to be on the receiving end for once?” Shoji called out, and Giovanni laughed. Then he looked over at Shoji, confused.

“Giovanni don't get it,” he said. Then he shrugged and threw the second knife. It whistled through the air and Alexei reached out with his hand and the dirty blade buried itself in his palm, coming out the other side. He hissed, and it sounded almost like a snake, or the sound an alligator made when threatened. He worked it out of his hand and blackish-red blood, almost the color of liquid rust, came out of the wound as the knife was pulled free. The third and final knife caught him in the right eye socket as he looked up.

“Good shot,” Shoji said pleasantly. But his pleasure evaporated as Alexei slid the knife out of his eye socket, the ruined eye and rusty blood came as well, along with a torrent of clearish-gray vitreous humour released from its stagnant prison at the back of the socket. Alexei threw the knives overboard, and stuffed his ruined eye back into its

home. Unlike in his depressed state of collapse earlier, he could now heal much, much quicker. He wouldn't be seeing out of that eye for some time, but at least he wouldn't die of the wound only to return to life again to heal for a few minutes before dying. Giovanni jerked his head back at the other Calviarri in the back and they sped up, in an attempt to overtake them. Giovanni withdrew the machete from his back, and then the boat was out of sight.

Ilya's boat had entered the final spiral, but he could feel water around his feet. The boat was sinking from that first knife throw that had sent them skidding into the sides of sharp rocks. "Aleksander, get up!" Ilya said, as the man was slumped against the side of the boat. "You can't let the water get in your wound."

He forced himself into a sitting position, which made Ilya very closely acquainted with the knife sticking out of the back of his shoulder. A small amount of healthy red blood came from the wound, but not much. The beach came into sight ahead, as the water crawled up Ilya's ankles. He looked down for a moment and saw that at this distance, there was little difference between the color of blood and the water of the lake. There was no way they could take this boat back. Not that it mattered. All Ilya was hoping for was that it would take their pursuers long enough to get to the island that he would have time to run into the waiting arms of the Patriarchy. It was like running from the jaws of an anaconda, in order to leap into the mouth of a large crocodile. Ilya cut the engine as they neared the black sand, and the boat drove a few feet up onto it before grinding to a halt with a small spray of black dust around them.

Ilya jumped out of the boat to land in the sand, but Alexei and Aleksander, grievously wounded as they were, took their time getting out, Alexei kept one hand over his left eye socket.

“Don't wait for us, Ilya, get up there,” Aleksander said, when Ilya turned back to help him after getting Alexei onto the beach.

“Do you want me to pull the knife out first?” The thought of it made Ilya light-headed and queasy.

“No, it doesn't hurt too badly. I'm not bleeding much, now go,” Aleksander said, pushing at him with his good arm.

Ilya turned and ran, his feet sliding around in the grainy black sand. There was no path through to the fountain. There was desolation and dead weeds everywhere. The place had an eerie feeling, as Ilya walked through a web of shadows caused by the spindly trees, which did bleed red sap that collected in shallow, sticky pools at the base of the m, as though they wept blood. The place smelled of ash and decay, along with the sickening odor of blooming flowers gone to rot. The shadows seemed to point to the tortured youth at the center of it with their limbs ending a few feet away.

Ilya zeroed in on the statue's head. It stared at the base of the tower. He stood between the statue and the tower and looked at the direct angle of the eyes. A shadow flew overhead, and Orryn landed on the ledge of the fountain. The bird was bleeding from a tear in its neck, and some of its feathers were ruffled, but he seemed all right for the most part. He cawed at Ilya and ducked his head a bit. Ilya heard the sound of birds,

many of them, cawing in the distance. Ilya looked back at the lake and saw Alexei and Aleksander, supporting each other up the hill, with the circling whine of the other boat's engine getting nearer and nearer.

In the distance, beyond the lake, Ilya saw dozens of vultures, moving up and down the length of the earthen dam that protected the lake from easy access. Occasionally, they would dive and strike at the top of the dam. Sometimes they came away with something long and black that they would drop from a great height. Less often, they were pulled down into the water on the other side of the dam, and they did not emerge again. The serpents had arrived. But they had to leave the water to slither over the dam and there they were exposed. But it was a temporary delay. The snakes would overrun the greatly outnumbered birds eventually. There were simply too many for the vultures to deal with. Shoji's boat drove by in the distance and Ilya guessed they were in the last spiral now. It would only be minutes until they arrived. Shoji looked at the birds with loathing, the black umbrella clutched tightly in his hands, his snake still around his neck.

Ilya turned back and got down on his knees in front of the spot where the eyes pointed. Orryn hopped from the fountain onto the stones and waddled over to him, observing as Ilya pushed aside the vines until he saw a small valve control like there would be for a spigot on the outside of a house. Ilya reached out and turned it once. The high pitched squeal of water pressure was heard, but Ilya knew it was not something so benign. He turned the knob again and the sound deepened. He heard dripping water

behind him and looked back at the statue. The eyes were already weeping, and from the wrists pinned above the statue's head, against a marble column, lines of red began to run out.

He looked back and turned the knob once more. The pressure in the valve ceased and the whole control sunk into the stone slightly. Amaranth had said that he would know what to do next. He could see only one thing to do. He pushed against the valve with the palm of his hand. It moved in slightly and stopped, as though it were stuck. He put both of his hands against it and pushed as hard as he could, but it wouldn't budge. Orryn looked from him to the valve, and nipped at his leg with his beak, cawing loudly. Ilya sat down in front of it and kicked the valve and it slid all the way in. A groaning and sharp clinking of chains could be heard deep within the structure.

To Ilya's left the wall of the tower shuddered. Beneath the mass of vines, a portal began to rise. Vines and roots broke away and fell to the ground as they were pulled loose by the moving wall and Ilya was showered by debris. Orryn hopped out of the way before taking flight back up to the fountain. Then the derelict bell began to toll, announcing a visitor at the front door to the waiting Patriarchy within. Ilya felt the twisted peals of the bells in his heart as Alexei and Aleksander staggered up next to him. The dark passage that had opened was no bigger than for a single man to pass through. Would the Patriarchy come out to him, or would he go to them? What had Amaranth said? They slept in the pool beneath their God? He supposed they would wait for him to come inside and then kill him. His only chance was to make them understand that their guardianship

was only making the problem worse, not better.

Ilya got to his feet as Alexei came up beside him. Aleksander had his pistol out now. “You can't use that,” he said.

“Yes I can,” Aleksander said calmly. “I can fire it once. If they're going to kill us anyway, I want to at least know that they'll die too.” He looked toward the dark passageway into the tower. “Do you want me to come with you?”

Ilya shook his head. “No, I think I should go alone.” He turned toward the archway. There was no sense in both of them dying.

“Good luck.” Alexei waved to him. Further down on the beach, Shoji's boat came into view. It would arrive within seconds.

Ilya threw his inhibitions to the wind and stepped into the darkness and promptly bumped his nose against a portcullis a few feet in. He squinted in the darkness and saw the lock on the door. He laughed. All this distance and all this way for nothing. “There's a lock,” he said. He remembered in Amaranth's desk there had been a large metal key sitting with the diary. It had no meaning to him, but now he knew its importance. Why hadn't she said anything about this? He heard shouts behind him and knew that Shoji's boat had landed. Soon the vultures would be too few to stem the tide. Ilya shook the bars with his hands and screamed in frustration. The door gave slightly, and Ilya's eyes widened.

“Ilya, come away from there,” Shoji called out pleasantly from behind him.

Soldier jumped out of his jacket and silently slid down a bar of the portcullis. Ilya



stepped out of the alcove and saw that Alexei and Aleksander were standing in front of him. The knife was gone from his back, the sleeve of his right hand slightly bloody. Orryn had flapped to the safety of a tree limb high overhead. On the other side of the fountain stood Shoji, his snake at his feet though she was not looking at them. She had her head raised into the air, staring at Orryn. The black robed figure sat down on the edge of the fountain, seemingly tired, its shoulders heaving. The two Calviarri stood on either side of Shoji. Giovanni had his machete out and the other one had a hunting knife in his hand.

“Now, how do I make the fountain bleed for me?” Shoji asked pleasantly, as the blood had ceased to flow.

Ilya smiled at him. “I don't know.”

“Really? Fascinating. Leo, cut his left hand off, maybe that will jog his memory.”

The Calviarri, with his hair pulled back in a ponytail, moved forward with the hunting knife, slowly making his way around the fountain as Giovanni moved around the other side.

“I'm so thankful for their sister, Mariana, for convincing them to side with me. I thought that Lilith's children would have to kill all the Calviarri. But she was a lady of unusual...wisdom, and loathe to lose it. She respects the power of an oracle. Much like my other best friend,” Shoji reached out and put his hand on the black-robed figure's shoulders. “The Calviarri found him in the swamp in a peat bog where he'd lain for almost seventy years. Animals had fed on him over the years, but he always healed.

Mariana arranged for him to be brought to me at the house without the other members of her family noticing. Dano was quite helpful, even if he didn't know all that much in the end.”

Alexei jerked at the mention of Dano's name, and the black robbd figure continued staring listlessly into the nearly empty fountain, pulling the black cloak tighter about him.

“He knew enough to tell me that there was a cathedral here, but not how to get into it or work the fountain,” Shoji continued. “I knew you wouldn't disappoint me, Ilya.”

Leo was only a few feet away from Ilya now.

“You can't cut my hand off. I'll bleed to death and you won't figure it out,” Ilya said, trying to be logical as he tried not to stare at the knife.

Shoji reached out to the statue and caught a drop of blood between two fingers. “I think there's enough here to make sure you don't die. Maybe enough for you to heal. Then my friends can cut other pieces off. Maybe I'll have them cook them and eat them in front of you, Little Piglet.” Shoji gave a polite little laugh.

Giovanni laughed, the stringy strands of black hair shaking like snakes. “Little piglet has soft, young flesh. I want the thighs.”

“Not if I get them first,” Leo said.

“I thought you liked white meat?”

“That's on chickens.” Both the Calviarri roared with laughter, and Shoji smiled indulgently at them.

Alexei stepped forward, toward the fountain. “Dano?”

Dano's head shot up at the sound of Alexei's voice.

“It's me, Alexei,” he said, taking a few tentative steps forward. “I... I couldn't die either.”

Dano got to his feet, running toward Alexei. Ilya held his breath, hoping the other man did not blame Alexei for his predicament. Alexei seemed to realize the same thing, and his steps faltered slightly. But Dano only embraced him wrapping his arms around Alexei with such force that they were both thrown to the ground, knocking Alexei's hat off.

Dano's words were jumbled and he spoke too fast to make sense of anything other than the word “Alexei.”

“Couldn't? Why would you want to?” Shoji's smile showed that he meant it in jest, but no one was amused.

“Look at us,” Alexei said, as Dano wrapped his arms around his neck, and the sounds of his sobs within the hood were slightly sickening in their inhuman timber. “Do you really want to be like this?”

The smile and the pleasantness evaporated from Shoji. “Being in pain is better than being dead.”

“You're quite wrong,” Alexei said, as Dano held him tighter. “Death is a gift I long for more than anything else. But it's only a dream, a fantasy now. Like your fantasy of immortality.”

“You had bad luck, that's all. If you'd taken the blood regularly, you wouldn't have degenerated so much,” Shoji said, looking from the bandaged wreckage of Alexei's face.

Alexei ignored him and turned back to Dano, wrapping his own arms around him. “It's all right now, you don't have to cry. We'll be dead soon. Ilya's going to free us.”

Dano pulled away from him. “Forever?”

Alexei reached up and pushed away the hood. “Forever.” Then they kissed, Alexei's bandaged face and Dano's ruined lips meeting after eighty years. His face was black and cracked, almost like a clay mask left to dry in the sun, only the mold hadn't quite stayed together. There was enough of the semblance of a face to make out, with two faded, dull green eyes staring from behind it.

“Would you cut his hand off already?” Shoji snarled, turning back to Leo. The man shrugged and turned back to Ilya, grinning at him with a mostly full set of teeth, and then Aleksander threw the knife he'd taken from his back earlier. Leo looked surprised as he stared down at the hilt of the blade protruding from his stomach. He pulled it out and threw it aside as if it were no more than a thorn. Blood poured from the wound and he staggered slightly. He still didn't seem to understand what had happened to him.

Giovanni screamed and rushed Aleksander with the machete raised over his head. But he didn't reach him. Orryn was down on him, raking his large, monstrous claws through the man's scalp. He howled, and it was a high pitched sound, almost like a hyena. He dropped to the ground waving the machete around, as Orryn launched himself back into the air, clumps of long, greasy black hair attached to bits of skin dangling from his

talons like trophies. Then she moved forward, so fast it was almost a blur as she covered the ground between her and Ilya's legs, moving past the nullified Calviarri. Leo staggered sideways, holding the wound in his stomach, as Lilith reared back. Before she could sink her fangs into him, Soldier leaped from the darkness, his bayonet raised over his head, and landed on her snout, the blade sank into the flesh, preventing her from opening her mouth. She reared back thrashing around like mad, Soldier hanging on for dear life. Giovanni staggered to his feet, blood pouring down his face from the shredded scalp.

Ilya turned and flung himself against the portcullis. Pain exploded through his shoulder and he cried out, but it gave. With a screeching groan, the whole thing fell inward with a crash. He scrambled over it, looking back one last time to see Orryn diving toward Giovanni once more, and then Shoji appeared behind the bird, a rock in his hand, and smashed Orryn's wing, sending the bird careening to the ground. Ilya turned away with a shudder, as Orryn screamed and the sound of a rock impacting on his delicate hollow bones echoed down the passage. He had a mission. The passage was about ten feet long, which must have been the thickness of the walls.

The chamber was massive, at least eighty feet in diameter, with the only source of light being a few stray beams of multicolored light coming from the corroded stained glass windows high above. Ilya heard crying faintly from far above his head, but he couldn't make out anything against the far wall. What he could see was the strip of stone about four feet wide in front of him. It stretched across the chamber, fading into the distance like the far wall. On either side of the stone path was a silent, still pool of blood.

There was nowhere else to go but forward on the stone path and death. He would be surrounded by them. The bell had stopped tolling.

Maybe they were dead. It had been centuries since anyone had seen them, and Alexei had starved after not getting any solid food. Maybe the creatures below had as well. No. They lived in the source; they didn't need anything to survive. Not air, not food, not sunlight. A faint dripping sound could be heard and Ilya assumed that Emernon was somewhere overhead, as Amaranth had said, raining deadly life down.

“Hello?” Ilya called out above him.

The crying ceased and the voice of a boy came from high above him, the words completely alien to Ilya, but the tone desperate and afraid. It was begging. Ilya didn't have to understand Aramaic to recognize that. The boy kept speaking, even though Ilya couldn't understand him.

“I can't understand you, but I'm going to help.” He stepped down on to the stone walk way. Nothing happened. A small amount of tension eased in him and he took another step. The surface of the blood didn't as much as ripple. It was different from water. There were ripples and waves, looking at any swimming pool would reveal that. This was completely still. It must be thicker than water, or perhaps, like regular blood, it was congealing. It didn't matter. He pushed the thoughts out of his mind and continued across the lake around him. He got halfway across.

Then it happened, almost like clockwork. The blood rippled and lapped at the stones, the sound of stone scraping on stone echoed all around Ilya. The lake began to

froth and shake, and figures emerged in the shadows outside of his vision. Were they floating in the darkness, or had some stone platform been triggered to rise after Ilya stepped on some sort of pressure plate? Either way, they had appeared everywhere on either side of him. There was no escape. One of the large figures seemed to sway toward him, undulating like an octopus, or like a hurricane in a slow, churning pattern.

“Wait,” Ilya began. “I’m an oracle,” he said desperately, as the thing emerged from the shadows. The rest of what he would have said died in his throat.

It was more of fish and insect than man, and at least eight feet tall. One central multifaceted eye as depthless as an abyss and as absent of color, stared at Ilya as limbs more akin to the legs of a locust wrapped in the black scales of a fish lashed out, striking Ilya in the face and chest with such force that they picked him up and flung him a dozen feet down the stone path where his head smashed against the stone, killing him instantly.

## CHAPTER 31: GREEN FIRE AND BROKEN GLASS

Ilya came to a few minutes later, sitting up and shaking his head like a wet dog. He was amazed that he'd felt no pain after such a devastating blow. Until he opened his eyes and looked at his body several feet away, one leg twisted around, blood running from the back of his head onto the stones. He should be upset looking at himself like this. But he felt as detached from his emotions as his soul now was. The black shapes circled his body like sharks, as though they were waiting to make sure that he was dead before moving in to feast.

One thing he became aware of in his new predicament was the fact that he had pushed himself into a sitting position. He was touching the stone. If he'd become a ghost, he should have difficulty with that, shouldn't he? But he'd never had any trouble touching Sacha. He'd carried Wlad on his back, too. Perhaps someone like him was a special case, still able to physically interact with the world around him, unlike normal ghosts. Maybe he was more like Amaranth. If that were the case, then now he could proceed with his mission and not fear retaliation from the Patriarchy, who ignored him, still fixing their eyes upon his body, as the red stain grew beneath his head.

It was a shame he was dead, but at least he could free Emernon and no one would need ever suffer again at their hands, or from the blood. He still couldn't see any better than he could before, so he turned away from the predators circling his corpse and proceeded down the path unmolested. An archway came into view up ahead. Inscribed



along the dirty white marble were symbols of a nature he was not familiar with, being utterly dissimilar to Cyrillic or Latin script. Perhaps it was Aramaic, or some other lost tongue. Beyond the archway, a set of stone steps led upward into darkness. He would have been afraid if he were alive and any danger awaited him. But he was dead. His friends outside were probably dead, too. Aleksander was his friend. Being dead made it easy to admit that, and now that Aleksander was gone, he could admit that his feelings for the Young Lord over the last few days had not been completely platonic. He'd reacted with anger to cloak it. He'd been successful, even hiding it from himself.

It was easy to say now that they were probably both dead. Orryn too, smashed into the stones by a rock, but the poor thing would come back to life until Ilya reached the top and finally put an end to everything. He supposed he should have complicated feelings about this. There was nothing within him but the desire to complete what had obsessed him in life. He walked up the steps calmly. He knew there was a long ways to go. He wondered how Soldier was faring. Would he kill Shoji's snake, or would the beast bash the piece of wood to pieces? He could hear crying ahead, the sounds of a young boy. Ilya wondered for how many years the Patriarchy had listened to the sound, like a lullaby in their bloody womb below, ready to be rebirthed and kill, utterly unwilling to change. It should make Ilya angry, but it didn't.

The stairs ended and he passed down a dark stone passage, which led out to a balcony overlooking the pool below. At the end of the stone walkway was an iron X six feet long suspended from the ceiling. Chained in rusted loops of silver was a boy of no

more than eight, tears running down his cheeks and falling into the blood below, along with the steady drip of blood from the gashes in his side, chest, and neck. He looked sickly; there was a yellowish tinge to his skin, and his eyes seemed sunken. His hair was limp and hung very long down below him. His fingernails and toenails, yellowed with infection and fungus, had grown long and twisted over the years.

He was bound by at least a dozen silver chains, but they appeared dangerously corroded in places. Emernon looked at him, and spoke, speaking the same alien words he'd said earlier. Ilya guessed it was *please help me*. So he did. He reached out and grasped the first of the chains and pulled as hard as he could. It snapped easily, a shower of little slivers of silver falling to the ground below, illuminated in the rose-colored beams of light from the stained glass windows. Ilya looked down and saw The Patriarchy go still, feeling their eyes on Emernon, and the broken chain. Then, at some hidden signal, they moved as one, dragging themselves out of the water. Scuttling like beetles, they moved toward the stairs. Ilya broke the second chain.

When they arrived up here, they would be powerless to stop the shackles they'd placed on Emernon from being broken. The irony was that they had made it possible. As Ilya snapped the third chain, he saw a figure stumble through the tunnel. Even from this height, he could make it out, as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. It was Shoji. He weaved back and forth. Ilya could see blood pouring down his chest and legs. Someone or something had bitten a large chunk of flesh from the side of his throat. Blood also came from his right eye socket, where something was lodged. It was small and brown.

Ilya couldn't make out what it was until process of elimination gave him the answer. It was Soldier's rifle. The bayonet had been driven completely into Shoji's eye. Ilya broke the fourth chain. Emernon continued to beg Ilya.

Shoji teetered against the edge and then he went down, his head falling into the pool. His body thrashed around for a few moments and then he grew still. It was the end of him and it filled Ilya with no pleasure whatsoever, seeing him lie there, his body no more than fifteen feet from his own twisted and broken heap of flesh. Ilya broke the fifth chain. He could hear the sounds of The Patriarchy echoing from the hallway and knew they would be here soon. Below him, another figure stumbled into the stone walkway below. It was Aleksander. His left eye was swollen shut and he was limping, favoring his right leg, the knife wound still bled sluggishly. Ilya broke the sixth chain. Sounds of scratching came from behind him, and he knew the creatures had reached the end of the stairs and were now dragging their bloated, freakish bodies through the catwalk toward Emernon. Ilya broke the seventh chain.

Then the world exploded. It started with a single sound of a gunshot outside. Ilya's dream from weeks ago became reality. The methane, allowed to build to dangerous levels by the Calviarri, ignited. Ilya had not been at Hiroshima when the atomic bomb was dropped, but it was the kind of power he would have expected, echoing deeply in the heart he no longer had, the stained glass windows shattering and raining debris down into the pool above, narrowly missing the figures below. Green fire arched through the windows all around Ilya and Emernon as the Patriarchy cowered behind him. The green

fire reached out to lick their moist skins, sending them flying from the catwalk, their flaming bodies falling into the pool below like the fat ungainly bodies of cockroaches thrashing around after being trapped on their backs.

The concussive force had no effect on Ilya's newly insubstantial body, or Emernon, still secured by five silver chains, though his legs now dangled below him freely. Ilya broke the eighth chain as the green fire licked around them, but it did not harm Emernon. He recoiled from the flames instinctively, but his flesh did not bubble and boil, like The Patriarchy's had. Fortunately, the destructiveness of the explosion was limited to the top of the building, and the thick stone walls of the cathedral held, shielding Aleksander and the bodies of Ilya and Shoji. On either side of them, the bloated scaly bodies of the Patriarchy thrashed around in the congealed blood that had kept them strong for so long, and Ilya knew it would only be a matter of time before their wounds were healed.

Ilya broke the ninth chain as the green fire dissipated, no longer raging about like a hungry beast. Aleksander stumbled to his feet below Ilya, shuffling toward his prone form.

“Ilya!” he called out. Was he crying? He was bleeding from the ears now, from the devastating blast of sound that had ignited the swamp.

It didn't matter. A gulf of perception stood between them. Aleksander would never see or hear Ilya again. He broke the tenth chain leaving only two. He carefully cupped Emernon's head as he reached out to pull the chain from his neck. Then he felt a jerking

sensation all through his body, as though someone were trying to drag him off the catwalk. He looked down again to see that Aleksander had reached his body and had turned him over. The Young Lord was crying. Ilya could feel it. He was performing CPR on his prone body in between sobs, trying to breathe life into him.

Ilya felt the jerking sensation again as Aleksander leaned down to breathe life into his mouth. The man was still trying to kiss Ilya even after he was dead. Ilya broke the eleventh chain. Emernon hung by a single loop of silver around his chest now, with Ilya holding one hand around his waist. Was Aleksander bringing him back to life, making his heart beat again? He had to break the last chain and get Emernon down before that happened. As he gripped the chain, he looked down again as he jerked, and he could feel his strength beginning to ebb away. Then he wanted to scream, for below him, Shoji rolled over onto his back, his whole head dyed red. He sat up slowly and looked at Aleksander's back, the miraculous effects of Emernon's blood resurrecting him.

Ilya broke the last chain as he cried out. "Aleksander, he's not dead!" Ilya pulled Emernon over to the balcony, as the boy clutched at him, crying normal tears, and babbling.

But the Young Lord heard nothing, because ghosts made no noise. Shoji got to his feet and Ilya saw one of Giovanni's hunting knives in his hands. He smiled at Aleksander, blood dripping from his chin like birthing fluid. The restored Oriental Boy slowly walked toward Aleksander's back. Again, Aleksander performed the breath of life, and this time, Ilya was ripped from the balcony as his own lungs breathed in deeply, swallowing him.

He came to, blinking up at Aleksander's tear-stained, grimy face, his lips flecked with Ilya's blood, and maybe a little of his own, maybe some of Emernon's. He wanted to scream and shut his eyes. Everything hurt. He wasn't aware of any fiber of his being that wasn't frayed and near to the breaking point.

Instead, he tried to speak. "Behind you," he whispered, shutting his eyes tightly.

"What?" Aleksander said, whirling around "You're dead."

"I don't need to worry about that anymore," Shoji said, and Ilya could almost taste the joy in his voice. "Do you have any idea how good it feels not to be dying?"

"You still want to kill me?"

"I fucking hate you. Do you know how it feels to be your toy for months on end?"

Shoji's voice was getting nearer, and the joy was twisting like a snake into something malevolent and ugly.

Ilya's hand fumbled in his pocket for the antique pistol. This time, it had bullets in it. He opened his eyes slowly, but his vision was blurry and he couldn't see what was happening at all. Everything was covered by a red haze as his own blood leaked into his eyes.

"No one forced you to stay here with me," Aleksander said.

"Really? I was paid by your mother to divert you and prevent scandal from touching the family. I'm just a fucking whore that spied on you and reported on what you did. Do you know how sick I was of being nice and pleasant to everyone all the goddamn time?" Shoji laughed. Ilya could tell that he was very close now. "Do you know how

much everyone hates you? Your parents would do anything to trade you in for a normal son, who's capable of continuing the family name."

"G...gun," Ilya whispered, his vision blurring even more with tears, as pain blossomed through his shoulder when he tried to pull it from his pocket.

Aleksander dived for Ilya's pocket, and indistinctly through the red haze he saw a darker blur coming at them.

"It won't kill me anyway," Shoji shouted and Ilya heard a gunshot, and then it looked like Shoji's head was simply shattered like a watermelon, indistinct bits of skull and brain showering the area.

Ilya almost giggled at the sight. A single pistol shot couldn't have done that. It had not. Large indistinct blurs had gathered. The Patriarchy had recovered from their deaths already. Shoji's body vanished from Ilya's limited field of vision and he heard the sounds of ripping and tearing, like a dog given a pair of old slippers to gnaw apart. Ilya got the feeling that it would take Shoji a long time to heal from this.

"What do I do?" Aleksander whispered, as though Ilya had some secret method of controlling the creatures that had already killed him once. "I'm Aleksander Neimasaurus!" the Young Lord shouted with as much dignity as he could. Silence followed his declaration. Only the sound of Emernon's sobs could be heard, faintly from above their heads. Ilya had been snatched from victory, literally, by the act of his life being saved. When no tentacles came to pop their heads like grapes and dice them up for consumption in palm sized pieces, Ilya assumed that they did, in fact, understand

Russian.

After a few moments, a hiss came from the darkness, as much an effect of the wind than spoken speech. “Leave...” the voice said, slowly washing over them. Then it was gone, just as ephemeral as a gust of wind. Aleksander was uncertain, as though he doubted what he'd just heard. Several of the towering cockroach-like bodies heaved themselves up onto the stones and waddled through the broken glass littering the area, and headed toward the stairs and the sobbing child above. So near, and yet Ilya had failed completely. The Patriarchy would ensure that the misery continued, in their mistaken wisdom. If he didn't get Emernon to a hospital, then all of this would be for nothing. He could see only one course of action in his current state.

Feebly, Ilya reached out for Aleksander's hand, the one that clutched the pistol. “Kill me,” he whispered, trying to point it at his head.

Horrified, Aleksander snatched the pistol from his grip. “What are you doing?”

“Please,” Ilya whispered. “It's the only way.”

“I...I can't.”

“Then give me the gun,” he said, his vision starting to go black.

*No, there is another way. You must ask me another question, and pay the price.*

“But you aren't here. You're in the chapel,” Ilya mumbled, as Aleksander pulled him into his arms. He screamed at the pain which blossomed in his back, and the Young Lord froze.

“Ilya, I'm sorry.”



*I didn't leave you, and you know it. You felt it in your head. Now ask me.*

He remembered now. The pain in his head and the bleeding from the eyes, nose, and mouth, as the tentacles of darkness had forced their way into his skull. Then the Guardian had made him forget, convinced him that it was merely the act of talking to it that caused the damage. He had believed it, not even bothering to question his recollection of events. He knew what he had to do now.

“How do I defeat The Patriarchy?” Ilya reached out into the darkness all around him as his vision began to fail. For a moment nothing happened, and then it was as if he no longer had the hand he had extended. There was no pain. There was nothing but a column of deeper darkness, no larger than his hand, suspended in space in front of him. He shut his eyes, knowing what was coming from his actions.

Aleksander screamed. “Ilya, your hand, it's gone,” he shouted, feeling the smooth stump where Ilya's left hand had been.

“Dark magic...” The words washed over Ilya like a wave, but The Patriarchy had ceased to matter, even as they moved in to kill the practitioner of said magic. It had only taken a small piece of Ilya's soul and flesh to do it.

*I will do it for you.*

He closed his eyes, and he didn't bother to open them as the sounds of insects filled the cathedral, rushing forth from the palm-sized hole of darkness that had been Ilya's hand. The Patriarchy screamed as the sharp, serrated edge of the insects sliced into their flesh. It was a death from more than a thousand cuts, and they had no defense

against it.

“Don't touch it,” Ilya whispered, as Aleksander shielded him with his own body, fearing the attack of the creatures.

“What?”

“The darkness, never touch darkness,” Ilya babbled. He had no hand and it would never come back. He laughed suddenly. A six foot pillar of darkness in front of the void. It was obvious what it was now; an entire body transformed into shadow. Would that be Ilya's future, too? Is that the price oracles paid for their powers?

“What did you do?” Aleksander shouted over the roar of The Patriarchy's screams, waves of the cursed blood crashing against them, the cacophonous song of the insects nearly deafening them both.

“It's darkness. That's all the world is, like fighting fire with fire,” Ilya babbled.

The only defense The Patriarchy had was to sink to the bottom of the pool, where the insects swarmed on the surface, as they began to consume the blood. From cacophony to perfect stillness, as the creatures literally inhaled the pool. The Patriarchy would not escape for long. Now that Ilya had opened a door in the swamp, all that was tainted would be consumed.

The small pillar of darkness hung where Ilya had left it, despite the flickering light of fires coming from the shattered windows, which now illuminated the cathedral. The surface of the water was covered in the sleek gray bodies of the Guardian's eaters. That was their calling, to kill or eat everything in The Here that did not belong.

“Emernon!” Ilya shouted, praying the child would recognize his own name.

“Emernon!” He looked up at Aleksander, who was still shielding him with his own body.

“You have to go get him. We have to go to a hospital.”

“But the boats all burned when Alexei set the swamp on fire. The snakes were coming, and there was no choice. They would have killed us all.” Aleksander didn't seem to be aware of what he was saying.

“I can't walk, and I'm probably dying. I need you to go and get him. Please.” Ilya shut his eyes. His body had ceased to hurt now. A pleasant numbness was slowly creeping over him. He knew what it meant and he tried to force his eyes open. The last thing he heard before he slipped into unconsciousness was the sound of the Young Lord getting to his feet and stumbling down the walkway.

## CHAPTER 32: THE END OF SUMMER

When he first opened his eyes, the doctors said he'd been in a coma for nearly five weeks, the torn ligaments in his back had mostly healed, as had the broken leg and the fracture to his skull. They had been at a loss to explain the missing hand. Ilya hadn't felt like explaining it. His room was sterile and empty of any personal touches except for a small wooden table at the foot of his bed filled with flowers and cards. He liked the colors of the flowers. They distracted him from looking down at the stump where his hand had been.

He couldn't feel anything from the waist down. He knew what that meant. He'd read articles on back traumas resulting in paralysis. He would never walk again and he only had one hand now to get through it. He hadn't finished school, he had no skills, and he would be a cripple forever. The world wasn't darkness. That had been a bit of artistic license on his part. No, the world was shit. It was unfair; it was greedy, cruel, and random. He cried for most of that first day. A psychologist had come in to speak to him and he'd screamed at her and thrown whatever was in reach with his one remaining hand until they sedated him. After his experience with death, he found he had little inclination for shyness or timidity. It was almost like he would never be Ilya Kollide again. He didn't know who this new person was.

When he awoke from the sedative, it was early morning, with only the barest hint of light coming from the black drapes. He didn't know how he'd gotten to the hospital or

why no one had come to visit him. Maybe Aleksander had died. Demetri must be dead too, which meant that Tabitha hadn't warned him, so she must also be dead. The hospital staff wasn't telling him because he wasn't "prepared" for the news yet. He decided to watch the dawn, because there was nothing else to do. There was no IV in his arm or heart monitor; he must be in a coma ward. At least he had his own room. It was probably paid for by Neimasaurus roubles.

There was only one way to get to the window. He pushed himself over the side of the bed and crawled on the floor over to the window. He ought to get used to moving around like this. It's how he would be doing it for the rest of his life, like an infant, or a bug. It took him almost ten minutes to get to the window because he had to rest several times. He was completely exhausted with the slightest bit of movement now. He couldn't pull himself up into the chair with only one hand. So he grabbed onto the window sill and poked his head between the curtains to look outside. Dawn lit a landscape of ten thousand buildings. The city was massive and stretched as far into the horizon as Ilya could see. It was not Petrograd; he would recognize that. He could make out the Great Kremlin Palace amongst all the modern skyscrapers and knew that he was in Moscow. He'd never been to the capitol before.

Holding onto the sill quickly became an ordeal for him, so he lay on the floor, resting his stump beneath his head. He wished the psychologist would come back so he could throw things at her and scream some more. At least now he knew why no one came to visit. He did not know anyone in Moscow. Everyone he cared about was in the Altai

Republic nearly six thousand miles away. They probably hadn't expected or cared if Ilya ever woke up. It had probably been a relief to Demetri, if he were still alive, to find out Ilya was in a coma. The bad news would be when he found out that the useless cripple had woken up. Now the man would be burdened with him forever.

He really ought to end it now. Not for his sake, but for whoever would be stuck with him. He would be a terrible patient, constantly complaining about his allergies and motion sickness, which he was fairly certain the wheelchair would give him because his sense of equilibrium had always been simply awful. How could he do it from the floor, when he didn't have the strength to even get into a chair? He couldn't think of a solution despite all the possibilities swirling around in his head. So he settled for lying by the window and crying. After an hour, he fell asleep again.

When he awoke, the tall impassive form of Klimov was carefully laying him back in bed, under the watchful gaze of an older woman in a nurse's uniform. *What were you doing?* the older man signed calmly.

*I wanted to see the dawn.* It took Ilya forever to sign it, now that he only had one hand. He supposed he would have to get used to that too.

He settled into a chair by the bed as the nurse left the room. She'd been less enthusiastic since his outburst with the psychologist yesterday. The woman had that *oh look at the poor wounded little bird* look in her eyes until Ilya had thrown a cup of apple juice he hadn't even wanted or asked for at her head. He'd been aiming for the psychologist, but his one good arm had been a bit slow and lethargic, which threw off the

aim.

*I came to see you yesterday, but you were sedated. The Lady Neimasaurus and Elem were with me as well,* Klimov signed

At least some people still cared about him. *What about everyone else?*

Klimov's face gave nothing away. *Demetri and Tabitha are coming up from Neimasaurus. Master Aleksander and his cousin are coming up from Petrograd. They got in a few hours ago. They'll be here soon.*

*Who died?* Ilya asked, dreading the answer.

*What are you talking about?* Klimov tilted his head at Ilya.

*All the snakes. They attacked Neimasaurus that morning.*

*That never happened.* Klimov leaned down to a few inches away from Ilya's face. *Do you understand? Nothing like that happened. You hurt yourself in a boating accident in the swamp with Aleksander and Emerinov. Shoji died. That is all.* Klimov's face gave nothing away. Was it the truth? Had Ilya imagined everything else, or was Klimov merely attempting to force him to toe the family line on what had happened that day. Maybe he'd imagined everything. Maybe he'd only been born with one hand. Maybe the moon was actually neon pink and butterflies were the secret rulers of earth, too.

*It was a bad accident,* Ilya signed. It didn't matter. Either way, he was a useless cripple taking up space. *The doctors won't tell me anything, but I was paralyzed in it.*

Klimov shook his head. *You're not paralyzed, Ilya. Some of the nerves that went to your legs were severed in the accident. You'll heal, but the specialists that reattached*

*them said that it could take as much as a year before you walk again and maybe two until you have full mobility. The Neimasaurus family spared no expense in your treatment. He reached out and took Ilya's left forearm. They couldn't find the hand, so there you will have to learn to do without.*

How could Ilya explain that he'd made his hand into darkness? Aleksander hadn't been able to see the door or the insects that emerged from it. He'd seen the Patriarchy thrashing about in the waves, heard the sound of the insects, but that had been all. No one knew what happened to his hand, and Ilya would never tell. He knew that inside his head, it was still waiting. Waiting for a desperate moment when Ilya would have to sacrifice a forearm or leg to it. Until one day, there was no more Ilya, just a pillar of flickering deep shadows.

*Well?* Klimov signed. *Do you want to talk about what happened?* The man's face was as inexpressive as ever, and for a moment, Ilya wished that Elem had come to talk to him instead, that was like having a grandfather talking to him.

*No. I don't ever want to talk about it.* Ilya was sincere. It was done. He'd been brave; he had taken charge and done his best to be a hero. It made him feel shattered inside, like he'd spent himself. His body might recover, but it didn't feel like his soul ever would. He wished he'd run away and taken Elem's offer to move to Moscow with him and Klimov and serve the Neimasaurus here, away from Blood Manor. He never wanted to set eyes on the place again. *Elem said that I could come work with you and him here, if I wanted to.* Ilya signed slowly, which is how he would always communicate with sign



now, in the slow and laborious process of a cripple. It was like talking with someone who'd had a stroke and could only speak out of half their face while the other side just sat there, dead.

*Yes, Elem told me. We thought you might want that, and you can, Ilya. But do you want to leave Demetri?*

*No. But I don't want to go back there.* He would never set foot in that house again. The thing in the chapel made it impossible. It was only memories, but they were so powerful to Ilya. They were delusions now, just the inventions of the bored mind of an imaginative young man who couldn't separate fantasy from reality. It didn't matter. What had Klimov said? A boating accident in the swamp. That was it. It had been an old boat, hadn't it? The boathouse was so run down, and it had been risky, but Shoji had insisted and Emerinov wanted to come, too. Who was Emerinov? Was it Emernon? Had he been an invention? It didn't matter. Soldier was dead. In both reality and fiction, so there was no point in sifting between the two. He hadn't entered the cathedral before the explosion, and that would kill a piece of wood as effectively as flesh. He'd become one of Ilya's closest friends, which he supposed was a little sad when he thought about it. At least he'd jammed his bayonet and a good portion of the rifle into Shoji's eye. Klimov was still signing something, so Ilya tried to pay attention.

*What did you say? Ilya signed. My head's still a little fuzzy,*  
*I asked if you needed anything, before I go to pick up Aleksander and Emerinov*  
*from the hotel.*

Ilya shook his head. He didn't need anything. *No, I think I'll take a nap until you get back.* Ilya yawned suddenly, actually tired. He supposed it took a lot of energy to be awake after sleeping for over thirty days. An entire month. It was weird to think that time had moved forward for so long and Ilya didn't have a single memory of it, no dreams, not even a nightmare. Klimov squeezed his shoulder before leaving the room. Ilya rolled onto his side and closed his eyes. He wasn't paralyzed forever. Just for a year or two. That wasn't so bad. At least he was expected to make a recovery. Shoji was dead. How did he feel about that? He didn't feel good about it. But he was relieved. It could have been so easy to fall into the trap that the Oriental Boy had fallen into. Hired to be the sexual plaything for someone's son in the hopes of keeping Aleksander on the straight and narrow, how could Shoji not seethe with resentment?

Ilya wouldn't have been able to resist the allure of the snakes and, despite her appearance, the love of Lilith. From the little he'd seen of them, there had been genuine affection between the two. When your only friend was a snake, was it any wonder what he'd done? Ilya had Demetri, Tabitha, and Soldier to keep him centered. Otherwise he would have come to rely on Orryn for a lot. Ilya felt loss at the bird's death. He had been a mentor more than anyone else in his life. Despite his frightening and slightly sinister appearance and his tendency to manipulate Ilya, the vulture had done his best to keep Ilya from falling into the trap that Shoji had. He'd warned Ilya away from his dreams and saved his life so many times. Then he'd died. It seemed a lousy reward Ilya had given Orryn. But it was what he'd wanted. Then Alexei, who'd actually reunited with Dano,

died permanently. But they both wanted it, and Alexei deserved it.

Ilya slept and dreamed of the boating accident. When he awoke, the door was opening. Aleksander stepped through looking a bit more common than Ilya had ever seen him, dressed in jeans and a black polo shirt. His wounds had healed, and there was no sign of any injuries as he moved across the room. He wouldn't be bedridden for two years, missing a hand.

“Hi,” the Young Lord said awkwardly, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“You look all healed.”

Aleksander nodded. “It took about two weeks before the knife wound was all better.”

Ilya felt pity for him. Even if he was healed, what Shoji said had to have twisted a knife in his gut that wouldn't heal in a few weeks, more like months or years. He probably didn't deserve it, despite how obnoxious he could be. Had the Oriental Boy's admission been what led to the boating accident? Ilya couldn't remember it clearly. The whole event was a little hazy. But it was best to say what was on his mind. Maybe it would help Aleksander. “It's true, what he said.”

Aleksander looked away, as though Ilya had slapped him. There was no need to clarify. He knew.

“You could be so awful sometimes.” He reached out to touch Aleksander's leg.

“You can be a better person than that.”

For a moment, Aleksander looked into Ilya's eyes. Then he blinked and lay down

next to Ilya, resting his head on his shoulder. "I don't want to do it, but I just do."

Ilya nodded. Like when he was caught in a lie with Demetri or Tabitha and he just kept digging himself deeper even though he knew he was screwed. Escaping one's own nature was hard. It was not impossible. "Tell me about the boating accident," he said, changing the subject. It was still indistinct in his mind. It seemed so much more plausible than what he thought had happened. Clearly, his memories of what had happened had been no more than the demented ramblings of his subconscious for the last several weeks. He'd taken things with significance to himself and incorporated them into his dream, hadn't he? He'd struggled with his feelings for other men, he'd found them uncomfortable and retreated into a safer object of desire that was equally appealing in the form of a redheaded maid named Tabitha. Then his subconscious had created a series of homosexual male tormentors that would force him to acknowledge his feelings.

"The story is that we were exploring the swamp, trying to find the mythical blood fountain, because everyone knows the legend anyway, and hit a tree, causing the boat to flip over." Aleksander studied Ilya carefully as he spoke.

But Ilya didn't care because he really wasn't paying all that much attention to the man anyway. In his mind he continued to think about his dream, because that's all it was now. He might have gone a little over the top in painting homosexual men as predatory deviants, when he'd imagined a whole masquerade of several hundred of them slowly stripping off their clothes and having an orgy. He'd found a way to make his desires a little more romantic with Alexei, a man who'd deeply loved and been loved by his best

friend. His subconscious had to punish them by turning them both into monsters. Sex hadn't been what the dream was about, it had just crept in because he was a teenage boy and sex found a way. He could be brushing his teeth in the morning and suddenly think of sex, or scrubbing a floor in the estate and think about his scrub brush rubbing down something else entirely. No, sex had been a side issue.

The main issue that screamed out at him was how he tried to fix the lives of several broken young men. First, there had been the cat, Arsenic, mourning the death of his mother. He might have just been a cat, but he'd been afraid to make an attachment to anyone. His parents had just died and he was all alone in the world except for the stranger who he had never met, who adopted him. It perfectly matched the Story of Ilya coming to live with an uncle he'd never met, whom he didn't trust. Of course, Arsenic had been murdered, which was a rather nasty trick for his subconscious to play on him. But that was only because he'd been ready for a more human analogy. He'd given himself a succession of ghostly young men whose lives Ilya had to fix, like Sacha, a boy all alone in a big frightening house without anyone to care for him. Ilya had tried his best and forced him to confront his feelings for the man who had killed him, just as Ilya had confronted his feelings for the two young men who killed his own parents. Deep down, Sacha couldn't do it, but he could try, just like Ilya.

Then there had been the last boy to be rescued. Emernon, who when saved would magically undo all the wrong that had happened to everyone. It had become a goal that he approached with almost tunnel vision. No matter what happened to him, he had to save

Emernon from the people who were hurting him, even if they hadn't meant to. Because his rescue was Ilya's rescue of himself. He was bleeding. Not literally like Emernon, but inside, all the time. The social worker had called it survivor's guilt. What happened had not been his fault. But he'd convinced himself that it was. All the bad in his life came from him. He'd reduced his attempt to kill himself in the dream into a joke to try and nullify how he did want to die. He'd even made death the ultimate release for so many people, to the point where Alexei, Dano, and Orryn all longed for the death that saving Emernon would bring. Ilya wanted to die. He wanted to repent and save Emernon, but then die at the same time.

The finale in the cathedral had become almost schizophrenic in a way, as Ilya, now dead, still tried to save Emernon from, in what was an obvious bit of symbolism, the Patriarchy. Who was the Patriarchy that Ilya struggled against? It was himself, his own male nature and maybe the nature of all men, or the worst aspects of it, just senseless, violent murderers, utterly monstrous in appearance and beyond reason. Ilya's, maybe any boy's, beast within. Every boy at some point dreads becoming a man, even while longing for it.

He'd created a spectre, someone else struggling with the death of their parents, and the guilt she felt at their death. He had turned Amaranth into a vicious mean spirited woman tormented long after death for the angry acts she'd committed in life, longing for forgiveness. That was what he wanted, for his parents to forgive him. He could never have that.

“Ilya, what's wrong?” Aleksander asked. “You're crying.” The Young Lord pulled his sleeve up over his hand and wiped at the tears on his cheeks. “It's okay. We did the best we could.”

It wasn't okay. Aleksander didn't understand what made it not okay. Soldier, the representative of his childhood and boyish desire for adventure had burned to death in the swamp, because Ilya did not have the luxury of being a boy anymore. His subconscious had saved him from seeing it, but wood burned and the swamp had gone up in flames. But it didn't happen; it had only been a dream. He looked down at the stump where his left hand was supposed to be.

“I never had a left hand, did I?” It was a boating accident, that's all it was. He hated boats, didn't he? They were so unsafe. He didn't know how to swim either, and the swamp was full of bacteria and other things that could kill him without Ilya even being able to see it. He had to make sure if he was ever on a boat again that he was wearing a life vest, and that he never let go of the rail on the side. What if the boat didn't have one? Then it would have a seat that he could strap himself into it. He would be safe strapped in with a life vest on, but why take the risk? He couldn't ever really be safe could he? Maybe he shouldn't go outside anymore. “I just shouldn't get in boats. They're even worse than swimming pools. I'm allergic to the chlorine, you know, and I can't swim either. You tried to drown me in a pool once, didn't you? I remember. You said that you were trying to teach me, but you really just wanted to hurt me. I almost died. You poisoned me, you know.”

Ilya pulled his hand out of Aleksander's grip. He only had one left, so he had to be careful with it. He probably shouldn't let anyone touch it. They would get germs on it. Probably some bacteria and mold, too. He was allergic to a lot of molds. Dust and pollen, too. What if whoever touched his hand had a pet? They would get dander all over him. He was probably allergic to that too.

Aleksander stared at Ilya for a moment, shocked. "That's... Ilya, it was an accident. I..." his voice trailed off. "It all happened, Ilya."

"No it didn't," Ilya said mechanically. "Wait, what do you mean? There was a boating accident, and I was in it. It's not safe to be in a boat. You made me get in it with you, didn't you?" Ilya rolled over on his side, looking away from Aleksander.

"Emernon's here, Ilya. He's waiting to see you. He knows you're the one who saved him. You pulled the chains off of him, don't you remember?"

"That's your cousin, Emerinov." Ilya felt the bed shift as Aleksander reached over and put his hand on his shoulder, forcing Ilya to look at him.

"That's just a story we made up. It's Emernon, and we are related, though distant, as you know. He's learning Russian very fast. Ever since we got him to the hospital and got him stitched up, he's been totally normal."

Ilya couldn't believe him. It was all too farfetched. "Stop touching me," he whispered, twisting his head away from Aleksander and staring down at the white linen bed sheets. It was a boating accident. He felt the hands leave his shoulders.

"Ilya, you can't run away from this." Aleksander got up off the bed, and Ilya heard



his footsteps retreating toward the door. “Emerinov,” Aleksander called out into the hall.

It was a summons. Ilya sat up and looked toward the door. It pushed open and a dark-haired, dusky-skinned boy stepped into the room. He was a bit shy, and appeared to be about eight years of age. He didn’t quite look like any other boy Ilya had ever seen. He supposed Emerinov was unique, being of actual, true, Assyrian stock of classical antiquity. How in the world had the Neimasaurus gotten away with calling him Aleksander's cousin? There was no similarity between the boy and any of the Modern Neimasaurus’s that Ilya had seen. It was weird to see him dressed in a modern sweater and pants. It must be getting cold outside already. Ilya had missed summer, hadn't he? He'd slept right through it and into fall. The boy waved at him shyly, half-hiding behind Aleksander.

“We came to see you every day for several weeks, until they moved you into the coma ward. They said you probably wouldn't ever wake up, that the bleeding in your head had caused too much damage for you to ever recover.” Aleksander pushed the boy forward. “Go on, show him what you've learned.”

Awkwardly, Emernon took a step forward. His white sneakers embossed on the sides with what appeared to be ninjas, squeaked loudly. “Thank. You,” the boy said haltingly in Russian. “You. Save. Me.” He pointed at himself for emphasis and smiled at Ilya. Then he rushed forward and hugged him. Ilya was touched, not just literally, but figuratively. Being a rescuer was a different sort of thing to him. He was used to being the one in trouble.

“He was very worried about you. Even though it was the soldiers that rescued all of us.”

“Soldiers?” Ilya asked, as Emernon settled down next to him, and then looked deep into his eyes.

“Magic,” the boy whispered, pointing at the two orange eyes.

Aleksander nodded. “My mother called the army. She didn't take any chances. They entered the swamp shortly after the explosion, after finding all the dead bodies at Neimasaurus.”

“Sort of,” Ilya said to Emernon. “Not as much as you.”

The boy looked confused.

“He remembers being rescued from the church and being hurt. But the two and a half millennia of torture are gone from his memory.” Aleksander sat down in the chair next to the bed.

“That's good,” Ilya said. Hopefully, the memories would never return. If only he could forget so easily.

“He says your soul saved his soul.” Aleksander shrugged. “He can't explain any more than that.”

“He doesn't need to,” Ilya said. It seemed perfectly clear to him. Ilya had thought of himself as a ghost when he'd been thrown from his own body, but calling it a soul really didn't seem that different. It was just different words for an inexplicable, abstract concept. Maybe what Ilya had rescued after two thousand years hadn't been Emernon's

body, at least not literally. The flesh was weak and malleable. But a strong soul... Clearly Emernon's was powerful. So was Ilya's, since everyone didn't survive death.

His fit of madness had passed. There was no boating accident. Everything was as he remembered it. He had wanted it to be that way. It made everything easier for him if he'd just been mad. Another thing caught his mind about what Aleksander said. The bleeding in his brain had been what put him in the coma to begin with. Had that been caused by the attack in the cathedral, or had it started when the darkness forced itself inside his head in the shrine? Emernon stayed with him for a few minutes more, until Klimov came to get him. Aleksander lay down on the bed next to him and Ilya didn't say anything about it.

“So... I guess I'm a little crazy,” Ilya said, looking away from Aleksander when the man's gaze became a little too uncomfortable.

“A couple months ago your parents died. Then you were sent to a strange new place where you knew no one. Then you nearly died repeatedly and were tortured by a psychopath and then we both nearly died at the cathedral, and you spent a month in a coma.” Aleksander leaned in close to Ilya and kissed him on the forehead. “If you pretended everything was just fine, I would be worried. You're entitled to being a little fucked in the head for a bit.” Then he kissed Ilya. It happened so fast that he barely had time to react before Aleksander leaned away from him. It was like a hit and run, and Ilya wasn't even sure it had happened.

He let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. “So...I'm normal, then.”

“Well... I wouldn't let it go that far, but pretty close.” Aleksander kissed him again, quickly, as if he were afraid Ilya would slap him.

He remembered his thoughts when he thought he'd been dead. He knew how he felt and it was all right, even if he was still alive. It still seemed a bit unsavory to have feelings for a borderline date-rapist like Aleksander, but then again, that fellow seemed to have disappeared. Then again, Ilya was no longer the neurotic nutcase who'd arrived at Neimasaurus having conversations with his dead parents, whose remains he carried around with him everywhere. What had he been thinking? They were both different now. So he did it; he leaned forward and kissed Aleksander on the lips, taking the initiative for the first time in his life. It didn't last.

The Young Lord's hesitation only lasted a fraction of a second, and then he was pushing himself down on Ilya, slipping his tongue into his mouth as his hands were traveling down to Ilya's groin.

“Wait! Don't touch me there. I'm not ready for that.” Ilya pushed Aleksander off, trying not to let his panic get the best of him. Give the Young Lord an inch and the next thing Ilya knew, he could feel at least seven hard inches against his thigh. “Let's just kiss.”

“So for today, neither of us has cocks then?”

“Probably tomorrow, too.”

“Do we have nipples yet?”

“Yes, but only for touching, not tongues.” Ilya thought for a moment. “And not

for anything else you can think of.”

Aleksander looked a little crestfallen at the news, but recovered quickly, leaning in close and brushing his fingertips down Ilya's cheek. “So I can brush them with my fingers?”

“Yes, but not for too long.” Ilya found it very likely from Aleksander's breath that he'd had some fish for lunch. Hopefully, it wasn't shellfish, or it could be a kiss of death for Ilya.

He smiled down at Ilya. “Otherwise you might get excited.”

“Exact—no, it would just feel weird,” Ilya said, blushing slightly.

“This is going to be fun.”

“I'm glad one of us thinks so.”

“What about th—”

“No.”

“But you don't know what it is,” Aleksander said, the thumb of one hand pressing very gently into the hollow of Ilya's throat.

Was it getting slightly swollen? Had he had a bunch of shrimp for lunch? “Yes I do.” It didn't take a genius to know where his thoughts were going. On the plus side, it was barely past eleven, and it seemed unlikely Aleksander would have had lunch already, so maybe it had just been some smoked salmon and cream cheese on a bagel for breakfast. No one ate shrimp in the morning, did they?

“Then tell me.”

So distracted had he become by fish, he had trouble remembering what Aleksander was asking about, so he just shook his head and did his best to look shy as Aleksander leaned in for another kiss. It was no good. He couldn't let it go. He broke away from Aleksander's lips. "You didn't have shrimp for lunch, did you? Because I can taste fish on your breath."

"No, salmon, and it was breakfast." He leaned back down to Ilya, catching his lower lip in his teeth for a moment before letting it go. "Now, what about--" Aleksander started, and Ilya covered his mouth with his hand.

Couldn't he ever just shut up? He always had to take things too far. Ilya wasn't ready for anything else, not for a good long while. At least with him. Now, if Tabitha had been here... But that would be tomorrow. "Just shut up, okay? You're a hare, and I'm a tortoise."

Aleksander nodded and leaned down for another kiss, one of his hands brushing down Ilya's chest and slipping in between two buttons to brush against one of his nipples. How the hell had he done that? The man hadn't stopped moving his hands and had somehow totally ignored Ilya's shirt. He just shook his head. He needed to reconsider his analogy. Aleksander wasn't a hare, he was a cheetah, and Ilya didn't have the defenses of a turtle, no, he was a nice and juicy looking gazelle, missing one of his legs, and just lying prone on the road. Fortunately, the new Aleksander, while still a carnivore, wasn't quite so hungry anymore after stuffing himself so many times with other gazelles. Now, the cheetah could take his time and savor this meal. Why the fuck would he make himself

a defenseless gazelle in his own analogy?

Was he cheating on Tabitha by letting Aleksander do this? Was he already a bit of a player? He almost giggled, which would have thrown Aleksander off his game, but Ilya managed to hold it in. They weren't really going out, were they? It was just a few kisses, and that's what he'd done with her, and she'd denied they were an item. But had she meant it? Girls were difficult. Aleksander made things so easy. So easy, in fact, that it became necessary to give him a bit of the stick again, as the other man's hands drifted lower.

“You can't touch the hips either.” He felt Aleksander's lips curve into a smile as he broke the kiss.

His hands moved to Ilya's inner thighs. “What about here?” Aleksander whispered in his ear.

“No, it's too close to the danger zone,” Ilya said seriously. Aleksander laughed, collapsing against him for a moment. “Well, maybe the outside part.” It was a nice compromise. Ilya leaned back and closed his eyes as Aleksander caught his ear in his teeth and proceeded to do something extremely unhygienic, which seemed a bit weird to Ilya. But he let the older boy get away with it. So long as he brushed his teeth when they were done. Ilya certainly wasn't putting his tongue there. Absolutely not. Bacteria collected in the outer ear and it was quite dirty, which was why he used hydrogen peroxide to clean his out at least once a week. Aleksander's tongue moved lower, down his neck.

Ilya rested his arms around the Young Lord's neck, like he'd seen in movies, and

hoped for the best. As it happened, for the first time in months, that was exactly what he got. He didn't appreciate it and found all kinds of problems with it, but things worked out. In the end.



## **APPENDIX: READING LIST**

Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*  
Aristotle. *Poetics*.  
Atwood, Margaret. *Wilderness Tips*  
Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*  
Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Tales*  
Chekov, Anton. *The Lady with the Dog*  
Constantine, Storm. *Calenture*  
Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*  
Eliot, T.S. *The Hollow Men*  
---. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*  
---. *The Wasteland*  
Fowles, John. *The Magus*  
Genet, Jean. *Our Lady of the Flowers*  
Gogol, Nikolai. *Dead Souls*  
---. *Migorod*  
Haddon, Mark. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*  
Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Minister's Black Veil*  
---. *Rappaccinni's Daughter*  
---. *Young Goodman Brown*  
James, Henry. *The Aspern Papers*  
---. *The Beast in the Jungle*  
---. *The Jolly Corner*  
---. *The Pupil*  
---. *The Turn of the Screw*  
Kafka, Franz. *Collected Stories*  
Lovecraft, Howard Phillip. *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*  
---. *Herbert West, Re-Animator*  
---. *The Lurking Fear*  
---. *The Shadow Out of Time*

Machen, Arthur. *The Great God Pan*  
Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*  
Maupassant, Guy de. *The Horla*  
McCarthy, Cormac. *Child of God*  
---. *The Road*  
Morrison, Tony. *Beloved*.  
---. *Paradise*  
Nabokov, Vladimir. *Invitation to a Beheading*  
Nordan, Lewis. *Music of the Swamp*  
Poe, Edgar Allen. *The Cask of Amontillado*  
---. *The Fall of the House of Usher*  
---. *Masque of the Red Death*  
Renault, Mary. *Last of the Wine*  
---. *The Mask of Apollo*  
---. *The Persian Boy*  
Rosseti, Christina. *Goblin Market and Other Poems*  
Russo, Richard. *Straight Man*  
Shelly, Mary. *Frankenstein*  
Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*  
Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*  
Strugatsky, Arkady and Boris. *Roadside Picnic*  
Tatar, Maria. *The Classic Fairytale*  
Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Grey*