



Avenger of Sins (SPECTR Series 3, #6)

Author: *Jordan L. Hawk*

Category: LGBT+

Description: John Starkweather has one chance to stop a series of murders by the rogue telepath Ryan. Though only the drakul Gray and Night are safe from Ryan's mental manipulation, John knows it's up to him to capture his former friend—and fellow victim—before anyone else dies.

But outwitting a telepath isn't an easy task. In order to bring Ryan in, John will have to confront the darkest parts of their shared past. Because before all is said and done, John and Ryan find themselves confronting an even greater evil: one that will swallow them up body and soul.

Total Pages (Source): 14

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am

ONE

Ryan's head throbbed, a fierce ache that started behind his eyes and encompassed the rest of his skull, until even his teeth hurt. He leaned over the bathroom sink of the seedy motel in some backwater town in Mississippi. He'd chosen it because it looked like the sort of place that would take cash, skip asking for a driver's license, and in general want to know as little as possible about its guests in case the police came calling. He'd been right on all counts.

It was a dump, of course. Stains on the carpet, beds, ceiling. The cloying stink of mold. Towels that looked like someone had used them to wipe off grease from a car repair.

But none of that mattered. He'd endured far worse in sterile surroundings. He'd take honest dirt any day.

A glance in the mirror revealed the whites of his eyes had gone entirely scarlet. It had been years since he'd used his telepathy so regularly, pushed himself so hard, and it was taking a toll on his body. Unfortunately, resting his talent now was out of the question.

He filled an off-brand dixie cup with tap water and drank it down. The water tasted faintly of rust. Or maybe that was just the lingering flavor of blood in his mouth.

The vampire.

For a moment, when he'd first heard John's thoughts, he'd been certain he was

mistaken. Vampires weren't real; everyone knew that. And sure, he'd gone on one of the hokey "vampire tours" shortly after he first moved to New Orleans. Forced Jennifer and Marc to go with him, because he knew they'd hate it and all he wanted was to make them miserable in ways both big and small.

His parents had been terrified when he turned up on their doorstep so many years after they threw him away. Their fear was the first thing to make him feel as though he had any control since childhood. Gods knew they'd deserved every second of it after what they did to him.

But vampires were just a fun way to scare the tourists. Until one showed up on John's arm.

Damn the creature for escaping the bank vault; he'd been so sure it wouldn't be able to get out before he came back for more blood. Instead, it had shown up at the abandoned naval base on Poland Avenue. Prevented John from grabbing the Director of SPECTR herself.

Prevented John from escaping.

Now John was back in SPECTR hands. A prisoner once again. Bile rose to the back of Ryan's throat, and he gripped the sides of the ancient porcelain sink.

A part of him understood why John had been drawn to the vampire. He'd picked fragments of their relationship from John's thoughts, enough to know Caleb had been an ordinary telekinetic before being involuntarily possessed by the fucking thing. Even with his true memories blocked, John felt a twinge of kinship.

From the outside, the vampire didn't seem all that bad, considering most demons were driven to maim and destroy. But in the lab, at the Center for Loving Redemption, Ryan had demons forced into his body, over and over again. He knew

their madness, hunger, and pain. Knew the foul stain they left behind, even after they were gone.

He'd tried to spy on the vampire's thoughts just once. Only surface thoughts, of course; without etheric energy to boost his telepathic ability, he couldn't go any deeper than that. At least, not on a subject that wasn't otherwise impaired, like Granddad had been the night he'd sent him to meet the rougarou.

Caleb had seemed fine, but the demon inside him...

It felt big. Terrifying. Like Ryan was standing before an oncoming storm that would sweep him away. As though Katrina had returned with all its power and destruction, tucked away into the body of a thin young man. Unleashed, it would wreak untold havoc.

Ryan longed to turn around and go back to New Orleans. Save John from SPECTR, from the vampire. John belonged here, with him and Jo. The only three survivors from their time as lab rats.

But that wasn't an option. SPECTR would grab him again, and he'd spend the rest of his life locked away in some underground facility, experimented on just like he'd been for so much of his life. They'd be careful this time, learn from their mistakes. Rotate personnel so he couldn't manipulate their thoughts slowly over the span of months and years.

Then there would never be any justice. The people who had done this, who had destroyed their childhoods and their lives, would continue on free and happy. So, no, he couldn't turn back. John was lost to him.

He straightened his shoulders and wiped the tiredness from his face as best as he was able before returning to the main room. Jo sat in a chair beside the window looking

into the parking lot, staring out in silence. She appeared as exhausted as he felt.

“Did we really do that?” she asked, almost to herself.

Her thoughts unspooled in a jumble: we’re going to get arrested, that was so stupid, why did I go along with that, I’m going to jail, can we run?

“It’s going to be all right,” he told her firmly. Considered pushing his thoughts into hers, redirecting them...but no. The vampire was on the loose now; there wasn’t going to be another source of etherically charged blood conveniently waiting for him. He needed to conserve it for more important tasks.

Such as interrogating their captive.

Agent Pittman, executive assistant to Director Kaniyar. Her pet empath she’d brought up through the ranks with her, ready to do whatever she asked of him.

It didn’t take a telepath to guess Pittman’s thoughts right now; his expression of fury told its own story. But underneath, Ryan heard fear.

He wants names, he has to, met Carrie Lydell at—no! Stop! Think about something, anything, concentrate on breathing, in, out, in, out, fuck is he going to kill me?

Pittman lay propped up against the headboard of one of the beds, securely bound with a duct tape gag. The perks of a motel: back the car up to the door, yank someone out of the trunk, and it’s only a couple of feet until they’re inside and out of sight. Not that there were many other guests to see anything; no one stayed at a rundown motel on Christmas Day unless they had no choice.

Ryan picked up the thermos filled with blood he’d drained from the vampire. He took a quick sip, trying to ignore the taste. Energy instantly crackled through him; his

vision seemed sharper, his mind clearer. The thoughts of Jo and Pittman grew more distinct, easier to pluck from the air.

He resealed the thermos, then sat on the edge of the bed beside Pittman. “Now,” he said as he reached for the gag, “you’re going to answer some questions.”

“I brought the clothes the director asked for,” said the agent standing awkwardly in the conference room door. Caleb hadn’t caught her name or rank, had no idea if she was local or someone Kaniyar had brought with her to New Orleans. Either way, her eyes were wary as she held out a shopping bag in Night’s direction.

Unlike Gray, who could hide inside of Caleb’s living body, Night was clearly inhuman. Her body might be that of a soccer mom, short with rumpled blonde hair. But her eyes glowed like those of a predator reflecting the light from a campfire, and fangs flashed whenever she spoke.

Now she fixed her eerie gaze on the agent. “I have clothing already.”

Technically true, but Christmas-themed pajamas decorated with bloody bullet holes weren’t going to cut it. “Do you want mortals losing it around you?” he asked. “Because you’re pretty conspicuous right now.”

Night frowned slightly. Drakul learned pretty quickly that screaming mortals had the annoying tendency to get in the way during a hunt. “No. I will accept this disguise.”

Zahira, no doubt seeing the other agent’s uncertainty, reached out for the bag. “I’ll take over from here.”

The agent nodded, backing toward the door as she did so. “Great. I got a bunch of stuff, sizes fourteen to eighteen since women’s clothing sizes don’t mean shit.”

“Thank you,” Zahira said, but the other woman was already out the door and gone.

Smart lady.

“Come with me—I’ll help you,” Zahira told Night.

He half expected Night to protest, but she only followed Zahira out of the room. Night wouldn’t bother with figuring out the right sizes or what looked acceptable on her own; with Zahira’s help she at least wouldn’t stand out in a crowd. Too badly, anyway.

And now, at last, Caleb and Gray were alone with John.

Gray hovered close to the surface, not speaking but observing keenly. John had been quiet since Kaniyar left them in this boring-ass beige conference room at SPECTR-NOLA headquarters.

Which wasn’t really surprising. What the hell did you say, after being mind-controlled by someone you thought you knew? Someone you trusted?

If Caleb ever saw Ryan again, he was going to wring his fucking neck.

Gray stirred at that thought. “He tried to take John away. He stole our blood. I do not like him.”

Yeah, no kidding.

Caleb leaned across the table toward John. John didn’t look good—of course he didn’t—eyes bruised and hair unkempt, the shadow of stubble darkening his jaw.

“Hey,” Caleb said softly. He stretched out his hand and let it rest on the table, an

invitation rather than a demand. “How are you doing?”

John stared at nothing. “I don’t understand why he did this,” he said at last.

No need to ask who “he” was. Ryan Starkweather, originally called John Starkweather, the telepath. Handed over by his parents to a SPECTR operation pretending to be an anti-paranormal facility that would “cure” their child of his ability. Locked away, tortured by having demons forced in and out of him, injected with god-knew-what cocktail of drugs in an attempt to control the demons inside.

Four other kids had been with him. Two were dead. One missing alongside Ryan. The fourth, John Starkweather, born Jonathan Low. Mind-wiped, memories replaced, then scooped up by SPECTR to become an agent without ever remembering what they’d done to him. Hell, they positioned themselves as his savior, his haven.

“Ryan wanted to get close to Kaniyar, get the names of everyone who tortured you, and then kill them all starting with her.” Caleb shrugged. “It’s no deeper than that.”

And fuck, he kind of sympathized with the guy. Ryan might be a psycho, but the people on that list had been fine with torturing kids. This was all top-secret stuff; they’d never see the inside of a courtroom. There was no hope of justice unless Ryan took it into his own hands.

But Ryan had also decided to take over John and Jo’s minds, order them to shoot up him and Gray, and Night. Night just hopped bodies, but Gray and he ended up locked in a bank vault after having been bled by Ryan, who wanted the ability-boost of a drakul’s blood to fuel his revenge.

So Caleb’s sympathy was running a lot thinner than it would have otherwise.

The look John shot him was like a stake to the heart. Grief, anger, betrayal, all aimed

at the only target in the room. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Ryan loved us. You can’t even begin to understand the sort of bond we formed, locked up and tortured together. We were all we had. We’d die for each other.”

Caleb flinched. That last bit had been in present tense, and he didn’t like that at all.

Gray picked up on his alarm. “Does John wish he was still with the telepath?”

No; of course not.

“Then explain it to me,” Caleb suggested, keeping his voice as gentle as he could.

John wiped at his eyes. “When he revealed himself to Jo and me...it was like coming home. Even before I got my memories back, I felt a connection to him. I thought it was because we were related, but no. It went deeper than blood.”

A wash of concern from Gray. Caleb breathed deep, not wanting to add to it. There were a lot of advantages to being a drakul, but emotional feedback loops could get overwhelming fast. “I hear you. But he wasn’t the boy you knew back then.”

“Of course he wasn’t.” John shot a bitter glare at the camera monitoring them from the corner. “The rest of us got out. But he was stuck in a lab for years after they realized he was a true telepath. He sacrificed himself for us, and I didn’t even remember his face.”

In Caleb’s opinion, none of the test subjects had gotten out. One had been abandoned in the ruined Center to be transformed into a naga, one put in a different lab, and the rest parceled out to state schools for the paranormally abled, to be swept up in SPECTR’s claws once they were of age.

The people at the state schools must have known, at least the principals, or

headmasters, or whatever the fuck they were called. They'd steered certain students right into SPECTR's academy.

Had someone been keeping an eye on John all these years? Maybe not Kaniyar or any of John's direct coworkers, but some quiet operation still ticking along within SPECTR?

He tucked those unpleasant thoughts away for later. "I know," he said. "And I know those years in the lab changed Ryan. And that's not his fault! Far from it. If you want my opinion, all the blood is on SPECTR's hands here. But Ryan knew you'd never go along with his killing spree, so instead of respecting your decision, he forced you to carry out his orders. That's not love, John."

John sat still for a long moment, before sliding his hand over and taking Caleb's. Caleb gave his fingers a gentle squeeze, and Gray hummed just under their shared skin.

The door opened, and Kaniyar walked in, followed by a Black man with a green armband on his sleeve. An empath. Right on cue, he looked at Caleb and recoiled slightly, unable to sense his emotions thanks to his possessed state.

Kaniyar looked grim, even for her. "I've made some phone calls to warn potential victims," she said, taking a seat at the head of the conference table. The empath sat down uneasily, as far as he could get from Caleb and Gray. "So it's time to start talking." Her eyes fixed on John. "Tell me what Ryan Starkweather's next move is."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am

TWO

“Thank you, Director Kaniyar,” Reid Harlow said into the telephone on his desk.
“Yes. Of course I’ll be careful. You don’t have to worry about me.”

The call ended. Harlow sat back in his chair and contemplated his mahogany desk.

So. One of the Operation Mephisto subjects—Fifteen, the telepath—had a mental breakdown and was now out looking for revenge against anyone involved in the project.

The complacency that had allowed Fifteen to escape was one of his great regrets. What they could have done with him, if they’d only been successful at controlling him. If they’d been able to inspire a patriotic attitude, he would have been useful outside the lab. But unfortunately no amount of drugs or audiovisual reprogramming had worked.

Instead, all the time they’d been working on him, Fifteen had been working on those studying him in return. Until one day, the people in charge of the facility simply let him walk free.

God, what they could have done with his talent.

Harlow rose to his feet and walked across his spacious office to a shelf decorated with service awards. Distinguished Public Service, National Security Medal, half a dozen others...there would be even more if Operation Mephisto had continued.

They'd been doing good work. If the subjects had just cooperated, national security would be leaps and bounds beyond what it was now. Soldiers with paranormal abilities, enhanced by controlled Non-Human Entities...the United States would have the most fearsome army in the world.

Instead, things had ended up with Executive Assistant Director for the Non-Human Entity Research Division, Graham Forsyth, trying to field a demon army without any guardrails. Of course it had ended up messy; what had Graham expected?

But that was all in the past. Harlow turned away from his awards and wandered past the two women sitting side by side on a couch discreetly tucked in one corner. Demon armies weren't the way to go now, after Graham's debacle. Armaros Corporate Solutions pursued a much more subtle approach, funded generously by the Pentagon.

His instincts suggested there was something more to the situation with Fifteen. Things Director Kaniyar wasn't going to tell him, as they had no political ties.

A shame—but hardly an obstacle. There were always ways of finding whatever information he required. Any security system was only as good as the humans embedded in it, and social engineering was painfully simple. He already had friends within SPECTR who would pass along information, either for old time's sake or for a magnanimous payout.

Something had set off Fifteen's killing spree. Something had enabled him to carry it out. His telepathic ability had been impressive, but when it came to manipulating other people, it took time to change their thinking. Years, in the case of the lab he'd escaped from.

The only time he'd been able to do more, faster, was when he'd been in Operation Mephisto. Possessed.

Was he possessed now? Or was something else going on?

Well, Harlow would find out soon enough. Kaniyar had offered to send SPECTR agents for security, but he had no intention of allowing her to pry into his business.

After all, the army was funding Project Solomon, not SPECTR. And if he was careful, and clever, he could recapture Fifteen and make him a part of the project.

It was doubtful Fifteen would see reason and become a willing participant...but that detail had never stopped Harlow before. It certainly wouldn't now.

"I don't know precisely," John said. "It wasn't...that sort of relationship anymore."

Kaniyar studied him carefully. He made certain to keep his attention on her instead of...what was his name? They'd met briefly during the rougarou outbreak.

Andy Bertin, that was it. Empath. So either Kaniyar didn't trust him to tell the truth, or she didn't trust herself to spot a lie.

That thought gave him pause. Kaniyar had moved through the world with Pittman at her side for as long as he'd known her. To the point, maybe, where she no longer felt comfortable without an empath present, silently observing every conversation, then dissecting it with her after.

"You've already asked that," Caleb said to Kaniyar, and Goddess, John was grateful to have him there. To have someone he could trust implicitly, with no questions, no doubts. "I think it's our turn to ask a few questions. Such as, Pittman claimed you didn't know about Operation Mephisto, but I'm not sure I believe that."

"You can believe whatever you want, Mr. Gris," she shot back, emphasizing the name she'd invented for him. A reminder: the only reason they were free, walking

around, was because of her tolerance.

She'd misjudged Caleb if she thought that would be enough to shut him down. "The state school knew," he said with absolute certainty. "Or at least some of them did. They had to."

Kaniyar's mouth tightened. "I suspect you're right. I haven't exactly had the time to do a thorough investigation into a project that was shut down over a decade ago. Nor do I have time now to humor you. Lives are at stake."

Caleb bristled. "So why are you in here harassing John, when?—"

"Caleb," he said, and though he didn't raise his voice, Caleb instantly fell silent. "Let me handle this."

Caleb slouched back in his seat, arms folded over his chest. The movement hid most of the blood and gunshot wounds on his torso. Wounds John had put there.

He hadn't even seen Caleb—well, Gray at the time—as someone he knew. Just an NHE between him and his objective, Kaniyar.

John cleared his throat, pushing down the keen sense of betrayal that cut through every other emotion. "As we speak, Ryan is probably pulling names out of Pittman's mind. Assembling a kill list. I can't tell you who they are, obviously."

"Does he have a safehouse?" Kaniyar asked.

A part of John wanted to laugh. "Where can he go to be safe? To get away from SPECTR? We tried when we were kids. But it didn't work. None of us escaped, except maybe Megan, and she turned into a fucking naga."

He touched the necklace he'd taken from her rotting body, and now wore around his own neck. A simple crescent moon with a zircon chip of a star, the sort of jewelry worn by teenage girls everywhere, because that's what she'd been. Just a fucking ordinary kid, who had the misfortune of being born to parents whose love had conditions on it.

An expression of discomfort passed over Kaniyar's face. "I didn't know," she said, and it was the only time he'd ever heard her try to justify herself, her actions, to someone else.

"Nowhere is safe, and Ryan knows that," John went on. "He'll move as fast as possible and take out as many of the bastards as he can. What other choice does he have?"

Kaniyar arched a brow. "He could choose not to kill them."

"They could have chosen not to torture us in an underground bunker. But here we are."

Kaniyar's lips pressed into a thin line. She didn't like his answer.

A part of him longed to give her what she wanted. Murdering people in cold blood wasn't the answer, or at least, he didn't want to believe it was.

But he no longer trusted his own judgment. Not because of anything Ryan had done, but because of SPECTR. They'd kept him in the fold, let him believe a lie about his past, given him a state-sponsored education, then sent him to their academy to have his views of the world further shaped by their carefully chosen curriculum.

He'd been a true believer. Made SPECTR his whole identity, because he thought they'd saved him.

Lies, all of it lies. He was a lie.

“Will he hurt Agent Pittman?” she asked, and he noted a flash of fear in her eyes, a tremor in her voice, there and gone. “Or the pyrokinetic?”

“He’d never hurt Jo. Physically, I mean.” Ryan had done plenty of damage by controlling them, but John doubted he’d see it that way. “As for Pittman...I don’t know. He might.”

“He beat an old man to death,” Kaniyar said heavily.

“An old man who shot us up with chemicals with his own hands,” John cut in sharply. “One who had no remorse for what he’d done.”

Her nostrils flared. “You sound sympathetic, Starkweather.”

“Don’t,” Caleb said, and Gray’s rumble underlay the word. “SPECTR created this mess, not John. Your lapdog is in danger, and so are other people, so why don’t you tell us what you’re going to do about it?”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, but she didn’t push back. That alone told John how worried she was.

“Agent Pittman was privy to some of the information I uncovered about Operation Mephisto in the last few days,” she said instead. “Some of the names associated with it are still employed by the agency. All of them are currently en route to various safehouses across the country, their assigned locations randomized to make them harder to find.”

So some of the people who’d been okay with illegally and unethically experimenting on children were still within SPECTR. Were technically his co-workers.

But why shouldn't they be? There had been no repercussions. A few had probably been disciplined or passed over for promotion when the project failed, but on the whole they'd performed the duties they'd been assigned.

Goddess.

"And the others?" he asked.

"There are three names Agent Pittman knows, who might be vulnerable targets: Carrie Lydell, Reid Harlow, and Dr. Ted Foster. Lydell lives in Atlanta now; I'm heading there next. Harlow works for a private military contractor and says he can handle his own security. Foster retired to a tiny town in the middle of nowhere in Alabama, Thomasville. That's where you're going."

"Why us?" Caleb asked.

Kaniyar folded her arms over her chest. "Foster is the closest, reachable by a relatively short drive. It seems logical that Ryan would go there first. And you, Mr. Gris, have the best chance of ending this without further loss of life. The telepath passed up the chance to control you and Night, which hopefully means that he can't do so, for whatever reason."

"He still altered our perceptions. I didn't see John gunning for you until Ryan got distracted and his concentration slipped." Caleb paused for a moment, no doubt in conversation with Gray. "But you're right—we're probably the best shot at stopping him. Unless he traps us somehow and opens up a vein or two." He paused again. "But as Gray points out, we weren't expecting that."

"Then I hope you'll be on your guards this time, because as of right now, you and Night are the only offensive players we have on the field." Kaniyar paced a few feet, then back to where she began. "The rest of us just have to try and guard the targets as

best we can.”

No doubt that didn't sit well with her—Kaniyar was a woman of action. Caleb shot John a questioning look, and he nodded slightly.

“All right,” John said aloud. “We'll need a car and some new phones. And I need information.” He met Kaniyar's gaze. “These people we're trying to save—I want to know what they did to us. To me.”

She wavered for an instant, then shrugged. “I'll send you the files. You can read them on the way to Alabama. Now, if that's all, I have a plane to catch.”

The sunset turned the winter sky bloody as Caleb drove them out of town. He sat at the wheel of a black SUV, breathing in its new car smell. His motorcycle rode on a trailer towed behind them; that had been the one demand he'd put on Kaniyar. John rode in the passenger seat, and Zahira and Night in the back. Night looked like a typical agent now, with a white blouse and black pantsuit. The exception was the sunglasses she wore despite the growing dark; no need to terrify some poor truck driver glancing inside the car.

The drive would only take a little over four hours, in a car that he knew for damn sure was being tracked by SPECTR. With brand new phones that looked straight out of the box, but without question already had spyware loaded and ready to go. No doubt his motorcycle had a brand new tracker as well, better hidden than the last one.

Fuck SPECTR, and fuck Kaniyar, and double-fuck this Foster asshole they were supposed to keep alive. His blood boiled at the thought; how dare Kaniyar send John to save the life of one of the people who'd tortured him?

“Because she wishes us to capture Ryan,” Gray rumbled within the shared space of their brain. “And we could not leave John alone with her.”

Caleb shook his head, but not in disagreement. You're right.

The movement must have caught John's attention, because he asked, "Caleb?"

"Nothing, sorry. Just that drakul aren't exactly the world's greatest thinkers, but sometimes Gray surprises me."

"Humans overcomplicate things with their nonsense. We simply prefer to get to the point."

Unable to argue with that, Caleb asked John, "Found anything yet?"

"Some." Christ, John sounded tired; Caleb wished he'd just put his seat back and nap until they reached their destination. "Everything is redacted to hell and back, and none of the files are full reports, just selected pages."

"Oh, of course they are," Caleb muttered. "You have the right to know who these assholes are. No redactions, no holding back."

"This is still classified information," Zahira said from the back seat. Night, as usual, had no opinion. Caleb almost envied her.

Caleb bit back what he really wanted to say, which was that John had the right to know every last detail about what had been done to him and the other kids. None of this was Zahira's fault, after all. "Yeah, I get it. Anything on this Foster guy, sweetheart?"

"Dr. Theodore Foster was the lead chemist. From what I can tell, it was his job to come up with pharmaceuticals that would help control the NHEs and blunt the possession-induced psychosis in us." John's voice rasped slightly, and Caleb's fingers tightened on the wheel until the plastic creaked in protest.

A growl seemed to thrum along his nerves. “What if we allow Ryan to act first, then capture him?” Gray suggested.

I’d love to. But John and Zahira would feel bad about it. And deep down, Caleb didn’t think he could just stand by while Ryan casually murdered this dude, no matter how evil he was.

But at the same time, it was probably a good idea to head off temptation.

John cleared his throat and went on. “Foster was an older man even at the time, and he retired almost immediately after the Center was shut down. His extended family was still in Thomasville, so he moved back here to be closer to them.” He swiped through files on his phone. “Carrie Lydell was the lead exorcist.”

The one in charge of stuffing demons into children, then yanking them back out. Caleb ground his teeth together.

“Her husband is high up the ladder in a Fortune 500 corporation, and a couple of years ago she quit her job at SPECTR to become a lobbyist. So it sounds like she’s doing pretty well for herself.”

“Of course she is.” Caleb hated these assholes more with every passing minute. “What about the last guy—Kaniyar said he works for a private military contractor, right?”

“Reid Harlow.” John swallowed audibly. “He was the man at the top, the one in charge of Operation Mephisto. Going by what isn’t blacked out, it looks like he was fairly hands-off, just gave the orders and left it to his subordinates to carry them out.”

“Typical,” Caleb muttered.

John ignored the remark. “He’s a telekinetic, though not a strong one. Harlow now works for Armaros Corporate Solutions, a private military contractor located in western Virginia. Close enough to Washington to pop in for a quick chat with the top brass, far enough away for plausible deniability.” He let out a sigh and lowered the phone. “And that’s it. Anything else is redacted or withheld.”

“I’m sorry, John,” Zahira said gently. “I can’t imagine how difficult this must be for you.”

John managed to give her a small smile, turning halfway toward the back seats. “Thanks, Zahira. It’s...a lot.”

It was, so Caleb kept his next thought to himself. The one about all the others who had been involved, who were still in SPECTR. Kaniyar was protecting them, sending them to safehouses under her orders, where they’d stay in comfort until all this was over.

Then they’d return to their jobs, sit at their desks, go to their homes after work. Live their lives, like nothing had ever happened. As though they hadn’t committed atrocities.

Justice would never find them. Kaniyar hated wasting “assets.” That attitude had worked in their favor, and it felt a little hypocritical to criticize it when it applied to someone else.

“Mortals often hold contradictory beliefs,” Gray informed him. “But I do not like this either. It feels...wrong.”

It sure does. But there was nothing he could do about it, so he focused on the road in front of them and drove into the night.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am

THREE

John stared out the window as they crossed the city limits into Thomasville. It was a tiny southern town, split down the middle by a four-lane highway. So late at night, there was almost no one else on the road, though Caleb was keeping to the speed limit in case of bored cops. A scattering of strip malls lined either side of the highway, none of them open this late.

Foster lived in a residential neighborhood to the east of the highway. Peachtree Road, one of a thousand streets in the south with that name. Soon, John would be face to face with yet another of the people who'd turned his life into a living hell.

Would he recognize the man? If Foster had been a chemist, he might not have been giving the injections himself. John couldn't remember him off the top of his head, but what did that matter? His mind was full of holes.

Trepidation formed a cold lump behind his heart. He didn't want to see Foster, didn't want to talk to him, didn't even want to think about him. Certainly he didn't want to be in the position of saving him.

It wasn't fair. It shouldn't be up to him to save someone who'd helped torture him. He shouldn't have to stop Ryan, someone he loved but who had betrayed him.

He didn't want any of this. If he could just turn back the clock...

To what? Ignorance?

They turned onto Peachtree, and a few minutes later, Caleb pulled off to the side of the road and put on the four-ways. “According to the GPS, the house is about a mile away,” he said. “Gray, Night, and I will go on foot from here.”

John shook his head. “We should?—”

“Stay as far away from Ryan as possible,” Caleb interrupted. “Assuming he’s here, that is. If he isn’t, we’ll throw Foster over our shoulder and get him away from the house, then meet up with the rest of you.”

“And if he doesn’t want to come?” Zahira asked.

“I was being literal with the throwing him over our shoulder bit.” Caleb unsnapped his seat belt. “Personally, I don’t give a fuck what this bastard wants. If I have to keep him alive, I’m doing it however I can, and there’s literally nothing he can do to stop me.”

The words sent a little frisson up John’s neck. Even without Gray manifesting, Caleb had a drakul’s enormous strength. No mortal could hope to resist; he could bundle up Foster like a newborn if he felt like it.

John had taken advantage of that more than once—it was hot, what could he say? But there was a vast gulf between being manhandled consensually and being kidnapped.

Caleb glanced in the back seat. “Take the wheel, would you, Zahira? You’ve had more sleep than John. Just drive around—I don’t like the idea of you sitting in one place if Ryan might be on the prowl. Call me if you spot him; otherwise, I’ll call you when we have Foster secured for pickup.”

John wanted to protest, to insist he go with them. But he’d already been controlled by Ryan once; it would be stupid to take the chance a second time.

“Please be careful,” he said, and leaned over for a kiss.

Caleb kissed him back. “Don’t worry, we’re not about to let Ryan get the drop on us again.” He opened the door and hopped out. “Come on, Night.”

Night followed him. By the time Zahira climbed behind the wheel, both drakul had vanished into the shadows.

Gray slips to the fore as they walk down the empty road. A few festive lights show from houses, strings of these new electric lights. Mortals love light; he has seen a thousand variations on this celebration, meant to drive back the darkness of winter. Candles and bonfires dance in the memories absorbed from his many hosts, defying the night which blinds them, making it his natural home.

“Will we hunt?” Night asks.

Her scent of night-blooming jasmine and copal mingles with that of the asphalt beneath their feet, the pine needles in the scattered woods. “Yes,” Gray says. “After.”

“We waste our time with these mortals. What do we care if this Foster lives or dies? He will be dust soon enough no matter what we do.”

She’s right, of course. But... “In this moment, he lives, and we must try to save him. What does the future matter? It is not yet here.”

Night remains silent for a short distance, then says, “I see. We will save him, then.”

“What does she think about the lights?” Caleb asks. “I mean, since this is a human pattern, and she’s, well, Night.”

His own curiosity sparked, Gray relays the question. Night cocks her head,

considering.

“It is not...natural to me,” she says at last. “The light, that is. But I speak of the light of the sun. I can overwhelm or overlook anything a mortal can create.”

“Even the electric lights we have now?” Caleb asks. “I mean the ones with millions of lumens or whatever. Not Christmas lights.”

“This is nonsense,” Night says once Gray has dutifully asked in Caleb’s stead. “I have not encountered these lights. There are none here. Why does your host worry so?”

“He thinks like a mortal,” Gray explains.

“Hey!”

“Then you know what he asks is foolishness.”

“Hey! Wait...was that a joke? Can an undead drakul make jokes?”

Gray is unsure—jokes are still a concept he works to grasp. We should concentrate on the task at hand.

They slide through the darkness like a pair of shadows, passing single-story houses on large lots. “Doesn’t look like anything’s been built here since the 70’s,” Caleb says. “I guess this isn’t the swanky part of town. Though come to think of it, there might not be a swanky part of town.”

Gray ignores him; human architecture is of no interest. Light—steady yellow light, not the blinking dots of holiday lights—shines ahead through the trees. He slows, until their destination comes into view.

Unlike the rest of the houses, this one is three stories high and clad in brick. Floodlights beam up from the yard, illuminating the front. In the back, garden lights reveal a pool covered with a tarp.

“Looks like Foster bought the old homestead and plopped a McMansion on it,” Caleb opines. “Tacky.”

An iron fence surrounds the lot, but its gate stands open. Perhaps the fence is merely for show.

Or perhaps the telepath Ryan is here.

Gray stills, senses straining. A dog barks from somewhere within, its claws scrabbling on wood. Otherwise, there are no sounds.

Caleb’s unease filters through them both. “If anyone was alive in there, they’d be trying to quiet the dog down.”

That would seem likely.

He exchanges a glance with Night; they have hunted together enough now that there is no need for discussion. They slip in through the gate, the grass beneath their feet bright green even in the dead of winter. Night fades into the shadows, while Gray scales the brick cladding, claws sinking easily into the mortar.

The cheap lock on an upper floor window gives beneath their strength. Gray slips inside, then pauses for a long moment, sensing.

The window opens onto what seems to be a guest bedroom, a fine layer of dust across bed and furniture. The dog is somewhere beneath them, scratching frantically to be let out. The only other sound is the occasional creak of a beam as the house slowly

settles.

“Not good.”

Gray ignores Caleb’s obvious statement. He glides into the upstairs hallway, the carpet softening their footsteps. The scent of blood like cold copper wafts from the stairway leading down.

If Ryan is here, he is hiding himself from their senses. Gray prowls from room to room, alert for any twitch of a curtain, any shadow out of place.

There is nothing.

He meets Night on the second floor. “The dog is locked in a bathroom,” she tells them. “And there is a dead mortal in the first floor bedroom.”

“Damn it,” Caleb mutters. “We’re too late.”

“I have not found any other mortals,” Night adds. “I believe the telepath has already come and gone.”

Gray isn’t certain how to feel about this. He doesn’t like Ryan, but nor does he like this dead mortal who hurt John.

“Yeah, same,” Caleb says. “Let’s take a look at the crime scene and make sure the dog’s okay.”

The dog is grateful to be let out. It is a small thing with curly white and brown fur, and it presses against his leg whimpering in fear. Perhaps it understands what has happened to its guardian. Gray picks it up in one arm and keeps it tucked against their chest as they approach the master bedroom.

The room is cold; one of the windows is open wide despite the winter chill, its screen removed. Perhaps this is where Ryan entered the house, or where he left. The dead mortal lies sprawled beside the bed, dressed in plaid pajamas. In one hand he holds a revolver; a bullet wound splashes blood and brains across a wooden nightstand beside him.

Ryan forced his hand, no doubt. Used his paranormal ability, bolstered by Gray's blood, to make Foster take his own life.

But not to make it appear a suicide. Because on the wall behind the body, someone has scrawled the word MONSTER in Foster's own blood.

The dog lets out a sharp bark of alarm. Gray takes a step back from the scene, assuming it is alarmed from the sights or smells?—

The ice-cold shaft of a needle sinks deep into the side of their neck.

John hated waiting.

Most people did, of course. But, no matter how SPECTR had manipulated him, he hadn't become a field agent because he didn't like action. Driving aimlessly through the night, waiting for Caleb to call, grated on his nerves.

It also gave his mind too much time to come up with scenarios where everything went wrong. What if Ryan got the jump on the two drakul, forced Night to switch bodies, and took Gray prisoner again? What if their bet had been wrong, and Ryan could control their minds?

He could make them give up their blood. Worse: he could use them to enact his vengeance. He'd be unstoppable with them at his command.

“John? Is that you? I can feel you.”

John let out a hiss and put a hand to his head. That voice...

“Ryan,” he said aloud. “He’s nearby. He’s trying to control me again.”

Zahira stomped on the gas, heading away from Foster’s house at an unsafe speed on the narrow, winding road.

“No!” Ryan’s voice grew fainter. “I won’t hurt you. I won’t try to control you again. I couldn’t even if I wanted to. You’re too far away.”

Was it true? John wavered: this was his chance to talk Ryan down. But it also could be another trap. “Slow down, Zahira,” he said at last. “I think he just wants to talk. But if I start acting weird, gun it.”

She slowed, but asked, “Are you sure this is wise?”

“No,” he replied honestly. “All right, Ryan. Talk.”

“I just...wanted to make sure you’re all right.”

John closed his eyes and concentrated on the distant voice. I am, he thought. No thanks to you.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think you would approve of...my solution.”

John shook his head. So you decided to take away my ability to say no. Just like Walsh and the others did at the Center.

Silence. Then, after a long moment: “This is our only chance for justice. You know it

as well as I do.”

You’re not a murderer.

Something like dry laughter came through their connection. “Of course I am. Jennifer and Marc—Mom and Dad—didn’t kill themselves. Granddad didn’t just decide to take a walk at the exact moment a rougarou was outside.”

The day at the hospital came back to John. Ryan standing with his parents, the preacher, the hostility. I don’t understand. Why did you kill them?

“You don’t know what it was like. Granddad hated me when I came back. He learned not to say anything out loud, but I could still hear his thoughts. Just a stream of abuse, day and night. When I sensed the rougarou outside...I don’t know. I’d had enough.” A pause, then, stronger: “It must have been fate, since that was what brought you back to me.”

Arguing would be counterproductive. Where are you? Let’s meet face to face. It would be dangerous as hell, but with Gray and Night...

Ryan caught the thought. “I’m not letting monsters drag me back to SPECTR.”

They aren’t monsters.

“You’re wrong.” The sense of a shiver came through the mental link. “They’re fucking dangerous, John. I hoped I could get you away from them. I understand why you feel bad for Caleb, why you see yourself in his predicament, but you’re better off without them.”

John ground his teeth together. Like hell. You didn’t hear that from my thoughts, because I would never think it.

“We all deceive ourselves.” Ryan sighed. “I have to go. Please don’t try to stop me.”

The sense of another presence disappeared. John tried to reach out, but he was no telepath, and Ryan’s attention was clearly somewhere else.

Which...wasn’t good.

“Back to the house,” he said out loud to Zahira. “Something’s going down.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am

FOUR

Gray wrenches back from the needle, sending it flying. The attached syringe is empty, plunger fully depressed, and a sensation of numbness spreads out with every heartbeat. Their limbs feel wrong, muscles going to rubber, and suddenly the floor impacts their knees. The dog scrambles away, growling and barking in a rage at the woman who appeared beside them as if out of thin air.

“Jo.” Caleb’s thoughts are sluggish. “Ryan hid her from us—he must be close. We’ve got to move...”

Gray snarls at her. He’s clearing the poison from their blood, but it takes time, and that is one thing they may not have.

She flicks her honey-blonde braid back over her shoulder. “It seems like the good Doctor Foster had a problem abusing sedatives,” she says. “My luck; your loss.”

Fire blooms along her fingers—a pyrokinetic. Caleb’s fear spikes their blood, but feeling is coming back into their limbs, Gray needs only a few more seconds?—

Night lunges across the room, fangs bared at Jo. Jo swipes at the drakul’s face, fingers trailing fire, and Night jumps back to avoid being burned. Shaking off the last effects of the drug, Gray grabs Jo’s wrist, below the flames.

They spread, running like water over her skin. The sleeve of her shirt catches, even though the skin beneath remains whole, and the flames bite into their fingers like a thousand hungry mouths.

He wrenches back, the smell of their own cooking skin thick in their nostrils. A flare of panic from Caleb, who does not like this, and for the first time in a long while they try to control the same limb at the same time and end up flailing.

“She cannot kill us,” Gray snarls aloud.

“No?” Jo cocks her head. “Maybe not. But you won’t enjoy what I can do.”

She goes up like a torch, entire body wreathed in flame, clothing turning to ash around her. Caleb is stunned into silence, and even Gray feels uncertain as her heat blisters their face and singes the fine hairs. How much of their blood has she drunk?

“I’ve only felt this powerful once before,” Jo muses, her eyes reflecting the flames. “At the Center. When I was possessed. But this is a thousand times better. Surrender now and give me your blood, and I won’t hurt you.”

“What the fuck is happening?” Caleb asks, pointlessly. “Has Ryan driven her crazy?”

Gray scrambles back quickly, and she stalks after him, the bed sheets catching flame as she brushes against them. “Go down,” she snarls at him. “I gave you enough tranquilizer to drop a horse. Why are you still up?”

She, or Ryan, has underestimated them. Good.

He slows his movements, pretending confusion. The dog continues to bark madly, and Night hovers nearby, uncertain what to do.

“Take the creature and leave,” Gray says, slurring the words intentionally.

Night doesn’t question, vanishing with the dog quickly as a shadow flickering across a room. Jo doesn’t seem to care; all of her attention is on him.

On his blood.

She reaches beneath the mattress, setting it alight as she does so, and draws out a wicked knife. “Too bad we can’t bleed you the way we did before. But this will be enough for now.”

He waits until the knife is in its downward arc, toward their throat, before flinging up his arm.

The thick leather of their coat foils the blade; the sweep of his arm knocks it free from her hand. With his other hand, he grabs for her wrist again, bracing for the pain. “Surrender!” he orders, even as skin blisters and peels, and Caleb writhes under their shared skin. They just need to hold on a little longer, push through the pain?—

She brings the hand that had held the knife around, under his guard, and grabs them by the face.

Agony.

Gray roars in fury and pain. Fingers jam into his mouth, bringing fire with them, trying to cook their brain from the inside.

He bites, instinct overriding all else. There are flames in their mouth, melting the fat in their lips, but bone crunches under fangs and Jo screams in an agony of her own.

She wrenches away leaving behind shreds of flesh, the taste of her blood lost to charred tastebuds. With another roar, Gray surges to their feet.

Jo scrambles back, hand cradled to her chest and blood pouring down her arm. Flame spreads with her every movement, further engulfing the room.

They aren't supposed to bite mortals, if John finds out?—

“This is an exception!” Caleb all but shouts. “She was trying to make drakul flambé, for fuck’s sake!”

Fear shows in Jo’s eyes now, and the flames begin to die from her skin even as they spread everywhere else. Smoke fills the air, excoriating their throat and lungs.

“Surrender,” he snarls again.

With a sob of pain and terror, Jo stumbles away from them—and topples backward out the open window.

He starts after her, but there is fire everywhere now, the heat blistering their exposed skin. “We have to get out!” Caleb insists, his fear and pain thrumming along their nerves.

Growling in frustration, Gray runs out of the bedroom, through a hall filling with smoke, then across the living room and out the front door. Night stands in the yard, still holding the dog.

“Put it down and help me,” Gray tells her.

The rattle of an opening garage door comes from the side of the house. He runs toward it, as a cream-colored SUV pulls out, tires squealing on the concrete. Jo’s face, white with pain, flashes past in the passenger seat.

No. He cannot let them escape, not after what Ryan did to John.

He leaps as it speeds past, grabbing hold of the roof rack. The driver—Ryan, presumably—throws the vehicle into a tight turn to exit onto the road, and their body

slides across the slick metal. But Gray's hold doesn't loosen; it will take more than that to shake him off.

The SUV accelerates, tearing off through the darkness, swerving from side to side in an attempt to shake them off. Night won't be able to catch up at this rate. It's up to Gray and Caleb to stop these mortals.

He punches through the roof; Jo screams in terror. A glimpse through the hole shows her huddled against the passenger side door, still holding her mangled hand, tears streaming down her face.

The vehicle doesn't slow, so Gray grasps the edge of the hole and pulls, peeling back the steel. If he can just make the opening big enough to get inside...

Ryan glances up at them, just a brief break in his concentration on the road. He's steering with one hand; in the other, he holds a gun.

"Tell John I'll talk to him again soon," Ryan says, then pulls the trigger.

A flash of light, followed by a greater flash of pain as the bullet smashes into their skull. The world flips over-and-over, starry sky swapping places with the ground.

Then they hit the road hard, all the wind exiting their lungs in a whoosh. The howl of the speeding car's engine fades away into the night.

"Ouch," Caleb says after a long moment.

Indeed. Gray sits up as the pain in their skull subsides, then spits out the bullet into their hand. Its silver jacket gleams in the starlight.

Unease stirs through Caleb. "That's SPECTR ammo. Probably Pittman's gun. So

where is Pittman?”

We do not have enough information to say.

“Yeah, but...it doesn’t look good, does it?”

Mortals often wish reassurance that what they fear, however logical, is not how things truly are. Gray doesn’t bother to answer, instead climbing to their feet. The glow of the fire paints the sky behind them, and sirens split the night. We should return to John.

“Yeah.” Caleb’s frustration is Gray’s own. “He needs to know Ryan got away from us. Again.”

The blare of a siren sounded behind them. Zahira slowed and pulled onto the shoulder. A fire engine roared past, red lights flashing off bare trees and darkened windows.

Just a car crash, or a heart attack. Some late-night emergency that had nothing to do with them.

More sirens and lights came up behind them. Two more firetrucks screamed past, followed by an ambulance.

All heading in the direction of the house.

John sat up straighter, his heart thumping with a sudden surge of adrenaline. “Something’s gone wrong.”

Zahira pressed her lips together and stepped on the gas, falling in behind the emergency vehicles. Before long, a column of black smoke appeared above the trees,

lit amber from the fire below.

They passed the point where they'd dropped off Caleb, Gray, and Night. Another mile, and the flaming wreckage of a house appeared before them.

Zahira pulled off the road well away from the emergency vehicles and took out her phone. "That's the address," she confirmed. "Foster's house."

John climbed out of the SUV. The stink of burning wood, plastics, and Goddess knew what else filled the air. Neighbors had come out of their houses and stood on the lawns. One woman clutched a small dog, her face buried in its fur. Beside her, a young man waved his arms at the firefighters and yelled, "Uncle Ted! Uncle Ted's in there!"

John's heart sank. The blaze burned fiercely—had Jo started it with her prokinetics? And if so, had it been on purpose?

And were Caleb and Gray inside?

Goddess, please no. He took out his phone and hit their number.

It rang through to voicemail.

Fuck.

Hands shaking, he started to text. But he'd barely hit a couple of letters before Night materialized beside him.

John yelped in surprise, phone falling to the ground as he instinctively reached for his Glock.

“Night?” Zahira exclaimed. “Are you alright? Where are Caleb and Gray?”

“Here,” Caleb said, and a surge of relief nearly took John to his knees.

Instead, he flung his arms around them as they emerged from the darkness behind Night. They reeked of smoke, burnt hair, and a disturbing smell like charred pork. “Fuck, you two had me scared for a minute,” he said.

Caleb hugged him back. “Sorry. We ended up toe to toe with Jo, and it didn’t go so well for anyone involved.”

“Tell me.”

“We will. But let’s get out of here first, before anyone starts wondering who we are and comes over to ask questions.”

It was a good suggestion. They all climbed back in the SUV; Zahira carefully executed a three-point turn and aimed them away from the fire and back toward town.

As they drove, Caleb related everything that had happened. When he finished, Night said, “This was pointless. The mortal is dead, the other mortals gone. We should abandon this foolishness.”

“I would if we could,” Caleb told her. “And honestly, if you want to take off, this would be a good time to do it. Kaniyar’s got other things on her plate; you could be long gone before she realizes.”

Night considered for a moment. Then she shrugged. “We will hunt together?”

“Yeah.” Caleb made a face. “We’re pretty hungry after getting set on fire and then being shot in the head.”

“Then I will stay.”

“You’re a drakul of simple needs.” Caleb leaned forward and held something out to John.

Puzzled, he extended his palm, and Caleb dropped a bullet into it. “This is what we were shot with. Silver-jacketed lead. You might want to send it to Kaniyar for ballistics, but I don’t know who it could belong to except for Pittman.”

John’s heart sank. Ryan had said he was a killer, but he hadn’t mentioned Pittman. “That isn’t good.”

“And you didn’t see Pittman with them, correct?” Zahira asked.

“No.”

John curled his fingers around the bullet. “So either Ryan let him go, or left him tied up somewhere. Or he’s dead.”

“Yeah.” Caleb sighed. “And Ryan doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy to leave loose ends.”

Jo whimpered as Ryan carefully wound gauze around her splinted fingers. She needed a hospital, but SPECTR would certainly be monitoring any emergency rooms within a hundred miles of Thomasville. So instead, he’d stopped at the first all-night drugstore they came across and bought everything he could think of that might ease her pain and halt the bleeding.

This was his fault. He should never have let her stay behind and confront the drakul alone. But she’d wanted more blood, and if their plans were to work, he needed to keep what they had left for himself.

And he'd wanted to talk to John.

He'd been in the car, listening for thoughts, for any sign of someone waking up at the commotion inside Foster's house. And then, to his shock, he'd touched a mind he knew almost as well as his own.

Maybe he shouldn't have said anything. But he hadn't been able to resist.

It hurt, being here without John. It should have been all of them together, meting out justice, taking back their lives.

But the drakul had fucked it all up.

Ryan had expected to fight human monsters, not NHEs. The vampire had been a wild card from the beginning. He should have done more, planned more carefully. If he'd put to use some of the schemes for restraining the drakul he'd pulled from Pittman's head...but that would have taken more time and resources than he had.

If only the damned thing hadn't caught up with them so quickly. The operation itself had gone smoothly. Foster had been waiting for them, sitting upright in his bed with gun in hand. He'd tried to negotiate rather than taking a shot, though given his shaking hands he probably couldn't have hit them if he'd tried.

"I wasn't the one giving the injections," he'd insisted, eyes wet with fear. "I worked in the lab—I needed that job to feed my family. I was just following orders!"

Just following orders—the cowardly refuge for someone who'd been happy to do his job, right up until facing the consequences. If Foster'd had the nerve to at least own up to his own culpability, Ryan might have had some sliver of respect for him.

But what had he expected? People with any sort of courage wouldn't torment helpless

captives who couldn't fight back.

Jo let out a moan of pain, and he winced. "Sorry, sorry. I'm trying not to hurt you."

"Do you think...am I going to lose it?" she asked.

"No, of course not," he reassured her, though in truth he wasn't sure. Her right hand was a mangled mess of broken bones and shredded flesh where the creature had sunk its fangs in deep. She might as well have been bitten by a mountain lion or a grizzly bear.

She needed stitches and antibiotics. Hell, she needed surgery to put muscles back together and try to prevent permanent nerve damage, if that was even an option at this point.

But as usual, none of them were getting what they needed.

If only things could have played out differently. If they could have reunited under better circumstances.

That was a pipe dream, though. There was no other way things could have happened. Not once John began to remember; not after Ryan committed to giving his old friends back their true selves. From then on it was inevitable that SPECTR would find out. Ryan would be recaptured and put into some black ops site. As for what would happen to the others, he didn't know, but SPECTR wouldn't let them loose to tell the world about its sins.

So the only choices had been to sit and wait for SPECTR to come for him—for them all—or try to enact some justice.

There was no happy ending ahead for any of them. Hadn't been since the day they'd

walked through the Center's doors.

"They're going to be waiting for us," Jo said. She leaned her head tiredly against the passenger door, skin gray from pain. "We aren't going to get Lydell, are we?"

"We are. We'll have to be more creative, that's all." He secured the gauze and stepped back. "None of this was in vain, Jo."

"I hope not." She licked her lips. "Can I have some more blood? It will make me feel better."

It probably would. That sensation of power, the headiness of it, would push through the pain for a while. But if they weren't going to get any more, they needed to ration what they had left.

"Try to sleep," he said. "That's what you need to heal. Lie down in the back seat, and I'll drive."

She acquiesced. They'd stolen another car to replace Foster's; curse the drakul for ripping open the roof and making it so noticeable. As she settled in the back, she said, "John wasn't there."

Ryan slid into the driver's seat. "He was nearby. Waiting."

"I wish he was with us," Jo murmured, sounding on the very edge of sleep. "What do you think Kaniyar did to him?"

Ryan started the car, swallowing back the grief that slashed him like a knife. "I don't know. But I doubt it's anything good."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am

FIVE

John stepped into the little motel room, swaying on his feet. The sheets on the twin beds looked rough and scratchy even from a distance, but at the moment they could have been made from rocks for all he cared.

He'd left a message for Kaniyar about what Night and Gray had found. There would be an investigation into the fire; it was up to her as to whether she wanted to alert local law enforcement, or send in more SPECTR agents, or make the problem disappear altogether.

He'd left his conversation with Ryan out of the report. It felt...private. Personal. If he could just talk Ryan into turning himself in...

"Are you okay?" Caleb asked, shutting the door behind them. They were in one room, with Night and Zahira in the next one over.

"Ryan's still out there." John sat on the edge of the nearest bed and kicked off his shoes.

Caleb hovered uncertainly. "And how do you feel about that?"

"I don't know." He sighed. "A part of me...Goddess, this sounds terrible, but a part of me is glad he's still free. I might feel differently if I'd seen Foster's body, though. I just...he's been through so much, and yes I know what he did to me, to you, but..."

"But you don't want to see him disappeared into some SPECTR lab again," Caleb

guessed.

John pressed his fingers against his eyes, colors exploding behind the lids when he did so. Because Caleb was right—Ryan was a telepath, and thus valuable. He'd never have a trial of his peers, not when he might manipulate their minds. Kaniyar would tuck him away somewhere as yet another of her "assets," and take every possible precaution to keep him from escaping again.

If John did his job, if they caught Ryan, he'd spend the rest of his life trapped in the horror they'd all been so desperate to leave. Oh, he didn't doubt Kaniyar would be far more humane than Walsh or Harlow, or the rest of the brain trust who'd come up with the Center. But he'd ultimately still be a lab rat in a prisoner's jumpsuit.

"I hate this," he said, voice cracking a bit. "I hate this so much."

"I know." The mattress bowed beneath Caleb's weight, and an arm went around John's shoulders. "It sucks. I'm no fan of Ryan after he mind-controlled you and stole our blood, but I'm no big fan of SPECTR, either." He sighed. "Though I guess we shouldn't let Ryan run around killing people, huh?"

"Probably not." John leaned against him. "I'm so tired of thinking."

"Then don't." Caleb pressed a kiss into his hair. "Let me pull back the covers, and you lay down, okay?"

John nodded. Caleb turned down the bed, then helped him strip. "I wish I wasn't too tired to do anything," John mumbled as he stretched out.

"Eh, it's not like any of us are in the mood." Caleb pulled up the covers and kissed him on the forehead. "We're going to swing by and grab Night, then go hunting. Are you going to be okay here?"

“I’ll be fine.”

Caleb’s weight left the bed—John hadn’t even realized his eyes had fallen closed. There was the squeak of leather, then the soft sound of a door opening and shutting once again.

It was afternoon by the time they hit Atlanta traffic. Caleb had driven in the city a couple of times before and was familiar with its infamous gridlock. Which didn’t make it any easier to sit through.

Sullen rain showers made it even worse, salting in a few car crashes just to really slow things down. Zahira tapped away on her phone in the back, while John stared blankly out the passenger side window. Night faded into the gray shadows of a rainy winter day, only her eyes occasionally flashing in the rearview mirror when he glanced back.

They’d had no luck hunting the night before. Thomasville had been too small even for a ghoulish nest, and if anyone was summoning demons they were doing it somewhere in the deep woods too far away to catch the scent.

It had left Gray somewhat grumpy. They weren’t in need, exactly, but all the healing had spent enough energy to give a sharpness to their appetite.

“This place will be better,” Gray rumbled as he watched out of Caleb’s eyes. “More hiding spots for demons within a city.”

And more mortals in one place equals more concentrated desperation, and hence more demon summoning, Caleb thought back. An actual social safety net would do more to cut down on possession than anything else. But of course the government would rather spend the money on agents with guns.

Gray's response was a wave of indifference. He had a very specific set of mortals he cared about; musing about society in general was beyond him.

"I simply do not indulge in mortal nonsense," Gray corrected loftily. "'Society' shifts and changes with the wind. Five hundred years from now, this city may not even exist."

Weird to think he would probably still be hanging around centuries into the future. What would things be like then? How well would he remember ever being human?

Would he remember John?

Not the time to think about that sort of thing. He pushed it aside and concentrated on driving. Traffic crawled through downtown, then sped up to twenty miles an hour. Practically flying for this time of day. Caleb followed the GPS's instructions onto an exit, then a two-lane road. The area became more affluent as they went east, the houses growing larger and farther apart, until they were true mansions, tucked away from the road. In the summer, when there were leaves on the trees, most of them wouldn't be visible from the street.

"Tuxedo Park," John said, naming the richest neighborhood in the whole damn city. "Of course. She's a lobbyist married to a guy who runs a Fortune 500 company."

Rage spiked through Caleb's blood, and he ground his teeth together. Foster had his McMansion, Lydell was living like she was on an episode of *Real Housewives* —at this rate, Harlow would own fucking Versailles. All of them had thrived, while their victims sorted through the wreckage of their lives.

Alarmed by Caleb's anger, Gray rose to just under their skin. Ready to manifest; ready to fight. But this was one problem they couldn't just eat.

The GPS brought them to a mansion surrounded by a brick wall and iron gate. Christmas lights decorated the wall, and a huge wreath hung from each half of the gate. A miserable-looking man in a suit stood beneath a too-small umbrella, his shoes and slacks below the knee soaked from the rain.

Caleb pulled in and rolled down the window. John leaned over him, badge out. Zahira did the same from the back seat.

“John St-Starkweather,” John said as the man leaned forward, and Caleb winced.

The guard didn’t seem to notice the stumble. “Special Agent Chris Christopher,” he said, because apparently his parents hated him. He examined both badges, then handed them back. “Go on through—the director is waiting for you.”

The iron gates opened; past them, a brick driveway cut through stands of bare trees to emerge into an impossibly green lawn. Topiaries flanked the circle at the end. Feeling petty, Caleb pulled off the driveway and parked on the pristine grass.

The mansion was a sprawling brick edifice, and he almost hoped Jo would show up and burn it to the ground. Behind them, the gates creaked closed again, poor Agent Chris-Chris huddled on the other side.

John sighed heavily, then climbed out of the car. “Stay here,” Caleb told Night, though he wasn’t entirely sure why. Night sank back into the shadows, doubtless glad to escape dealing with mortal foolishness.

A second agent met them at the door and checked their badges again. Apparently Kaniyar really wanted to protect this psycho from Ryan.

“Follow me. I’ll take you to Director Kaniyar,” the agent said, before briskly heading into the house.

A huge Christmas tree greeted them in the foyer, its branches laden with ornaments that looked as though they'd been carefully placed by an interior designer. The rest of the house was gorgeous in that weirdly sterile way rich-people houses sometimes had, at least judging by what Caleb had seen on TV. Everything in its place, no pile of crap dumped on the chair just inside the door, no stains on the carpet, not even any dust. The ecru furniture was artfully arranged on the taupe carpet, with tasteful paintings hung just-so on the eggshell walls. Bouquets of flowers dotted the rooms; some were beginning to wilt, cracking the facade of bland perfection.

A spare bedroom suite on the second floor had been converted to SPECTR's command center. Laptops covered every surface, the king-sized bed had been pushed into a corner, and the empty walk-in closet hastily turned into a break room with coffee maker. Agents with headphones on stared at monitors showing various security camera feeds of the property.

Kaniyar had been peering over one of their shoulders. Now she turned to them, hands folded behind her back. "You bit someone, Mr. Gris?" she asked him pointedly.

Of course she wanted to start with that. "She stuck her fingers in my mouth. Oh, and those fingers were literally on fire. So, yes, I bit her. I assure you, nobody enjoyed that experience."

"I see. And your compatriot? Where is she?"

"Waiting in the car." Away from this bullshit.

Kaniyar pressed her lips together, then jerked her head toward the door. "Come with me."

They followed her into the next bedroom over, another spare which Kaniyar had apparently made her private office, including desk and chairs. Rather than sit down,

she went to the window and looked out into the rain.

“I’m concerned about how desperate Jo seemed for your blood,” she said.

John cleared his throat. “Ryan is manipulating her, ma’am. She isn’t responsible for her actions right now.”

“No doubt. I’d be less concerned if some of the Charleston agents who...partook...weren’t complaining about lack of access. They seem to suspect I’m holding some in reserve and assure me they require it to do their jobs.”

Caleb went very still. Yuri had controlled his renfields by giving or withholding his blood. He’d called Isabelle greedy that night in the alley, just before she sucked his blood straight out of an opened vein. Was their desire for it, for its power, not entirely under their control?

“Director—” John began, but Caleb cut him off.

“They’re just being whiny,” he said. “John’s had it and he’s fine.”

Her dark eyes fixed on him. “Is he? Or does he just have access?”

Caleb restrained the urge to tell her to go fuck herself. Instead, he said, “And what about you? You had our blood that day. Are you having any cravings we should know about?”

“No,” she said, her gaze steady. If only he was an empath and could know for sure she wasn’t lying. “This is all moot right now, anyway. I’d like for you and Night to patrol the grounds and keep a sharp eye out for Ryan or Jo. Starkweather, Noorzai, report to the command center and relieve some of the agents there.”

Thank god they could get outside and away from Kaniyar. “Happily,” he said, and turned to the door. Before he could leave, however, Kaniyar spoke up again.

“Before you go...you didn’t see any sign of Agent Pittman, did you? Other than his gun, of course.”

He glanced over his shoulder. She’d turned back to the window, so he couldn’t make out her expression.

“I’m sorry, but no.” And, to his own surprise, he was sorry. It sounded like they’d been a team for a long time. “I don’t think he was with them anymore.”

John and Zahira stepped out into the hall, shutting the door behind them.

Sourness turned his stomach and clawed at his esophagus. Somewhere in this house was Carrie Lydell, the exorcist who had summoned demons and put them inside him. Inside Ryan, and Jo, and their poor dead friends.

The knowledge threatened to make his hands shake, or send him running to the bathroom to throw up. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself.

Zahira noticed. “Are you all right, John?”

“No.”

She let out a sigh. “I don’t see how you could be. Do you need to take a break?”

An idea began to grow in his brain. It would be a mistake, he knew it would, but...

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m going to find the kitchen, splash some water on my face, have a glass. Hydration always helps, right?”

“Take all the time you need.” She stopped outside the door to the command center.
“I’ll be in here.”

He nodded, and she slipped through the door. Alone in the hall, he contemplated for a moment, before heading off in what he thought was the most likely direction.

The plush carpet rendered his footsteps silent. Despite being near the heart of a major metropolitan area, no outside sounds penetrated the thick walls and triple-paned windows. The air was oddly still, except when the heat kicked on, as though the house was more showplace than home.

A grand staircase led the way back downstairs, a huge chandelier dangling from the ceiling above the massive Christmas tree. The house’s electricity bill must be astronomical, but clearly Lydell had plenty of money to spare.

He found her sitting in one of the many living rooms, tapping on her phone. Plastic surgery had taken its toll, sharpening her cheekbones, plumping her lips, and suctioning any fat from her cheeks so the flesh clung close to the skull. But he recognized her still. This woman, dressed in white pants and a tan sweater of Vicuña wool, had once stood over him while he was strapped in a medical chair. She’d dressed like a typical agent then, in a black pantsuit, and her hair had been honey blonde instead of the frosty shade it was now dyed, but it was her.

The exorcist who had summoned demons and forced them inside himself and the other kids.

A wave of nausea passed over him, and his limbs felt weak. He sank into one of the chairs, barely noticing the cloud-like softness of its cushions.

The motion caught her attention, and she looked up. A flash of irritation crossed her face at the sight of him sitting on her furniture. “How much longer is this going to

take?” she demanded. “I can communicate with my personal assistant over the phone, but I need the maid service back in as soon as possible.” Her gaze went to one of the ubiquitous vases of fresh flowers, their leaves drooping sadly. “All of the flowers are old and wilting.”

“You could just water them yourselves,” he said.

Her glare could have flayed skin. “I’m not asking for advice. I’m asking for results.”

The sick feeling was joined by something else. Something darker, like a stain on his soul. As soon as the first demon had touched him inside, he’d wanted to kill her. Bite her, rip her, taste her blood and flesh. It was all the maddened thing inside him could understand.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” he asked.

She frowned, started to respond, then hesitated. At last, she said, “Nineteen?”

“Yes.” Something seemed to constrict his throat. “I’ve been assigned to stop Ryan and protect you.”

The agent who’d been guarding the front door walked in, holding a plastic cup of something green and thick. “A delivery driver brought your smoothie.”

“Finally!” Lydell snatched it out of her hands. “I’m famished.”

John met the other agent’s gaze as she walked out; she rolled her eyes and mouthed “rich people” at him. He managed a slight grin for her.

Lydell sipped her smoothie, then made a face. “Even more disgusting than usual, but it’s good for the skin. Packed with antioxidants.”

She'd put NHEs in him, exposed his young mind to desperation, madness, and rage. Now she sat here in her fucking mansion, nattering on about smoothies as though everything was normal.

His hands tried to curl into fists. "Don't you have any remorse at all?"

"Why would I have remorse?" She took another sip, made another face. "I served my country. Just because things didn't work out doesn't mean I failed."

God, it was Walsh all over again. "You tortured children," he growled. "You tortured me!"

"Oh, please." She rolled her eyes. "You have no idea how lucky you are. If it had been in the 60's, you would have been strapped to a gurney 24/7 with electrodes implanted in your brain. Instead, you were allowed far too much freedom." She winced and put a delicate hand to her forehead. "You're giving me a literal headache with these questions. You seem fine to me now, so why don't you go and do your job?"

He was at a loss what to do. Could he say anything to crack her facade? And if he could, what did he want that to achieve?

An apology—that would be a good start. An acknowledgement of their pain. A bit of remorse, even if only because her actions had helped create the situation they were in now.

Lydell set aside her smoothie and her hands went to her throat.

He stood immediately. "What's wrong?"

"C-can't breathe." She lurched to her feet, then promptly bent over and vomited

green smoothie all over the floor. Even as he shouted for help, she collapsed to the carpet like a marionette with its strings cut.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am

SIX

Caleb sat on the roof, rain pissing down on him. Just an annoying drizzle, no thunder or lightning, no storm. It ran down his long hair and slipped under his collar, dripped from his nose. At least he didn't need to wear glasses anymore thanks to Gray; otherwise he would have been blind from the raindrops on the lenses.

The trees standing a short distance from the house were the same wet gray as the sky. A shockingly blue pool sat in the backyard, surface rippling as the rain fell on it. In front, the unnaturally green lawn provided its own splash of color. Lydell must have an army of gardeners, swooping in to yank out any weed that would dare to interrupt the grassy wasteland, then covering it in chemicals to kill anything left.

Night was somewhere below, hopefully out of the rain. And hopefully not scaring any agents who weren't strictly supposed to know about her.

Caleb tried to settle into the inhuman patience of a drakul, but his mind kept going to John. Was he okay? Lydell had better stay the fuck away, or he'd...

What? What could he do that John would approve of and wouldn't get them in trouble with Kaniyar?

I don't like being helpless, he thought at Gray.

"We are not helpless," Gray responded. "We are waiting for Ryan and the other mortal."

Pittman's dead, isn't he?

A wave of indifference, followed by, "Perhaps. I do not care. I did not like him."

Pittman hadn't been a fan of them, either. He thought Kaniyar should have chucked them into some black ops site, and put John in jail.

Still, the guy probably didn't deserve to have his brain taken apart before Ryan killed him. And the loss of her long-time assistant wouldn't help Kaniyar. Hopefully she wouldn't get any bright ideas about tightening the leash she had on them.

A small car pulled up to the gate, a red delivery service sign strapped to the roof. A driver wearing a red baseball cap that matched the sign stuck his arm out the window as Agent Chris-Chris came over. Caleb couldn't make out either his face or what he was giving the agent, but a few seconds later he pulled away. Agent Chris-Chris, probably glad for an excuse to get out of the cold rain, hurried up the drive and into the house with the delivery.

Caleb scanned the grounds again, then walked to the other side of the roof and did the same with the backyard. Agents patrolled the woods, but there was no sign of Ryan.

Surely Ryan wouldn't just walk up to the house. He wasn't stupid.

Jo was either more impetuous, or else her mind had broken under the weight of Ryan's telepathic instructions. Or she was just that desperate for their blood, and Ryan let her try for it.

Was their blood addictive in some way?

"Mortals will ingest anything to make themselves feel better," Gray observed.

True. And being juiced up on drakul blood would probably feel pretty good to anyone with a paranormal ability. A sliver of what being a drakul was like: powerful, confident. Running over rooftops, hunting demons, feeling as though they could do anything they wanted.

That was how Yuri and Drugoy had gotten into their head. That high. Just drinking the blood probably wouldn't be half as good, but for someone in a bad place psychologically, they might find themselves chasing after that feeling of power. Especially if they felt helpless otherwise.

Well, Jo was the poster child of being in a bad place psychologically right now. As for John...

He was fine. They'd gotten together before anyone realized about the blood. He wasn't some power-hungry fuck-up like Drugoy's renfields.

"Drugoy and Yuri are dead," Gray said, no doubt irritated by Caleb's fretting. "We are hunting Jo and Ryan. The rest is mortal nonsense; let it go."

Right. Ryan. Still no stupider than he was five minutes ago. The property was locked down like Fort Knox, so how did he plan to get inside past all the agents, the cameras, everything else?

"Perhaps he is not even here. He may have decided to kill the other mortal instead."

Harlow? Maybe. But he works for a private military contractor—those guys have as much firepower as the actual army.

Caleb bit his lip, considering. He was thinking about this the wrong way around. Asking how Ryan could get to his victims, instead of how Ryan would.

Ryan was a telepath. He might be able to conceal himself from the perceptions of the agents patrolling, just as he'd done with Jo at Foster's place. But he'd still show up on camera. So sneaking in using his usual M.O. wouldn't work.

What then? The weak link was always people; he'd read that somewhere. If you had a high-vis vest and a clipboard, you could go just about anywhere, and people would assume you belonged there.

Just like he'd assumed the obvious delivery driver was just doing his job.

He scrambled down from the roof and reached the gate in a few seconds. Agent Chris-Chris was just getting back to his post; he startled when Caleb materialized beside him.

"What did the delivery guy drop off?" Caleb barked.

The agent seemed taken aback. "A smoothie for Ms. Lydell—she gets one for her dinner, same thing every day. You'd think as rich as she is, she'd be eating filet mignon every night, but?—"

"Make sure she's okay. Now!"

A spark of fear lit in his eyes, and he touched his headpiece. "Is Ms. Lydell all right? I've got the contractor here, and—what? Oh shit."

That was all the confirmation Caleb needed. "Open the gate!" he shouted, and ran full speed for the motorcycle.

Lydell moaned as John rolled her into the rescue position and felt her pulse. It beat erratically beneath his fingertips, and her breath rasped as she struggled to breathe. Her eyes flickered, then closed.

“Help!” he yelled at the top of his lungs. “We need an ambulance!”

Her body stiffened, then went into a seizure, back arching and arms thrashing. He put himself between her and the coffee table, making sure she didn’t accidentally hurt herself on its sleek, cold edges.

Then she went still. No seizing muscles. No breath. He took her pulse, but no life pumped against his fingers.

Fuck.

“Ambulance! Now!” he shouted again, even as he rolled her onto her back and began CPR.

“You’re trying to save her?” Ryan asked, aghast. “Why?”

The sudden intrusion of Ryan’s thoughts interrupted his rhythm. John gritted his teeth and focused on resuscitating her.

“Have you forgotten what she did to us? The demons she called forth, guiding them into our bodies? Our minds?”

There was a snap as a rib cracked beneath the force of his compressions. I remember. But I’m not going to sit by and watch anyone die!

The next few minutes passed in a blur. Other agents rushed in, Kaniyar among them. He answered their questions in short bursts as they worked. One of them put on latex gloves and retrieved the remains of the smoothie. Sirens grew louder and louder, and soon paramedics crowded into the room. Arms aching, John gratefully let them take over.

There was no sense of Ryan in his head. Maybe he'd gone out of range or was otherwise occupied. Where were Gray and Night?

"What happened?" Kaniyar asked as he moved out of the paramedics' way.

He didn't answer for a moment, watching the paramedics move Lydell onto the gurney and wheel her out, oxygen mask strapped over her face.

She was a terrible person. The world would be better off without her. And yet, when she had collapsed, he hadn't been thinking of all the awful things she'd done to him.

He could have stood back, waiting a few critical minutes to make sure she was gone. Watched her suffer for once.

But the thought hadn't crossed his mind, and it repelled him now. Maybe he could blame SPECTR indoctrination for that, but he didn't really think so. It had simply been instinct to try and help someone dying in pain.

"I made a choice," he said.

Gray rises to the surface, waiting to bloom outward the moment Ryan is in sight. It takes Caleb a few precious seconds to unsecure the motorcycle from its trailer. Then it roars to life beneath them, before shooting down the drive and out through the opening gate onto the tree-lined street.

Caleb leans forward; their hair whips out behind them in a black cloud. No time to put on the helmet, not while their quarry has such a head start.

"I can't believe I didn't see it right away," Caleb rages. "Scratch that—what the hell were the agents doing, letting her order out in the first place?"

There is no point to lash yourself or others. What is done is done. Now we hunt.

Not the sort of hunt he would prefer to be on—but if they can catch Ryan, stop him, perhaps some of the sadness will leave John's eyes. Or perhaps a new sadness will replace it; mortals are endlessly creative in finding ways to suffer.

“That isn't fair. You know it's more complicated than that.”

It should not be, Gray replies stubbornly, even though Caleb is right.

“Yeah, well. That's being human for you.”

The wide street with its light traffic quickly gives way to interstate-side strip malls and gas stations. No sign of the car with its red sign yet, but traffic on the entrance ramp is at a standstill. Ryan couldn't have gotten far, assuming he chose to go this way.

“He might not have,” Caleb admits. “But he's not familiar with the area, so far as we know. And he wants to keep moving. The interstate is the fastest way to do that.”

There—the vehicle they seek is just nosing out onto the slow-moving interstate. The traffic forces them to slow, so Caleb threads a path through as best he can, squeezing between concrete barriers and car doors with only millimeters to spare, splitting the lane between semis. It takes too long—they are too slow?—

An opening; Caleb cuts in front of a truck, less than an inch before collision, and they're off the ramp and onto the interstate. Ahead, the vehicles are beginning to move faster, the knot in traffic caused by the on-ramp clearing slightly. From five miles an hour, they accelerate to ten, then fifteen. Caleb opens the throttle; they roar between cars, faster and faster, the sedan with the red sign five cars ahead, then four, then three.

Ryan swerves into the HOV lane and guns it.

“Damn it!” Caleb shouts, then recedes, and Gray bursts to the fore.

He dodges another car and swings into the HOV lane, ignoring the blare of angry horns. Ryan is just in front of them now. He can try to lose them, but his human reflexes are nothing to theirs. No matter what he does, they will run him to ground.

A pickup truck swerves toward them.

For a split second, they both think it is simply an inattentive driver. Then Gray catches a glimpse of Jo at the wheel, an instant before she slams into them.

In the sliver of time he has to react, Gray gets their left leg out of the way before it is trapped between the motorcycle and the concrete barrier separating north- and south-bound lanes. Agony tears through them as the right is caught between the side of the truck and the motorcycle. Sparks fly and metal screams as Jo tries to either drag or crush them against the barrier.

The pain is immense, but Gray pushes through it. Jo is right there now, inches away, driving with her left hand. Her face is horribly white, and fear flickers in her eyes when she glances frantically in their direction.

Good.

He punches out the driver’s side window. Jo instinctively flinches away, jerking the wheel as she does so. Their leg comes free, the poor wreck of the motorcycle falling behind. Gray sinks claws into the side of the truck and hauls them up and partially through the window.

Horns blare and the truck swerves again. The front plows into the barrier; a sudden

snap as they stop, but his claws hang on. The airbag deploys, hitting them in the side of the face like a punch, then collapses.

Jo moans in pain. There's an abrasion on her forehead from the bag, but she's trying to curl around her right hand, the one they bit. Guilt sparks through them from Caleb, which is nonsense—what else were they to have done?

Still. "We do not wish to hurt you," Gray says. "Surrender."

"Surrender to a demon," she says, and laughs weakly. "God."

Why must mortals say such ridiculous things? "I am no demon. John would not wish for you to be harmed further. Do not fight me."

She holds up her left hand, and for an instant flame flickers, and he braces for pain. Then, with a groan, she lets her hand fall, the spark going out. "I give up. Do what you want."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am

SEVEN

Dawn wasn't far off when John stepped through the hospital room door. Two SPECTR agents stood guard outside; one looked uneasy when John shut the door behind him, but didn't object. No doubt he knew as well as John that Jo couldn't hurt a fly at the moment.

She lay in the bed, her skin as pale as the sheets pulled up to her chest. Special flame-retardant sleeves covered both of her arms and hands to prevent her from attacking a doctor or setting the room on fire. The precautions probably weren't necessary...but John didn't blame the hospital for taking them.

Jo turned her head slowly, and the expression on her face when she spotted him mingled hope and despair. "Jonny."

"Hi." He pulled over one of the visitor chairs and sat in it. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit."

"I bet." He hesitated, then hiked up his trouser leg, exposing the twisted knot of scar tissue on his calf. "I know what it's like to be bitten by a vampire."

Her mouth settled into an angry line. "He—it—did that to you?"

"No!" Not that anything he said was likely to make her feel any more charitable toward Gray, but he couldn't help but defend his boyfriend. "Another drakul back in Charleston. They're dead now."

Jo feebly lifted her right hand; the flame retardant sleeve bugled around the bandages underneath. “They operated, but it had been too long to save my index finger. I might lose the middle one, too; they don’t know yet. And there’s nerve damage, broken bones...”

John winced and let his trouser leg fall back into place. Drakul fangs were built for damage, meant to pierce the thick hide many NHEs grew once possession set in. They bit and held on, blood grooves along the backs of their teeth speeding up the process of drinking their prey dry. Something as complicated and fragile as a human hand had no chance against that brutal power.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You didn’t leave Gray much of a choice, though.”

“Is that its name?” She shook her head. “I can’t believe, after everything we went through, that you’d work with a demon voluntarily.”

“It’s not the same. It would take too long to explain, but...it’s completely different. Caleb is fine; Gray would never hurt him, the way we were hurt.”

“As if our demons had any choice about that.” She looked away, then back to him. “Did we succeed? Is Lydell dead?”

Kaniyar hadn’t given him any parameters when he asked to talk to Jo, so he answered honestly. “Yes. She died en route to the hospital. Toxicology is pending, unless you want to tell us what Ryan used.”

“Does it matter? She’s still dead.”

He shrugged. “I suppose it doesn’t. I was with her when it happened. Her death wasn’t pretty.”

“Good.”

He sat back, suddenly uncertain. He’d thought she’d feel like him, once Ryan’s influence was gone. “Do you really mean that? Ryan forced you—forced us— to help him. To do terrible things. But he can’t get to you in here.”

Jo stared at him, and for a moment he could see the girl he’d once known in her haggard features. “Selina,” he said. Her name, her real name, which had been taken from her all those years ago.

“Selina is dead. SPECTR killed her.” Jo shifted in her bed, then winced. “Ryan did what he had to. Or what he thought he had to, anyway. But he didn’t need to for long. Once I saw the lives they had...” She met his gaze challengingly. “You’ve seen it, haven’t you? How the people who did this to us skipped away to mansions and wealth, while our lives were left in shambles. They were monsters, and they were rewarded for it.”

A terrible suspicion settled into his gut. Had Ryan reprogrammed her mind permanently? Not on purpose, but he’d put the imprint of himself on them before. Was it happening again? Or had she genuinely changed her mind?

There was no way to know. He looked away first, a heavy blanket seeming to settle over him, bowing his shoulders. “I saw. But you can’t just take matters into your own hands.”

“Why not?” she demanded. “No one else was going to do anything about it.”

“You’re going to be charged with murder!”

“Good,” she said, with such vehemence he looked back at her in surprise. “SPECTR manipulated me. Ryan took over my mind. Now it’s my turn to act for myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m going to make sure everyone knows exactly what SPECTR did to us. Operation Mephisto will be exposed to the world. Even if I spend the rest of my life in jail, even if they execute me, SPECTR won’t be able to cover it up any more.”

Could some good come from this? “I’ll be there to back you up with my testimony if you need it. And I hope Ryan will be, too.”

“Do you?”

“He’s—he was—he is my friend.” John swallowed against the tightness in his throat. “Even after what he did. I don’t want him hurt. I don’t want him to die.” He glanced in her direction. “Tell me what his next move is, and I swear to you, I’ll make sure to reach him before SPECTR. If I can just talk to him, convince him there’s another way, I can save him.”

She was silent for a long moment, then sighed. “After all this, you’re still a SPECTR lapdog, aren’t you? Ryan doesn’t want to be saved, Jonny. He wants to save others. He’s making sure scum like Lydell, and Foster, and Harlow can’t hurt anyone else.”

“There are other ways?—”

“Like what?” she cut him off. “Without Ryan, we’d still be ignorant. Oblivious to the truth of our own lives.”

How could he argue with that? Instead, he asked the question Kaniyar had instructed him to. “What about Agent Pittman? Where is he?”

For the first time, regret flickered over her features. “I…”

“He has a family who deserves to know,” John said, though he didn’t know if it was true. Or maybe he did, if Kaniyar counted as family.

Something seemed to go out of her. “He’s dead. We dumped his body in a swamp along the way. I’m not exactly sure where.”

Even though he hadn’t expected a different answer, his heart sank. He hadn’t known Pittman well, but the man had always been a steady presence at Kaniyar’s side. “He didn’t deserve to die. He didn’t do anything to us.”

Rather than answer, Jo turned her head away. And again, for a moment, he saw the girl she’d been all those years ago. “I’m tired and in pain. I’d like to sleep now.”

“All right. Should I send a nurse in to see about pain management?”

“No. I just want to be left alone.”

He rose to his feet, reached out to touch her, then let his hand drop. “Okay. Get some rest.”

“Goodbye, John.”

“Goodbye,” he said, and quietly let himself out of the room.

Gray and Night return from their hunt shortly before dawn. Gray is pleased; they found a werewolf in a park and ate it together. If only there had been an entire pack.

“A werewolf pack in the heart of Atlanta would be bad news for the people living there,” Caleb points out. “They’ve got enough troubles already.”

Bad enough he must worry about mortals he knows but does not care about; now

Caleb wishes him to concern himself with ones he has never met. He ignores Caleb, allowing him to talk to the other SPECTR agents at the hospital, until Zahira and John appear. Dark circles show around John's eyes, and Gray can feel Caleb's worry alongside his own.

Still, he remains quiet while they go to yet another hotel. Zahira and Night take one room, and they take another nearby.

John strips off his jacket and kicks off his shoes, before sitting on the bed with a sigh.

"The conversation with Jo must have really bothered him," Caleb says. "No surprise there, I guess."

What can we do?

Caleb muses a moment. "Let's see if he's in the mood for a distraction."

Caleb sits down by John and puts a hand on his thigh. "Want Gray to 'power you up'?" he asks, by which he means have intercourse with. Gray perks up; he would like this very much.

"Noted," Caleb says dryly within their shared brain.

John meets their gaze, his blue eyes troubled. "That's not why I'm with you. Whatever Kaniyar says or thinks?—"

Gray signals he wishes to come to the fore, and Caleb lets him. "Of course not," he tells John. "You are ours, and we are yours. I will give you my strength, either through blood or sexual intercourse—or not, as you choose. But that is a small thing, compared to all between us."

John smiles and frames Gray's face with his hands. "That's true," he says, and draws them down to kiss him.

They disrobe as they go, hands wandering over bared skin. John's breath comes quicker and quicker, and his erection presses against them. They kiss his skin, pausing to lick or nip, until John finally gasps, "I need you to fuck me."

"Gladly." Gray sits up on his knees. "Turn around."

"Let me get the lube."

He waits while John does so, rumbling in pleasure as John slicks him. "Sit on my lap."

Gray guides John's hips, lifting him so the tip of his own cock is lined up, before pulling John down. John gasps as he sinks down, his body tight and hot.

"Oh Goddess, oh fuck," John moans.

It is good to hear him like this, untroubled, caught up in the moment. He slips an arm around John's chest, holding him in place, then rolls his hips in a series of short thrusts. John's untouched cock bobs in the air, precome leaking freely from the tip. It won't take much to push him over the edge—but that isn't what Gray wants.

"Don't come," Gray growls in his ear, making John shiver against him.

He increases the tempo of his thrusts. "I-I can't," John pants. "Let me touch myself, please."

It isn't a true plea; they have made love often enough for Gray to know it is part of the pleasure. "No."

Caleb's glee and ecstasy twines with his, shimmers between them as he takes John harder. When their orgasm finally takes them, John moans frantically and grabs the tip of his cock, squeezing hard to try and stop from coming.

It seems to work. "Well done," Gray says, then licks John's neck, making him whimper. "Let us taste you."

"Please."

He pricks John's skin with a claw, right at the join of neck and shoulder. Then he fastens his mouth on the small wound and sucks.

It isn't more than a few drops, but the taste inflames their senses. He stiffens inside John again, drawing a groan from him.

"I'm yours," John whispers.

"Yes," Gray agrees. His and Caleb's, to fuck and love and safeguard.

He pushes John forward, onto the bed, grips his hips, and resumes thrusting. Long and slower at first, then faster, attentive to John's soft cries, the way his back arches. When the time seems right, he slides one hand around to stroke John, closes his eyes, and lets another orgasm crash through him as John clenches tight.

"Fuck," John says after Gray has pulled free. He has gone limp, face-down on the pillow, boneless in the aftermath of pleasure.

"You cannot breathe like that," Gray informs him.

"Wow, that's super romantic," Caleb says.

John laughs tiredly and rolls on his side. “Come here.”

Gray does so, fitting John’s back against his chest, wrapping him up in his arms. Within seconds, John’s breath evens out, and he sleeps.

Did we help? he asks Caleb.

“We made him happy, for a little while at least. That counts for something. Plus his exorcist ability should be all charged up now, with two loads of etheric energy in him. And, uh, other things.”

This is good. Content that he has done well, Gray slips beneath their skin.

John woke from dream to memory, so abruptly he lay staring at the hotel ceiling in confusion for a long moment.

What had shaken the memory from his subconscious, he couldn’t say. Only that it returned clear and whole. He sat beside his mom in the front seat of her old car. Trash bags stuffed with all the belongings they could carry were crammed into the backseat and trunk. Mom drove down a trash-littered street, away from their apartment, where even now a sheriff kept watch while the lock was changed.

“Where are we going?” he’d asked.

Somehow, despite the circumstances, she’d managed a smile for him. “We’re just going to stay in a motel for a few nights. There’s a pool and an ice machine—it’ll be just like a vacation!”

It wasn’t, of course. They’d been evicted, unable to pay the rent after Mom lost her job. Dad had taken off years ago.

What was his father's name? John searched his mind, but there was nothing. Mom was Darlene, he knew that from the SPECTR paperwork they'd uncovered at the Center. Another name nudged his mind—Dolly. She'd gone by Dolly with her friends. But his father was nothing but the vaguest of memories, just a suggestion of features and a feeling of bitterness.

Fuck him, anyway. He'd owed thousands in child support and never paid a dime, that much John did recall.

Now, looking back with the eyes of an adult, he realized how hard his mother had worked to shield him. Getting laid off from her job became "We get to spend extra time together for the next couple of weeks!" Eviction to a motel turned into a vacation.

The motel hadn't lasted long. Soon they slept in their car and begged for change at stoplights.

Was Dolly, his real mother, even alive? Could he find her again if she was? And if so, would she even want to see him?

He'd been stolen from her, not given away. Not like the other poor souls at the Center. But she had no power to find him, let alone charge SPECTR with kidnapping, if she even suspected they were behind it. Likely she thought he'd run into trouble while out asking for change. Been picked up by a man with bad intentions. Did she think he was dead, his dismembered body in a landfill somewhere?

A certainty crystallized in his heart. Once this was over, he was going to find her, or find her grave if she hadn't survived the streets. If she still lived, he could finally answer the questions that had surely haunted her all these years.

He'd tell her the truth—the whole truth, no matter if it was classified. SPECTR owed

her that much.

What had Jo said? That she was finally going to act for herself, after being lied to and manipulated for so long, both by SPECTR and Ryan. She meant to use her day in court to try and enact actual change.

So what was he going to do?

“What are you thinking?” Caleb asked softly.

John rolled over to face him. “Who am I?”

Caleb’s brows quirked together. “I’m not sure what you’re asking me?”

“I’m not sure either,” John admitted. “I’ve spent half my life thinking I’m someone I’m not. I never had the chance to find out who I really am, I guess.”

Caleb thought for a long moment. “Well, maybe I can help with that. You’re someone who cares about other people. You believe in fairness. In justice. You’re capable of thinking outside the box they put you in, and you push back when you feel it’s necessary. You’re loyal, sometimes to a fault. And you always try to do the right thing, even when it isn’t easy.”

Ryan had asked why he tried to save Lydell, even after everything she’d done to them. He’d acted on blind instinct—surely that said something about who he was deep down.

That was something to hold on to. To build from.

Caleb brushed a lock of his hair back from his forehead. “I can’t imagine how confusing and upsetting this all must be for you. But we know you. We know your

heart.” He leaned in and gently kissed John’s forehead. “We see you.”

Emotion thickened John’s throat. “Things might change.”

“Things always change.” Caleb gave him a smile. “I imagine you need to do some soul searching. This is your chance to become more...you. Which means we get more you, too. That’s a good thing.”

John’s phone rang. He picked it up and glanced at the display. “Kaniyar,” he said, before answering it.

“Report to the local SPECTR office—I’ll text the address,” she said without preamble. “Bring both drakul with you.”

She hung up. Caleb frowned. “What did she want?”

John sat up and reached for his underwear. “She wants us to come into SPECTR offices. I’m guessing to talk about our next steps.”

Where was Ryan now? Could they save him from himself?

Jo said he didn’t want to be saved, and she was probably right. But as Caleb had said, John was loyal; that much felt true. He wasn’t going to abandon Ryan if there was any hope of safely stopping him.

I’m coming, he thought, even though that wasn’t how telepathy worked. Please, Ryan, stop this insanity. You saved us all at the Center.

Please, just let me save you back.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am

EIGHT

Ryan sucked down yet another cup of gas-station coffee, fighting his body's desire for sleep. His head pounded relentlessly now, and his eyes ached. A nosebleed had started shortly after he convinced the delivery driver to hand over his car, hat, and deliveries, and still dripped intermittently.

The wheels hummed monotonously, while outside the windows the landscape went from foothills to mountains. He was heading up the great spine of the Appalachians. Old mountains, these were: older than bone and once high as the Himalayas.

No more, though. They'd been worn down, pared away, until only nubs remained. Just like his life, his friends, everything.

He was alone now. He'd gotten back his surviving friends, only to have them torn away a second time by SPECTR.

It hurt. God, it hurt. Being with Jonny and Selina again had felt right, in a way nothing else had since leaving the Center.

If only there had been some way to incapacitate the drakul. Without its interference, things would have gone differently. They would have had Director Kaniyar in their hands, and the three of them would still be together, as they should be.

Agent Pittman had a number of ideas on the subject. Apparently, Director Kaniyar had put a great deal of thought into how to stop the drakul, should it become necessary. Unfortunately, none of her ideas were applicable for a normal civilian, let

alone one on the run. He couldn't exactly lure it into a foundry and knock it into a vat of molten steel, let alone any of her plans that involved military grade weapons. Even the simplest method, a powerful spirit ward, was beyond his ability to create.

So Selina—Jo—was in custody. And John was still bound to SPECTR, unable to escape.

Ryan was alone again, as he'd been for so many years. But at least this time, he had some purpose outside of the petty punishments he'd dealt out to his parents and granddad.

He needed to focus on taking down Harlow. This would be the most difficult part of his plan, but he had to believe he could carry it out. Once Harlow was dead...

Best not to think about that. SPECTR wouldn't stop coming for him, and he wasn't going to end up in another lab.

He'd die first. The only question was how many of them he'd manage to take with him.

The SPECTR office nestled amidst Atlanta's glittering skyscrapers. A sleek lobby let onto high-speed elevators which whisked them far above the rest of the city. Inside, it was much like any other office building, except for the exorcism rooms. No doubt there was some sort of freight-style elevator elsewhere for bringing fausts here for exorcism, probably locked away from the rest of the building with the only keys in the hands of agents.

Kaniyar awaited the four of them inside a bland, windowless conference room, along with another agent she didn't bother to introduce. Was she auditioning various people to take over Pittman's old job?

“I’m sorry about Agent Pittman,” he said to Kaniyar, as the unfamiliar agent handed him a cup of coffee.

Grief flickered in Kaniyar’s dark brown eyes, then was ruthlessly suppressed. “We’re going to catch his murderer,” she said, rather than acknowledge his condolences.

Caleb stretched out in his chair, long legs casually crossed. “Harlow’s the next target, right? Or at least, so we think?”

Kaniyar nodded. “As you know, he currently works for a private military contractor, and has refused SPECTR’s offer of assistance. There’s nothing we can do officially, except try to intercept Ryan before he arrives. We’re working on that, believe me, but in the meantime I want Gray and Night close to the Armaros compound, ready to jump Ryan if he makes it that far. Starkweather, you’re going with them.”

“I’ll go as well,” Zahira volunteered.

But Kaniyar shook her head. “Not this time, Noorzai. I want as few of my people in the line of fire as possible.”

“From Ryan, or from Armaros?” Caleb asked, folding his arms over his chest.

She met his gaze coolly. “Either one. The Armaros compound consists of a hundred fenced-in acres in the mountains of Virginia. There are guard posts all along the perimeter, plus cameras. Probably other technology meant to deter interlopers. They have connections at very high levels in the Department of Defense, so the chance of them taking a ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ approach to intruders is larger than I’d like.”

“Oh, but it’s okay if John gets shot by some fucking mercenaries,” Caleb said, letting his arms fall and leaning forward.

Kaniyar raised a brow. “I would hope that Special Agent Starkweather isn’t stupid enough to put himself pointlessly in danger, especially when he’s accompanied by two beings who can’t be killed by weapons fire. But then again, given some of his past actions, perhaps he is.”

“Caleb,” John said sharply, when Caleb opened his mouth to either object or cuss out Kaniyar, or both. Kaniyar’s reminder of his past mistakes stung, but she’d only done it because she knew it would needle Caleb.

The important thing was he was being given the opportunity to get to Ryan first. To stop him before he killed or was killed in turn. Kaniyar could insult him all day for all he cared.

Caleb scowled, but let the matter drop. “What will Zahira be doing while we’re gone?” he asked instead.

“Whatever work I assign her.”

“It’s okay, Caleb, Gray,” Zahira said quickly. “I’ll be safer here than in Virginia.”

Caleb’s expression went momentarily blank; talking with Gray, no doubt. “All right,” he said at last. “It’s probably for the best, at least for now.”

“I don’t require your permission to give orders to my agents,” Kaniyar said, not bothering to disguise her annoyance. “Or to you, for that matter.”

That was bound to make Caleb mad; John prepared to intervene. But to his surprise, Caleb just shrugged.

Taking advantage of the quiet, John said, “Shall we get on the road, then? Or was there something else you needed, Director?”

“Nothing more. Get going, Starkweather.” She stepped to the side, then added, “Stop this lunatic from hurting anyone else. For Agent Pittman’s sake.”

“I see,” Reid Harlow said into the telephone. This call had come in on his special line, the one whose number he handed out only to a select few. It would probably be simpler to use what they called a burner phone these days, but such shenanigans felt beneath his dignity. Besides, he trusted the security on his end to be iron-clad. If the agent on the other end of the line slipped up, it would be their problem, not his. “Thank you. I’ll see another deposit is made right away.”

He put down the phone and turned to his computer. A few clicks, and the agreed-upon amount was winging its way through a long list of shell accounts, before it would ultimately come to rest in one dedicated to paying for all the expensive treatments the agent’s mother required to keep her alive.

Honestly, if the government didn’t want its agents compromised, it ought to pay them better. The private sector was far more lucrative.

So, Carrie Lydell was dead. Pity. The exorcist had been a true patriot. She did what needed to be done, no matter how distasteful. A shame SPECTR hadn’t been able to keep her alive, though it sounded as though she’d done them no favors. Security had never been something she needed to think about; it was something other people did for her.

But she was dead, and the telepath likely on his way to Armaros. So long as SPECTR didn’t interfere, he should arrive soon. He’d find it simple enough to penetrate the compound, never realizing he was being funneled inside, until it was too late to escape.

Unless the drakul got here first.

That was the most interesting tidbit the agent had for him earlier. Harlow had never made a study of the creatures, but he recalled Graham Forsyth's obsession well enough. The Soviets summoned one during the heart of the Cold War; Graham had intended to do the same, as part of his demonic army.

It hadn't turned out well for him, and Harlow had given the matter little thought, except to raise a toast to his old friend's ambition. But now it seemed Kaniyar's drakul was in play.

Why did she have it chasing down the telepath? Was it immune to mental manipulation?

"All that power will soon be ours for the taking."

Harlow glanced at the two exorcists on the couch, but neither had moved, all of their concentration still focused on him. The errant thought belonged to him, then. And it was true, was it not? If the drakul was coming here, the funnel would serve to get it inside the tunnels as well. A few misdirections and obstacles to keep it from actually catching the telepath, and it would be firmly in his grasp. And if SPECTR came looking for it...well, this wasn't an official operation, so there would be no paper trail. The spokeswoman for Armaros Corporate Solutions could simply spread her hands in bafflement and explain that neither the telepath they'd been warned about, nor any possessed persons, had shown up. Something must have happened to them along the way; had SPECTR tried retracing their steps?

Harlow leaned back in his chair with a smile. The drakul would be the perfect fit for Project Solomon, and Fifteen would be a valuable asset once he realized it was in his best interests to cooperate.

SPECTR might have wasted them both, but Armaros wouldn't make the same mistake.

Dinner consisted of what they could grab at the Sheetz where they stopped to get gas: a hot dog for John, a bowl of fruit for Caleb. Despite the bitter cold, John said, “Let’s eat at one of the tables outside.”

It was an odd choice, but Caleb didn’t question it. They were on I-81, just north of the Virginia border. Another hour or so driving on the interstate, then they’d have to take winding side roads through the mountains to reach the Armaros compound.

What they’d find when they got there, he didn’t know, but he pictured it like the black ops base Forsyth had taken him to. Guards, drones, electric fences, and Christ knew what else.

It was a good thing he was hard to kill. Ryan was a lot more fragile; this could all end in finding his body out in the woods, shot to pieces by a drone.

Instead of going straight to the outside tables, John held up his phone silently, then went to the SUV and tossed it inside. Caleb did the same. Night lay on the back seat, dormant, and didn’t respond.

The wind whipped across the parking lot, and scattered flakes of snow spit from the darkening sky. John had to be fucking freezing in his light jacket from New Orleans. “Here,” Caleb said, taking off his heavy elk hide coat. The wind tried to bite him, but it felt refreshing rather than cold. He draped the coat around John’s shoulders and received a smile in return.

“Thanks, babe. I wish we’d had time to go back to the apartment in New Orleans and grab some of my heavier clothes.”

“We were in sort of a rush, if you recall.” Caleb sat down across from him at one of the outdoor tables and opened his fruit bowl. “So why did you want to eat out here in the freezing cold?”

“Because I don’t want Kaniyar listening in.” John took a bite from his hotdog.

“Fair enough. What do you want to talk about?”

John turned his attention to his food. “I’m coming with you to confront Ryan.”

“Like hell!” Had John lost his senses? “He already mind-controlled you once! You don’t want that again.”

“Of course not.” John lifted his chin. “I want to talk to him. Face to face. I think I can convince him to stand down.”

“He’s never going to surrender.”

“Not as things have been, no.” John met his gaze steadily. “When I talked to Jo, she said she was done letting other people make all the decisions for her. She’s going to act for herself, try to use her murder trial as a chance to blow the lid off what SPECTR did to us all those years ago. I want to help her, and I think Ryan will, too.”

There was a spark in his eyes that Caleb hadn’t seen since Ryan betrayed him. Maybe before that. John’s plan, such as it was, might not work. Ryan might try to take control again, or Kaniyar might intervene, or...

“It is his decision to make.” Gray cut through his inner ruminations. “We must help him, whatever he chooses.” A pause. “You told me as much yourself, back in New Orleans.”

Damn drakul, using his own words against him. “How can we help?”

“I’m not sure yet. We need to set this up so the truth will come out one way or another. Some of it will depend on what happens with Jo, but however her trial goes,

I'm not going to let them cover up what happened again." His eyes sharpened into blue diamonds. "We deserve better than that."

Caleb nodded his agreement, even though it sent a chill of fear through him. He was all for defying SPECTR, but these were dangerous waters. If Kaniyar decided they were more trouble than they were worth...

A worry for another time. "Fuck yeah," he said instead of voicing any of his concerns. "We'll figure it out one way or another. It's all going to come out once we're done."

"Thanks." John reached across and took their hand. "For now, let's get out of the cold and back on the road. We need to find Ryan before he gets himself killed."

Ryan crouched on the ridge and peered through the gathering dusk at the Armaros Corporate Solutions Virginia Headquarters. The icy mountain wind caused him to shiver, and rhododendron branches snagged in his hair and clothes. At least he didn't have to worry about ticks in the winter.

He did, however, need to worry about security cameras. He hadn't spotted any yet, but what did that mean? It wasn't as if his telepathic ability allowed him to override electronics, or control some distant viewer. It only worked up close and personal.

Nothing he could do but worry, so he put it out of his mind. Raising a cheap pair of binoculars to his eyes, he focused on the hollow below. A million years of rain had carved it out of the mountainside, growing wider as it spread away from the ridgeline. Trees blanketed most of its length, a single road just visible through the winter-bare branches.

Below him, at the narrow end of the hollow, clustered the Armaros Corporate Solutions compound. A high concrete wall surrounded what looked like office

buildings, a garage, and some military-style vehicles. No large open spaces that might be used for training or firing ranges—that must go on elsewhere.

At the end of the hollow, set into the mountainside, was a massive pair of steel doors.

So, Harlow had himself an underground bunker of some kind. No wonder he'd waived SPECTR protection—even if someone managed to get past the walls and the guard shacks, those doors were designed to keep out an army.

Fortunately, he wasn't an army. Unless the bunker was the size of NORAD, its occupants would need supplying from the outside.

Ryan carefully picked his way down the steep slope, ducking through groves of mountain laurel and rhododendron. This mountainside would be beautiful in the spring.

If only he could live long enough to see the flowers bloom again.

As he approached the road, the distant sound of an engine echoed off the trees. Taken aback by his own good luck, he almost waited too long; the truck with Corporate Dietary Solutions emblazoned on the side was nearly past when he stepped onto the tarmac, waving his arms.

The driver rolled down his window, squinting at Ryan in the growing dark. "Who are you? What're you doing out here?"

He smiled, even though pain spiked through his brain as he reached out to the driver's thoughts. "I need you to do me a favor..."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am

NINE

It was dark by the time they parked the SUV off to the side of a winding road disappearing off toward the mountain. Caleb had steered it off the road onto what looked like no more than a deer path, in hopes it wouldn't be seen by any passing vehicles.

"So what now?" Caleb asked as they got out.

John looked around. The woods were silent except for the lone call of an owl: Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all? In summer there would be cicadas and crickets, small animals rustling in the leaves. For now, winter spread a quiet blanket over the hollow.

There was no snow at least, except for a dusting on higher peaks. Nothing to betray footsteps, if Ryan had passed this way.

Was Ryan already here? Or had they beat him? And what should they do in either case?

"We walk," John answered.

"And if there are cameras in the woods?" Caleb asked.

John began to walk, and Caleb fell in beside him. Night drifted off to one side, vanishing from sight in the shadow of every tree. If not for the scent of night-blooming jasmine and copal, mingled with the crackle of etheric energy, John

wouldn't have even known she was there.

Would she show up on camera, even one with night vision? He didn't know, and it didn't really matter, since he and Caleb certainly would.

Last fall's leaves crunched under their feet as they made their way through the trees a few yards away from the road. John had brought a small flashlight, which he used to keep from tripping over fallen branches and winter-dead briars.

"I have my SPECTR badge," John said. "Hopefully, if we do get caught, they'll listen to a federal agent when they wouldn't an ordinary trespasser. Harlow used to work for SPECTR, after all."

"True, but he refused Kaniyar's offer of help," Caleb said. His long hair whispered over the elk hide of his coat, and he moved with the confidence of someone who didn't need a flashlight to see.

"If I'm standing right in front of him, offering a solution, he might be more amenable to assistance." John ducked under a branch, felt a twig grab at his hair. The chill soaked into his skin through the thin jacket he'd worn in New Orleans, but Caleb's thicker coat was too slim in the shoulders for him to wear comfortably.

Caleb was silent for a long moment, before saying, "And if we do end up standing in front of him? The sick fuck who thought up Operation Mephisto in the first place?"

John's stomach did a slow roll. He had no memory of the man, and sure, it might be that there were still memories he'd never get back. But men like Harlow tended to be hands-off in his experience. Walsh, Lydell, Foster, and others had been the ones to do the dirty work and write the reports.

Was that better or far worse? Harlow hadn't overseen their suffering directly, only

handled bloodless reports. He was fine giving the orders, but when it came to seeing the results of those orders, was he squeamish? Disinterested? Just too busy with Goddess-knew what other projects and operations?

“I don’t know,” he said after a few minutes filled only with the rustle of leaves under their feet, the hoot of the owl growing fainter. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Caleb took his hand, and their fingers curled together. “I’m glad you’re here,” John said, squeezing Caleb’s fingers. “You and Gray. And you, too, Night. Thanks for seeing this through.”

“It is mortal nonsense,” Night replied, her glowing pupils the only thing he could make out in the darkness. “But it is...interesting. A diversion from the hunt, but unique in my experience.”

Caleb snorted. “Glad we can keep you entertain?—”

He stopped abruptly, head turning in the direction of the road. Night did the same. John strained his ears, but heard nothing. “What is it?”

“A vehicle. Something bigger than a car.” Caleb let go of his hand. “Stay here.”

He was gone in a blink, vanishing in the trees. Night might have gone with him; it was impossible to tell. John stood perfectly still, listening, until at last the distant rumble of an engine came to his mortal hearing.

“It’s a laundry truck,” Caleb said from the shadows beside him.

John startled, swinging the flashlight around wildly. Caleb blinked in the light. “Sorry—didn’t mean to surprise you.”

“It’s fine.” John lowered the light. “You said a laundry truck?”

“Yeah. So I’m thinking we reverse-prison-break this thing. What about you?” Caleb arched a brow.

John hesitated. Instinct whispered that this was too convenient, too cliché.

But that was ridiculous. Harlow knew Ryan was after him, but he wouldn’t suspect one of his other victims and two drakul would also be trying to get inside. Let alone to stop Ryan and save him, as bitter as that saving tasted. This was no trap set for them.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Caleb nodded. “Turn off your flashlight and climb on my back.”

John did so, wrapping his arms around Caleb’s neck and his legs around his waist. As soon as he was secure, Caleb set off at a run, easily dodging trees and leaping over obstacles John couldn’t see in the blackness.

The headlights of a truck appeared, the engine growling as it hauled itself up the hollow. John caught a glimpse of the logo painted on the side as it rumbled past: Laundry Strategies, Inc.

Caleb leapt, John clinging on for dear life. A moment later, claws caught in steel and etheric energy bloomed around them as Gray emerged.

A flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye; then Night was hauling up the roll-up door on the back of the truck, having broken the lock. Gray swung them inside, followed by Night, who closed the door again behind them.

John flicked his flashlight back on. The back of the truck was packed with hampers filled with folded sheets, uniforms, and towels.

Gray receded, and Caleb lifted one of the sheets. “Well,” he said, “at least it’s clean.”

The ride in the truck, hidden beneath a layer of laundry, seemed to take forever. Caleb listened intently to each shift of the truck’s gears, noted when it slowed to a stop, then sped up again. Waved through a checkpoint? Were they inside the Armaros compound now?

“Calm”, Gray said. “These humans cannot harm us. And we will not allow them to hurt John.”

It wasn’t that easy, and they both knew it. You’ve learned to lie to yourself. Good job; you’re becoming more human all the time.

“There is no need for insults.”

The truck slowed again, and his sensitive hearing picked up the groan of motors and the creak of moving steel. Heavy doors of some kind? Where the hell was the truck taking them?

The truck moved forward again, but this time the engine raised a strange echo, as if they were in an enclosed space. A garage? If so, it was an awfully big one.

Eventually, it came to a stop. The engine shut off; the driver’s door opened and then shut again. Footsteps walked away...then silence.

How long to wait? Presumably someone would be coming to unload the truck soon. On reflection, it seemed a weird time of night to get a delivery of clean laundry...but what the fuck did he know about it? He’d never worked in laundry services; maybe

this was perfectly normal.

Either way, they shouldn't dawdle too long. Once the driver's footsteps had faded into silence, he tossed the folded sheets aside.

"Let's go," he said.

Night emerged from wherever she'd been hiding, and John rose from the hamper beside Caleb. As he helped John out of the oversized hamper, Night rolled the back door up.

The sight outside the truck was unexpected to say the least. Caleb had assumed they'd be in some sort of garage, pulled up to a loading dock. Instead, the truck sat within a cavernous space that appeared to have been carved out of the mountain itself. Rough rock walls formed an enormous tunnel, running from a pair of huge steel blast doors—currently closed—to a distant dead end, barely perceptible even to his enhanced sight. Pipes and conduit ran along the walls in neat rows, and some kind of bulkheads segmented its vast length, though all appeared to be open at the minute. Smaller doors led off the massive tunnel, regularly spaced across from each other.

"What the fuck?" he breathed. "This can't be right."

Gray stirred. Memories flickered behind their eyelids, gray and faded. Men, donkeys, mining carts, coal dust heavy in the air.

"A mine?" Caleb asked aloud for John's benefit.

John slid down from the back of the truck to the concrete floor. "I think you're right. They took an old mine and modified it for their use."

"And what use is that?"

John's mouth thinned. "Nothing good."

Well, he wasn't wrong about that. Caleb couldn't think of anything a private military contractor would need a mountain fortress for that would qualify as "good." Especially one headed by assholes like Harlow.

Sodium lights cast a strange orange glow over the scene. Another truck sat nearby, this one belonging to a food service company. Its rolling door also stood open.

The hair on the back of his neck prickled. "Why are there two service trucks just parked here, with no one else around? For that matter, why are they parked here in the first place? There's no loading dock, so no way is this their usual stop."

John pulled out his badge and clipped it to his belt. "I'd suggest heightened security procedures of some sort, but then we'd already be swarmed by guards."

"This isn't right." Caleb took a step back, staring at the food truck. "Ryan must have come in the same way we did. This was all a trap, and we've stumbled right into it."

Horror washed over John, threatening to make his hands shake. Kaniyar had warned Harlow that Ryan was coming, but instead of trying to keep him out, Harlow had seen it as a chance to recapture the only known telepath.

They'd thought they needed to save Harlow from Ryan...but it was the other way around.

"He wants Ryan back in a lab," John said.

"And us?" Caleb looked worried. "He couldn't know about us. Kaniyar wouldn't just blab to someone outside of SPECTR that there are a pair of drakul on the way. You know, just in case Harlow wants to add us to his fucking menagerie. She's the one

who took down Forsyth for trying to pull this sort of shit.”

“There’s a leak.” His heart sank, though he didn’t know why he even bothered being disappointed in people anymore.

Night cocked her head. “Surely there would be mortals attempting to capture us if that was so.”

The enormous tunnel was still and silent, except for the occasional tick-tick from one of the pipes as it expanded or contracted in response to whatever flowed through it. Steam? Water? Something else he couldn’t guess?

Night had a point. Maybe there was no leak; maybe they’d sent a whole series of trucks waiting for Ryan to jump on one, and no one had realized they’d snuck in too. “We have to save Ryan,” John said, straightening his shoulders. “Whatever happens, we can’t let Harlow disappear him into this fortress, never to be seen again.”

Caleb didn’t look thrilled by the prospect, but he nodded. “Fine. What next?”

John scanned the walls. A number of smaller doors led off the main tunnel. They all looked sturdy, had electronic locks, and were inconveniently unlabeled.

No cameras, either, or at least none that he could see. They had to be there somewhere, though, right? Except as Night had said, no guards had rushed out to stop them from penetrating further into the base.

Something was wrong. No—everything was wrong. Everything had been wrong, for longer than he’d ever guessed. He’d come here to save the man who’d ordered him tortured, and now they were standing in a trap, and...

He took a deep breath, trying to dispel the bands of panic closing around his lungs.

He was no longer an unhoused child who could simply be disappeared; he was a SPECTR agent with a gun and a badge. Not to mention, he was backed up by two of the most powerful NHEs to ever walk the earth. Harlow should be the one afraid, not him.

“There aren’t any answers in this tunnel,” he said. “We should start trying doors, see if any are unlocked.” It seemed unlikely, but he didn’t want the drakul to start tearing the place apart until they had to. Hopefully he could talk to Harlow and get them all safely out of here; destroying the facility unnecessarily wouldn’t help with that. “I’ll check the couple back toward the entrance; you start on the others.”

“All right,” Caleb said. “Come on, Night.”

The two drakul drifted down the corridor, Night flickering from shadow to shadow. John turned from them and started back toward the closed tunnel entrance. Just as he reached for the first door, he heard a clunk from high overhead.

Faster than he could react—faster than even Gray could react—an enormous blast door slammed down just behind him, cutting him off from the two drakul.

It nearly knocked him from his feet, the enormous crash ringing so loudly in his ears he couldn’t hear anything else. The door had been in freefall; someone had disabled the safety features. He stumbled to the door, shaking his head as if that would clear it.

He was cut off from the two drakul. He looked around frantically, but spotted no way of raising the solid wall of steel again. The thing had to be two feet thick. Even Gray couldn’t easily get through it.

He’d been right; there was a leak. The trap hadn’t just been for Ryan—it had been for them as well.

One of the side doors opened behind him.

TEN

Gray slams his fists into the blast door. It refuses to yield, so he scores it with his claws, leaving only shallow gouges behind.

They are cut off from John.

“This will not work,” Night observes calmly. “You waste your strength.”

Gray snarls, not at Night, but at the layers of steel separating them from John.

“We could attack the stone wall around the door,” Caleb suggests without much hope. Such an attempt didn’t even work with the bank vault, which was much smaller, the walls merely reinforced concrete rather than a mountain of stone. Given enough time, they might be able to dig their way through, but that would be the work of months. Years.

He steps back reluctantly. “You are right,” he admits to Night. “These side doors are smaller—perhaps we can find a way through one of them.”

Night watches him expressionlessly. “Destroy this body. Perhaps I can free you from outside, rather than trapped within, as I did before.”

“No,” Caleb says. “John was right—Harlow has an informant inside SPECTR. This was a trap, set up for us. Night might not be able to get back in. Or they might find another way to grab her. We can’t split up.”

“No,” Gray tells Night. “There is no knowing if you could return. Or how far away the nearest suitable body might be.” This area appears empty of human settlements. Unless some foolish mortal has succumbed to the elements while hiking the forest, there seems little chance of a nearby corpse. It might take Night days to reach the compound again, if she were separated from her current body.

“As you wish,” Night replies. “We will do as you suggest.”

She strides down the vast corridor away from the sealed blast door, trying the smaller doors along the left side of the tunnel as she goes.

Gray grips the handle of the nearest door on the right and tugs on it. It has an electronic lock, and when he raps their knuckles against it, it feels and sounds like solid steel.

Caleb’s unease grows stronger. “What the hell is this place? Why do they need this level of protection? Are they expecting an invasion, or...?”

“Here,” Night says, as a door on the left swings open at her touch.

“Nope, this is wrong,” Caleb says. “These doors have electronic locks; it has to be disengaged on purpose. Another trap.”

Gray growls softly. Then we will spring it, and let the one who has set the trap know they have made a grave error.

Night steps into the corridor beyond the door, then pauses. “Demons,” she says, nostrils flared to catch the scent.

Memories rise up, these in full color. The SPECTR black ops site they were taken to for testing smelled faintly of demons as well.

“This is another goddamn Forsyth situation,” Caleb seethes. “Of course it is—look at what they were doing with John and the other kids. Harlow is still carrying on experiments with possession. These secure doors are to keep them in if they get out of control.”

“Be careful,” Gray tells Night. “We have encountered mortals like these before. Their actions are foolish, even for their kind.”

Fluorescent light illuminates the corridor, its walls of stone. An older memory teases him, from his host who worked in such a place, extracting coal from the surrounding rock, until his lungs grew clotted with black dust.

The doors in this tunnel are less sturdy. He tries the nearest one; it is locked, but it is a simple matter to tear it free from its hinges. The small room beyond is largely bare, except for weights of various sizes. The concrete floor is heavily scarred, as if they’ve been dragged back and forth, and the stone walls bear pits where something has been flung into them. He recognizes it as a telekinetic testing room; Forsyth had asked Caleb to move such weights with his mind as part of the tests he’d performed on them.

Night opens another door with a squeal of bending metal, revealing a similar room, this one covered with scorch marks. “This is like the Center,” she observes. “There were such chambers there, though fewer in number.”

Caleb’s anger sparks along their nerves. “Nothing ever fucking changes with these people. They can’t just leave well enough alone—no, they have to go around sticking demons in people for power, or money, or ‘national security,’ or whatever excuse they can come up with. Forsyth, Harlow, Lydell, all of them are just the same. They can’t even be original about it.”

The scent of demons grows stronger as they proceed down the corridor. A whiff of

smoke and rancid flesh, mingling with mange-clotted fur and slime. “There is more than one kind of demon here,” Night observes. “We will feast tonight.”

“They may yet be able to be exorcised,” Gray cautions. “Do not forget.”

“How could I? You will not let me.”

Gray ignores her disgruntled words. At the end of the corridor is another steel door like those in the main tunnel. Though it is open now, it is surely ready to snap shut.

He approaches slowly, senses alive to any sound or smell that might betray the nature of the trap before them. The whisper of mortal breath drifts to him, accompanied by the tang of wet stone, the whiff of rotting roses.

He approaches cautiously, Night nothing but a flickering shadow behind him. As they draw level with the door, a frantic voice calls out.

“Who’s there? Help! I’m a prisoner here! Oh god, please help me!”

Men dressed in paramilitary gear streamed out of the open door into the corridor, their M-16 rifles trained on John. “Drop your weapons!” one yelled.

John held his hands up, willing his heart to calm its frantic racing. “I’m John Starkweather, Special Agent, Strategic Paranormal Entity ConTRol. My badge is clipped to my belt.”

“I said put down any weapons!” the man yelled again. “Now!”

Fuck. “I’m going to reach into my coat and take out a Glock,” he said, as calmly as possible. “I’ll put it on the ground in front of me.”

He moved slowly, and thank Sekhmet, none of the guards—mercenaries?—pulled a trigger as he removed his Glock and carefully laid it on the floor.

The second the weapon was out of his hand, they rushed him. His back slammed into the wall, and the barrel of a rifle ground into his temple, while multiple pairs of hands searched him. One picked off his badge and handed it to their leader, who glanced at it absently before putting it in one of the pockets on his tactical vest.

“I’m an agent of the federal government,” he said firmly, even though it seemed they didn’t care. He’d hoped it might give them at least some pause, but no one even looked straight at him.

“He’s clean,” reported one of the men who’d patted him down.

The leader nodded. “Let’s go, then.”

They pulled him off the wall and hustled him down the hall they’d come through. About twenty feet down, they gathered around what looked like an office door, albeit one with an electronic lock. One man swiped a card across the door’s sensor. The moment it clicked open, three other men swung into the doorway, rifles trained inside.

“He’s still out!” one called.

“Proceed.”

John found himself quickly shoved inside. The door shut behind him with a definitive click as the lock engaged.

The room looked like a hastily repurposed office, all of the decorations and furniture removed except for a couch.

And on the couch lay Ryan.

John bit back a gasp and hurried to him. He looked terrible, the area around his eyes deeply bruised, dried blood forming a crust beneath his nose.

There were no obvious wounds, but that didn't mean anything. John shook Ryan by the shoulder, was rewarded by a sharp moan of pain. Ryan's eyelids fluttered, revealing eyes so bloodshot there was no white left, only red.

"Fuck," John muttered. "Ryan? Can you hear me?"

Ryan's brows drew down, and he seemed to be having trouble focusing. "John?" Then his gaze sharpened, and he grabbed John by the wrist. "John!"

Ryan flung his arms around him. And, Goddess help him, John found himself hugging Ryan back. Despite everything—the murders, the burning building, the coercion—Ryan still felt like family.

"I should have known you'd show up," Ryan said, voice rough. "Fuck, my head."

"What happened to you?"

"Tranq dart." Ryan made a face and touched his shoulder, where John had gripped him earlier. "Got me right here."

Tranq darts weren't cleared for use on unpossessed people. It was too easy to get the dose wrong. But he had the feeling Armaros Corporate Solutions didn't really care much about the law.

John sat back. Now that his relief over finding Ryan alive had passed, the bitterness and anger began to seep back in. "You controlled my mind. Against my will; without

my consent.”

Ryan struggled upright. “I know.”

“The Ryan I knew would never have done that.”

“The Ryan you knew didn’t yet realize his life was over.”

“But it wasn’t.” John leaned back against the nearest wall, then slid down it. Ryan mimicked his motion, moving off the couch. They both sat on the floor, level with one another. “You escaped. You could have gone anywhere.”

“With no money and not so much as a high school degree?” Ryan’s mouth twisted. “I had to rely on Jennifer and Marc just to set up a shitty false identity that wouldn’t hold up to close scrutiny.”

“Did they pay for it willingly?” John asked, though he knew the answer already.

Ryan gave him a look that said he knew that John knew. “Don’t play dumb. Of course they didn’t. Everything that happened was their fault. They gave me over, then took cold, hard cash to participate in the cover up. The fact I couldn’t use my real name, that I didn’t finish high school—that’s due to their choices. I just took what I was owed.”

It made a twisted sort of logic. “What about Jo and me? Did we owe you our free will?”

Ryan winced. “You wouldn’t have gone along with my plans.”

“Of course I wouldn’t have!” Anger finally eclipsed betrayal. “I would have tried to come up with some other solution! Something that didn’t include murder.”

“Or you would have gone back to SPECTR. Turned me over, maybe. Not because you’d want to,” Ryan added quickly. “But because they’d leave you with no other choice. Do you think I don’t know the hold the vampire has over you? Or the hold SPECTR has over him?”

John wanted to argue, because he didn’t want it to be true.

But it was.

If it came down to a choice between protecting Caleb and Gray, and protecting Ryan...it would be agonizing, but it wouldn’t truly be a choice at all.

One corner of Ryan’s mouth twisted up slightly in the shadow of a smile. “I’m running on empty, but I can hear enough of your thoughts to know I’m right.” He waved a hand weakly. “There were no good choices for either of us, Jonny. You came as far as you could with me. After that...it was up to me to make the hard choice.”

“Mind-controlling us. Taking our agency away, just like SPECTR did.”

That hit home; Ryan flinched slightly. “I just wanted justice. You wanted it, too. Don’t pretend you’re sorry any of them are dead: Walsh, Foster, Lydell, Jennifer, Marc. They were all monsters in their own way. And one thing I know about you is that you fight monsters.”

John shook his head. He’d tried to save Lydell, even though, yes, she was a monster. He had no illusions that she’d come to feel remorse over what she’d done. “Maybe it’s not about them,” he said after a moment. “Maybe it’s about us. About the choices we make.”

“They took our choices away!” Ryan insisted, and John was certain he believed it.

But SPECTR hadn't forced him to drug his parents and set their house on fire. And SPECTR hadn't forced John to try and save Lydell when she lay dying in front of him.

Ryan closed his eyes. God, he looked tired—battered. This had taken a toll on him, physically and mentally, and the sight made John's chest ache despite everything.

"Gray and Night will get us out of here," he said in a low voice. "Just hold on."

"I hope you're right," Ryan murmured.

Movement in the corridor outside caught their attention: booted footsteps, lots of them, followed by an electronic beep.

The door swung open, rifle barrels trained on them. "Stay where you are," one of the guards ordered coldly. "If you so much as twitch a finger?—"

"That's enough," said a new voice. Its owner stepped into the doorway.

He looked like the CEO of some bland company: a White man, fit and tanned, dressed in slacks and a button-down shirt tailored to his form. Expensive-looking shoes, Rolex watch, and an unnaturally wrinkle-free face thanks to the miracle of plastic surgery. The harsh lights of the office shone on his immaculate silver hair, his perfect white teeth.

And he had a demon in him.

"Fifteen, Nineteen," the man said with a pleasant smile. "It's good to finally meet in person. I'm Reid Harlow, and I'm looking forward to working with you again."

ELEVEN

“This could be another trap,” Caleb cautions unnecessarily.

Gray pauses at the doorway, peering inside. Beyond lies a large room, its walls reaching high above into the darkness. Silver lines gleam faintly from the floor, connecting to more silver inlaid on the walls, as if the room is a giant circuit. The walls above are covered in sleek panels of black glass.

A mortal—female?—slumps against the wall, her hands behind her. Blood drips from her nose, smelling of rotting roses and rancid flesh thanks to the demon inside her. His stomach cramps with hunger, but he pushes it aside.

He switches places with Caleb, who says, “Hello?”

She shrinks back against the wall, her demon no doubt scenting the two predators so near. Even so, she manages to say, “Please. I don’t want to be here! They grabbed me, forced a demon in me. I tried to fight back, so they locked me in here. I don’t feel good—they hit me a lot.”

“Fuck. Okay.” Caleb holds up his hands and crosses into the room. Night follows. “Don’t be scared—we’re here to help you.”

Her eyes dart from him to Night, then back to them. She swallows, throat working, but forces herself to sit straighter.

“Thank you,” she says. “But you should worry about yourselves instead of me.”

The hum of electronics suddenly fills the room. Lights switch on, glowing brightly. The blank panels above become translucent, revealing people sitting on the other side, each in their own small cubicle. Strange bands encircle their heads, wires trailing into what appear to be consoles in front of them.

Night snarls and turns toward the open door, ready to run. But the shadows fail her; she stumbles, then goes to her knees, then collapses limp to the floor.

A great weight seems to press down on Gray. He tries to move, but their body is far away and getting farther. The lights grow smaller and dimmer with each passing second.

Somewhere, far above, Caleb shouts for him. He tries to reach back, but even as he does so, he is swallowed up by blackness.

John's blood froze in his veins. This man, this plain, unassuming guy who looked like he spent his days golfing with other rich men, was the architect of Operation Mephisto. The one who'd ordered Ryan to be locked away in a lab. The reason John barely knew the truth about his own life.

Then the rest of what Harlow said hit him. Looking forward to working with them again. As if they'd been co-workers in an office, or at least willing participants.

Nausea clawed the back of his throat, but he forced it down. Gray and Night would get them out of here soon. They'd find a way around the blast door—there had to be more than one route through these underground tunnels in case of emergency, right?

In the meantime, he needed to think. Harlow was possessed, he could feel the etheric energy, though it was strangely muted. And he wasn't the only one.

Not the guards—they seemed clean. But behind them, he caught a glimpse of two

people dressed in business-casual rather than flak jackets. Each wore a metal headband of some sort, and all their attention seemed focused on Harlow.

What the fuck was going on?

In case Harlow had some lingering loyalty to SPECTR, he said, “I’m Special Agent John Starkweather, SPECTR. One of your men has my badge.”

One of the guards hurried to pull it out and hand it to Harlow. Harlow didn’t so much as glance at it before tossing it in John’s general direction. It hit the floor and skittered to the center of the room. “I know exactly who you are. I also know you’re officially not here.”

Not good. There was a leak somewhere; there had to be.

“What do you want from us?” he asked, hoping to keep Harlow talking.

“Your cooperation, nothing more.” Harlow folded his hands behind his back, his brown eyes studying first John, then Ryan. “Obviously you’re a valuable asset, Fifteen, and we really do need to get new designations for you.”

Ryan showed his teeth. “You can call me ‘Mr. Starkweather.’”

“Cute.” Harlow turned back to John. “As for you, I have plenty of exorcists already in my employ.” He nodded toward the two possessed women in headbands. “What I don’t have, until tonight at least, is someone whose mind has been altered by a telepath. The data we can get from you could prove invaluable to national security. And don’t worry—it will only be a few interviews with our psychologists, filling out some questionnaires, maybe a scan or two of your brain function. A few days of your time, and then you’ll be free to go—with a hefty payment to a secure bank account.”

John didn't need to be a telepath to know it was a lie. He wasn't leaving here alive; once Harlow had what he needed, he'd wind up on an autopsy table having his brain dissected. Harlow had been a ruthless bastard before; if he had a demon urging him to violence, it would be even worse.

He needed to stall until the drakul arrived. "I might be interested—if I knew more about what you're doing here."

Harlow looked pleased, apparently believing John could be talked around into cooperating. If he'd been smart enough to have an empath with him, it would never have worked, but he struck John as the sort of man who thought highly of his own opinion. Maybe not enough people had told him he was wrong.

"I know you can sense the NHE in me," he said. "Do you know the legend of King Solomon and the demons?"

"Vaguely," John said. He'd delved through too many medieval grimoires not to have at least passing familiarity. "He was supposed to have a ring that allowed him to command Non-Human Entities, correct?"

"Very good." Harlow smiled approvingly. "It allowed him to place a seal—presumably some kind of spirit ward—on them. The seal allowed the possessed to access the strength of their NHE, while subduing its growing impulses toward violence. A myth—but perhaps one with some truth behind it."

"It wouldn't be the first time," John allowed.

"Exactly." Harlow flashed his unnaturally white teeth. "Now imagine the implications. How useful would a covert operative with all the strength of a demon, but none of the drawbacks, be to our country? Alternatively, a seal could be placed on an enemy combatant, who is then released back into the population. His possession

remains undetected up until when the seal is removed or broken, at which time he attacks his own forces. A devastating assault with zero chance for American casualties.”

He delivered his list of horrors in a calm, even voice, like a man discussing the projected growth for next quarter. That, more than anything, made every hair on John’s body rise. “Is that what’s happening here? With the headbands and all?”

“Very crudely. Obviously this particular method won’t work in the field. But it does allow me to do this.”

Harlow stretched a hand out in front of him. A moment later, John’s badge rose into the air, then slowly crumpled into a ball, the brass bending under Harlow’s enhanced telekinesis.

He let it fall to the floor with a pleased smile. There had been no point to the demonstration other than to show off his power, to make them feel weak and afraid, and John despised him for it.

“And how do we fit into Project Solomon?” he asked, keeping his voice calm so as to give nothing away.

“A telepath would certainly be useful in choosing proper targets.” Harlow nodded in Ryan’s direction. “Let’s say you’re an additional project that has a great deal of synergy with our existing goals.”

“Couldn’t have put it better myself,” Ryan muttered.

One of the guards murmured something in Harlow’s ear. Harlow nodded, then said, “Project Solomon still has quite a way to go, but I’ve arranged a larger demonstration of what we can accomplish.”

The guard handed him a tablet, which he turned so John and Ryan could see it. The image appeared to be from a security camera, mounted high on the wall of a large, round room. An intricate spirit ward flashed on the floor—set in silver, maybe? Bands of what might be silver encircled the walls, more silver lines connecting each ring to form something like a circuit.

He had just enough time to see Night and Gray enter the camera's field of view, before something went wrong.

There was no sound, so Night's collapse came in eerie silence, her limbs folding beneath her and her body crumpling like the dead thing it was. Caleb stumbled, then frantically ran his hands over his body, mouth moving as he shouted some protest John couldn't hear.

"I hope you weren't counting on your associates to save you," Harlow said, handing the tablet back to the guard. "Both drakul have been safely suppressed by my exorcists. Now, I need to go and oversee their disposal, so you'll have to wait here until I get back."

The door slammed shut, lock engaging with a sharp click. John stared at it blankly, his mind spinning.

Harlow had done something to the drakul—bound them with a larger version of whatever seal he was using on himself. He and Ryan were locked in an office, with no weapons and no way out.

And no one was coming to save them.

"Gray?" Caleb's voice scraped coming out. "Gray!"

His head spun, disorientation threatening to overcome him. There was a hole in his

mind, his soul, his very being, and his frantic calls vanished into it with no response.

For the first time since encountering Gray in an abandoned house, Caleb was alone in his own skull.

It was horrible—wrong. He cast about frantically, trying to make sense of what happened. Night lay sprawled a short distance away, a marionette with her strings cut.

Panic licked his spine, and he tried to shove it down. Looking up at the row of people hooked into whatever machinery was behind this, he shouted, “What have you done to Gray?”

“He’s...suppressed, you could say.”

Caleb spun. The woman who had played the victim now stood up her, hands unbound. Her nosebleed—the only mark on her—was already stopping.

They’d known this was a trap. They’d thought they were ready to handle anything, turn the tables on whatever Harlow could do to them.

They’d been so wrong.

Gray’s absence was like a missing tooth. No—a missing limb. Several missing limbs. Caleb reached for him instinctively, needing that foundation of certainty Gray brought.

But it wasn’t there. He was alone.

“Bring him back,” he snarled at the woman.

“It’s not me who’s doing it.” She gestured at the windows above them, the ring of

people wired into the machinery of the room. “Each exorcist is possessed by an NHE to amplify their power. And Armaros’s proprietary technology then boosts their ability even farther, allowing them to create a circle where their control over etheric energy is complete. These are early days, but imagine the applications on the battlefield. Suspect NHEs are in a village? Suppress the entire area, so troops can go in and safely remove enemy combatants.”

“Or people with the wrong skin color,” he shot back. Her calm put his hackles on end. She clearly had no fear of him, was certain of her own position in this scenario.

He reached for Gray again, found nothing again. He needed to think, but emptiness threatened to overwhelm him, send him into a spiral.

He’d lived most of his life alone and never felt incomplete. But Gray’s silence, absence, was a gaping chasm, and he teetered on the very edge, trying not to fall inside.

“If they don’t bring Gray back right now,” he said, trying to sound authoritative and failing miserably, “I’ll fucking kill you.”

She laughed in his face. “You can’t hurt me. My NHE might sleep as well, but I still have her power and her strength. So just hang tight—they’re on the way to secure you. I hope you like this room. You won’t be leaving it for some time to come.”

Oh hell no. He’d been through the whole government captive thing with Forsyth; he wasn’t about to go through it again. Panic receded, driven back by anger.

How dare they do this? How dare they try to keep Gray and him apart?

“Fuck you,” he told her.

Her smug smile was enraging. “Just relax. You and the two former test subjects are going to do your patriotic duty. Whether you like it or not.”

John bowed his head. What was Caleb going through right now? Were Night and Gray okay?

They were caught in Harlow’s web, just like he and Ryan had been all those years ago. Doomed to become lab animals, experimented on until they were of no more use. Only this time, there would be no release back into the outside world.

“I’m sorry,” Ryan said. “I tried to push at his thoughts, but I’ve got no strength left. Even with rest, it took me years to manipulate the doctors in the lab where I was held. Without drakul blood or possession...” He trailed off.

John only shook his head. “What did you think you were going to do when you came here?”

“Kill him, somehow. I don’t know.” Ryan shook his head, as if at his own folly. “I’m sorry. Once you came into contact with me, it was only a matter of time before SPECTR scooped me back up. And once you started to get your memories back...even without the drakul, SPECTR was never going to let you go. You’re one of their dirty little secrets in the flesh.”

John leaned his head back against the wall. “Funny how we’re the dirty secrets, not the people who actually ran Operation Mephisto.”

“Yeah.” Ryan shifted slightly. “Listen...I am sorry I had to kill the empath. Pittman. That wasn’t justice.”

“No. No, it wasn’t.”

“Just know, he would have killed every one of us if Kaniyar had told him to. He hated you for what happened in Charleston, and he hated Caleb just as much.” Ryan paused. “You should know, he and his boss spent a lot of time brainstorming what to do if they think they need to destroy your vampire.”

It made sense—or at least, it had back when Caleb was first possessed. But Kaniyar hadn’t known just how hard a drakul was to kill at that point. Most of her brainstorming must have come after.

Could he blame her? Without Gray, they couldn’t have stopped Drugoy. With no other living vampires to take him on, Gray could cause untold havoc. He wouldn’t...but Kaniyar couldn’t take the risk of certainty.

“I’m not really surprised.” John scrubbed his face. “Goddess. I hope Caleb is okay.”

He wasn’t, though; John knew that. In this vulnerable state, could Caleb be killed? And if so, would Gray jump bodies, or die with him? Or be returned to the etheric plane like any other NHE?

Or would Harlow keep them in this state and run his experiments on Caleb? Torture him, like the kids at the Center had been tortured?

He wanted to scream with frustration and anger. Wanted to pound on the door until it gave way before him, run to save his lovers and Night. Anything but this promise of captivity followed by death.

“It can’t end like this,” he whispered.

“It won’t,” Ryan said.

John turned to him. Ryan looked like he needed a shower and about fourteen hours of

sleep. Maybe even a hospital, given the blood under his nose, the ruby-red of his eyes. “You sound certain of that.”

“I’m spent. And probably in serious danger of frying my brain.” Ryan wiped at the blood beneath his nose; it flaked off and was replaced by a fresh trickle. “Harlow thinks I’m helpless, and at the moment, he’s right. But he doesn’t know about you.”

John frowned, nonplussed. “What about me?”

“That your powers are boosted. That you can exorcise without a circle, thanks to your...intimate relationship with the drakul.”

“How does that get us out of this room?”

“Because if you can exorcise without a circle, I’m guessing you can summon without one.” Ryan met his eyes. “Put a demon in me, and I can get us out of here.”

TWELVE

“No,” John said, even before his mind had fully processed what Ryan was asking of him. “How could you even ask that?”

Ryan’s gaze remained steady. As if he’d come to a place of acceptance. “It’s the only way we can get out of this.”

John’s very soul recoiled. “I can’t. It’s against everything I believe in.”

“You can exorcise me after.”

“No.” He shook his head. “NHEs—our world isn’t meant for them. Our emotions, our physical feelings—they can’t handle it. It drives them mad. I can’t do this, to you or to some innocent entity from the other side of the veil.”

“Except for your vampires. They don’t seem mad.”

“Gray and Night had the cushion of being summoned into corpses. That’s not an option for any other NHE I’ve ever heard of—the others lack the strength to move the dead. They get memories, some sensation, but not enough to break them. And no single exorcist could bring a drakul through the veil.” John stopped and shook his head again. “You can’t go by them. If I did this...it would be just as bad as it was at the Center.”

“In a way,” Ryan agreed, and how could he be so damned calm about this? “I don’t want to do this, John. But no one is coming to save us, so we have to save ourselves.

Just like we did before.”

John rocked forward, face in his hands, fingers pressing against his eyelids. Caleb and Gray were in terrible danger, and Night might be as well, depending on whether she could actually be killed in a dead body, or just set free.

If Ryan had his telepathic powers boosted, he could reach out to the guards on the other side of the door. Force them to unlock it.

No. No, he couldn’t even contemplate this. Using his gift to drag some NHE screaming through the veil, shove it into anyone, let alone someone he knew...

“If I had the supplies, I’d do it myself,” Ryan said wryly. “Any idiot can summon a lycanthrope or a ghoul with a circle and the right intentions. Or wrong intentions, maybe. But unfortunately Harlow didn’t conveniently leave us with the materials to create a summoning circle.”

John wanted to lash out at Ryan. How dare he ask him to do something against everything he believed? Ryan’s actions had led to this situation, and now he wanted John to save them, no matter what it cost.

Just like they’d asked Ryan to save them, back at the Center. To erase their minds, because any chance at escape was worth trying.

“Were you afraid?” He dropped his hands and looked at Ryan. “At the Center, I mean. Were you scared you’d give us all brain damage, or...?”

Ryan nodded gently. “Terrified. You were my brothers and sisters in every way that mattered. I was scared to death I’d kill you, or turn you into a vegetable. And when I learned what had actually happened, that I’d overwritten your memories with my own, the guilt was overwhelming.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” John protested. He’d never considered what Ryan felt about what he had done, but it seemed so obvious now. “You tried to save us, and you did, even if not in the way we’d hoped.”

“I’m glad you see erasing your identity as being saved.”

“We were kids, being exploited by adults. They didn’t have to keep up the pretense after, but it served their purpose, so they did.” The words were ashes on his tongue; it was SPECTR who had done this. “You did save us, Ryan. Please, never doubt that.”

Ryan blinked, tears gathering at the corners of his eyes, and Goddess, this must have eaten into him for all these years. No wonder he’d jumped on the chance to fix things, to bring back John’s memories, then Jo’s, even if it meant making them all targets. This wasn’t only about revenge, or justice. It was also about absolution.

John held out his hand, and Ryan took it, squeezing his fingers. “Thank you,” Ryan croaked, then cleared his throat. “We might not be kids any more, but here we are, back in the same place. With nothing but bad decisions in front of us.”

John closed his eyes. He didn’t want this, any of this.

But he had it anyway.

“After exposure to our world, some NHEs want to return,” he said. “Maybe because they no longer fit in either plane, or their fellows who remained in the etheric plane avoid their madness, leaving them alone and desperate for anything to fill the void. I don’t know exactly why; no one does except the corrupted NHEs themselves.”

“I took a couple of online classes, thinking I might get at least an associate’s degree,” Ryan said. “There’s a term in field biology—trap happy. Some animals will keep coming back to the same trap over and over again.”

“It makes as much sense as anything else.” John licked his lips, a part of him unable to believe he was about to do. “In a place like this, where I’m certain summoning has been happening on a regular basis, they’re probably clustering on their side of the veil. It won’t be hard to find NHEs who have already been fucked up by the mortal plane, but want to come back.”

“Give ’em what they want, then,” Ryan said with a quirk of his mouth that might have been a wry smile. “Will you do it?”

Caleb and Gray needed him. He couldn’t let them be imprisoned here by Harlow, experimented on for years to come. Couldn’t consign Gray with his visceral love of life, Caleb with his artist’s soul, to a featureless prison.

Couldn’t consign himself, either. To helplessness. To despair. Not when he had the power to act.

John took a deep breath. “I don’t want this. But none of this is about what I want. I’ll do it. I’ll summon demons into both of us.”

Ryan recoiled, letting go of John’s hand. “What? No! That’s not what I’m asking.”

“I know.” Now it was John’s turn for calm. Decision made, there was nothing left to do but move forward. “But if I’m going to do this, I’m going to do it right. Everything is on the line here. You, me, Gray, Caleb, Night. We can’t half-ass this.”

“But you don’t need the boost,” Ryan objected.

“I will after I summon a pair of NHEs without a circle. And...you forget what my job is. I know all the reasons people summon demons, and you’d be surprised how often a physical advantage is behind it. It will be too early in possession to truly exploit all the NHE’s powers, but it will still be an edge we can’t afford to pass up.”

Ryan stared at him for a long moment. Then he wiped his eyes. “Fuck, Jonny. I’m so sorry I controlled you. I thought I didn’t have a choice. I thought you’d come around to my point of view, thought I just needed to give you a little nudge. I was so desperate to reclaim ‘us,’ you and me and Jo, I lost sight of everything else. It was so fucking easy to convince myself I had to do it, that you’d eventually understand, that we’d have justice and somehow still be together...”

John’s heart ached. Their bond had been forged in terrible circumstances, but was all the stronger for it. Even before he’d gotten his memories back, he’d felt it. “I wish everything had been different,” he said. “At least, that we’d met again some other way. Or...I don’t know.”

“Do you regret knowing? If you’d never found out the truth...”

“No.” John didn’t even have to think about it. “This has been terrible, I won’t lie. But it’s real. No matter how painful it is, it’s the truth.”

“And the truth will set you free?” Ryan asked with an arch of the brow.

“Something like that.” John opened his arms. “Come here.”

They hugged for what felt like a long time, but was probably less than a minute. With his restored memories, everything about Ryan was achingly familiar. Tears stung John’s eyes, and he let them flow without shame, felt Ryan’s tears sinking through his shirt in turn.

Whatever happened next, it wouldn’t end well for Ryan.

They clapped one another on the back and parted. “Are you ready?” John asked.

Ryan nodded. “Yeah. I’m ready.”

John took a series of deep breaths, stilling his mind. In the old days, doing an exorcism, he would have relied on candles, Florida water, and his silver athame to channel his intent.

Now, thanks to Gray, his sense for etheric energy required only the latter. The veil was right there, solid and real even though there was no physical way to interact with it.

He was used to pulling demons from this side and pushing them into a bottle, or else letting Gray feed on them. But sensing them on the other side was an entirely different prospect.

Or so it felt intellectually. But as his mind focused, he found it felt very much the same. Etheric energy crackled, close and yet far away.

All of his SPECTR training claimed that, while it was possible to summon specific classes of NHEs, the easiest summonings were simply to call on any entity that matched the energy of the faust. Loneliness and despair resonated with ghouls, and rage to lycanthropes. Just as humans were endlessly complex, so were NHEs. Or perhaps it was just those who had been corrupted by mortal needs.

Ryan's rage spread through the etheric, like the flames of a campfire seen in a dark forest. John sharpened his will, felt the attention of a lycanthrope pressing against the veil, hungry to feel the very emotions that had driven it mad in the first place.

Maybe NHEs were more like people than he'd ever imagined. Drawn irresistibly back to the things that had broken them in the first place.

His will sharpened into the spiked hook he used to yank NHEs free from their hosts. But this time, he cast it toward the veil, felt the etheric barrier puncture and tear.

The lycanthrope took the hook with an eagerness that turned his stomach. He was used to fighting them, dragging them from their hosts, and the reverse felt so unnatural he was almost unable to bring himself to continue.

Almost.

He pulled on the lycanthrope, even as Ryan leaned back on his heels, arms spread. Opening himself, trying to make the process easier.

The NHE slithered inside. For a moment, John's instincts screamed to yank it back out. Instead, he gently retracted the hook, making sure to leave the NHE behind in Ryan.

It was against all of his training. And what he was about to do was against all his instincts.

He reached out once again to the etheric plane, but this time he held nothing back. All of his grief, his fury, was on full display, a beacon crying out to the demons whose own pain resonated with his.

A sorrowful voice, full of compassion, whispered to him. "I see your sorrow. The ones who caused it should feel that same grief. They should suffer as you do."

Yes, he whispered back, and felt something reach across the veil to him.

He took its hand and drew it inside.

"...the two former test subjects..."

Ryan. And John.

Gray was a silent void, and Night a heap on the floor, the exit door now sealed tight beyond her. And if that wasn't bad enough, these fuckers meant to stick Ryan and John back in a fucking lab.

"Come now," the woman said. "Surely this is preferable, is it not? Your NHE sleeps—you can think clearly again! And yet, you retain all of the benefits it has to give." Her expression lost its smugness, and a troubled look briefly flickered over her face. "I know what it's like," she went on in a lowered voice. "The pain, the hunger, the...urges. But right now, your mind is free again. It will stay that way, so long as you cooperate and remain in this room. Surely you see this is for the best."

Something clicked. "This...are they looking for a way to create a demon army, but without the psychosis of possession?"

"Not an army. Operatives would be a better word."

Right. "And when the forty days is up? What happens? Does the possession still become permanent?"

Another flicker. "All your questions will be answered eventually, if you just cooperate."

"You don't know, do you?" he laughed incredulously. "You don't even know if you're doomed."

"I'll be exorcised long before it becomes an issue," she snapped back, but his words had clearly shaken her. "Now shut up and wait."

He reached again for the aching place where Gray should be. He'd never been alone in a situation like this. Gray was the hunter, the fighter, not him.

Caleb took a deep breath. He'd been a semi-competent human being before meeting Gray. He needed to act.

He had to save them both.

"No voice in your head, but all the benefits?" he asked.

She gave him a smile, clearly thinking he was coming around. "Exactly. Speed, strength, your paranormal ability more powerful than you ever dreamed."

"Right." He swallowed. "Listen, for what it's worth...I'm sorry."

And used his TK to slam her back into the wall.

A startled shout escaped her as he closed in, but she managed to bring her knee up. He twisted so it impacted with his thigh, only to have her punch him directly in the jaw.

Bone snapped and his head jerked back. Pain blinded him for a moment, but he was used to pushing through it by now. He tried to grapple with her, but without claws and fangs she slipped loose.

Fuck. Apparently manifesting physical changes was off the menu without Gray.

"Backup!" she yelled, staggering away from him. "I need backup! Someone call?—"

He sprang onto her back, wrapping his arms around her neck and his legs around her waist. She stumbled under his unexpected weight, then grabbed his wrists with her hands, trying to peel him off.

If he could get more etheric energy into them, maybe Gray could break free of the

exorcist's control. John wouldn't like it, but this was a life or death situation for all of them.

This was going to suck. More for her than him, but still.

Caleb bit her as hard as he could on the neck.

THIRTEEN

It was a banshee, John thought dimly. A creature of grief, compelled to make all who heard it grieve as well. If death came to one, death should come to all.

Megan's crescent moon charm seemed to burn against his skin, where it hung tucked beneath his shirt. Under Harlow's orders, she'd just been left there, sealed in until her forty days were up, until there was no way left to save her.

SPECTR agents kidnapped him, took him away from the mother who loved him, then allowed him to believe he'd been given away. They put Ryan in a lab, and trapped him, Jo, and poor Tim in SPECTR. Tim died in the line of duty, never even having a chance to learn the truth.

This burden on his heart shouldn't be his alone to bear. Harlow and all his enablers should feel it too, right before they perish.

He took a deep, steadying breath. The banshee would tell him what he wanted to hear, try to align their interests. He needed to resist.

"But you are right to feel angry," it whispered, and he couldn't disagree.

Ryan stood very still, head cocked to the side. "Are you all right?" John asked.

"No." Ryan cast him a rueful look. "But that's not the point, is it? I can feel its power surging through me. I think it will be enough to get us out of here. And after we escape the compound, once we're safe again, you'll exorcise me. Just like before."

John nodded. “Just like before.”

“Then let’s do this.”

Ryan crossed the room and stood beside the door. He closed his bloody eyes and took on an attitude of concentration. His breathing grew harsh, and a bubble of blood burst from one nostril.

What if he couldn’t do this? What if the NHE didn’t give him enough energy? What if...

A burst of gunfire sounded on the other side of the door, causing John to jump. It was followed by a beep as the door unlocked—then a single shot.

Ryan staggered. John grabbed his arm before he could crumple. “You can’t keep this up!”

Ryan licked the blood that had trickled down to his mouth. “No choice. Come on.”

He opened the door. The two guards lay outside, both dead from gunshot wounds. A sick satisfaction filled John, along with a murmur of “Their pain ended too quickly, but at least they’re dead.”

John shook his head, trying to dislodge the voice. His exorcist sense hummed like a live wire; when he looked at Ryan, he could see the demon within, hungry for more violence. Could feel other NHEs, like glowing lights beckoning to him from other points in the compound.

He couldn’t command them as he had the fully transformed ghouls in New Orleans. But some were so, so close to their forty days. Just a little while longer, and he could have them.

No—that wasn't why he was here. He straightened his spine, tried to focus past the banshee's influence that howled through his soul like a bleak wind, or a scream of the damned.

“Can you sense Harlow?” he asked. “Or Caleb?”

Caleb. Fuck, he must be so scared right now. They had to get to him, had to save Gray and Night.

Ryan nodded. “I can. Harlow is headed for Caleb now. I'll try to shield us from any other guards, but I might not be able to get them all.”

John squatted by one of the bodies and took the 9mm from his belt. “I'll take care of any you can't handle. And any who are possessed, though it doesn't seem Harlow has the same interest in demon soldiers that Forsythe had.”

“Just in boosting paranormal ability,” Ryan agreed.

John checked the clip, gratified to find it full. “We need to move.”

They started down the hall, Ryan leading the way to Harlow. Shouts sounded behind them; John spun and fired. He was already faster and stronger than an unpossessed human; how much better would he get if the possession lingered?

No, that was the banshee talking.

“Is it? Or do you just finally recognize the truth?”

One guard went down from the shot; the second collapsed beneath a mental pulse from Ryan. They turned their backs from the dead or dying men and continued on.

Time seemed to slow and speed up simultaneously; the banshee gave him an edge in each confrontation, but between fights they seemed to go from hallway to central tunnel, through the raised blast door, and to another hall in a series of blinks. Like a film carelessly cut.

Ryan moved like a hunter, the lycanthrope within lending his battered body strength and focus. As for John...

“Yes,” the banshee moaned, “let them suffer as we have suffered. As you suffered.”

At some point, he became aware his face was wet with tears, his own or the banshee’s, or both. People like these guards, blindly following the orders of their superiors, had stolen him from his former life. Locked him away. Experimented on him, killed his friends, destroyed his life...

Maybe Ryan was right. He had nothing left; better to drag everyone else down into death and despair alongside him...

Caleb’s face flashed through his mind. Warm brown eyes, alive with love. Gray, tenderly cupping his face at Fort Sumter.

He wasn’t alone. He had things to live for. Reasons for hope.

“Your enemies will kill them. You will be alone. Except for me.”

“No,” he said aloud.

Ryan turned to him, and oh Goddess, he was in bad shape. One eye drooping, blood dripping freely from nose and ears. “What?”

John gripped his arm. “Ryan, you can’t keep this up?—”

“I can.” Ryan pulled away, and for an instant anger flashed across his face, before being replaced by determination. “Sorry—the demon, it’s angry. Always. But we can’t stop now, Jonny. You know that.”

He was right; there was nothing to do but push forward. “You take out the guards; I’ll deal with the other NHEs.”

“Okay.” Ryan slowed. “We’re almost there now.”

They turned a final corner, and Harlow walked ahead of them, surrounded by his cohort.

The banshee stirred at the sight of Harlow, prompted by John’s rush of fury. “Make him hurt, make him feel what we are feeling!”

There were only two armed guards. They turned at the sound of footsteps, eyes betraying their surprise even as they brought their weapons up.

Ryan flung his hand out, as if needing the physical gesture to direct his power now. One stiffened, all electrical activity in his brain momentarily turned to static, then collapsed. Even as he hit the floor, Ryan let out a cry and clapped both hands to his head, before falling to his knees.

“Ryan!” John shouted—and was brought up short by the second guard pointing a rifle directly at his head.

That would have stopped him, before the banshee, before the trail of bodies behind him. Now the banshee rose within him, and he let it, their desires in perfect alignment. With its strength and speed, and his training, he propelled himself at the guard, avoiding the swinging barrel as the man belatedly tried to readjust his aim. He tore the weapon free, snapping a few of the guard’s fingers as he did so, and hurled it

away. A moment later, he slammed the man's helmet into the wall, hard enough for his eyes to go glassy.

"Stop!" Harlow barked. "Stop, or I'll kill him!"

John let the guard fall and turned. Harlow held one hand outstretched, his telekinetic gift mimicking the movement and wrapping itself around Ryan's neck. Ryan clawed at his throat, instinctively trying to pry off the fingers that were psychically strangling him, but only opening deep gouges in his own skin.

"I don't know how the hell you were able to do a summoning in a bare office," Harlow said, eyes now fixed on John. "You weren't possessed when we left you there, or else my exorcists would have warned me." The two women stood attentively beside him; one nodded, as if to confirm her loyalty.

Ryan had been right; Harlow didn't know about drakul blood, or other body fluids. So either his source was oddly informed about some things but not others, or it hadn't been a leak from SPECTR at all.

It had been a feed.

"Surrender, cooperate, and you can have a good life here," Harlow said. "Otherwise..."

He turned back to Ryan with a scowl. "You could have been so useful. Truly a one-of-a-kind opportunity for me. But I'm afraid the cost-benefit analysis is no longer in your favor."

And so saying, he slammed Ryan into the wall with the full force of his demon-enhanced TK.

The world slowed around John. He saw Ryan hit the wall with a terrible clarity, heard the crack of breaking bone as his skull met the stone wall. Ryan fell to the floor, limp. Unmoving.

Just a piece of trash Harlow had thrown away.

A rage like he'd never felt kindled in John's veins, and though the banshee fanned the flames, it belonged to him. He wanted to rip out Harlow's heart, set fire to the complex, tear down the very mountain.

"There was no way you were ever going to succeed, Nineteen," Harlow said. "Submit and you'll be spared."

John turned away from Ryan's unmoving body, grief and rage tangling together as the banshee howled along with him from just beneath his skin. Ryan had believed, wholeheartedly, that John would exorcise him again when the time came. But thanks to Harlow, he'd died with a demon inside him.

Ryan was beyond his help now, the demon freed back into the etheric plane. But John could still honor his final request the only way he knew how.

At the Center, he'd been an untrained child who couldn't imagine doing more than exorcising the ring of friends directly around him. Leaving Megan possessed, and ultimately forgotten.

That was no longer the case. He wasn't just an adult, but a highly trained government exorcist.

This time, he was going to exorcise the whole damned compound.

"I'll never submit to you," John snarled.

He reached deep inside, drawing on everything he had to give, everything the banshee had to offer. Throwing back his head, he screamed as he sent all of that energy, all of his talent, outward. Toward all of those glowing points of light that were NHEs.

It exploded out from him like the pressure wave from a bomb, tearing demons free from their hosts. Dimly, he felt it pass around two larger etheric entities—the drakul—like water around river rocks.

Then it was done, dissipating into the distance. John found himself on his knees, head aching and a coppery taste in his mouth. One of the exorcists cried out in shock—then stumbled away from Harlow, an expression of horror on her face. A moment later, she broke and ran, followed by the other.

Harlow remained, blinking, disoriented.

“Now,” whispered the banshee. “It is his turn to hurt.”

John rose to his feet. Harlow held up one hand, as if to fend him off. “Let’s not do something you’ll regret.”

John rushed him, closing his hands around Harlow’s collar and shoving him back into the wall so hard the back of his head cracked against it. Dazed, Harlow scrabbled at his hands, but John didn’t care.

“I’m not going to regret this,” he said, showing all his teeth as he grinned. “I’m going to fucking kill you with my bare hands, and enjoy every last second of it.”

The woman shoved Caleb away from her, then back-handed him. Blood arced from his mouth, both hers and his.

“You fucking psycho!” she shouted, clapping her hand to her neck. “Backup; I need backup!”

Something struck him from behind, as if he was at the beach and a wave washed unexpectedly over him. He swayed, took a step forward to keep his balance?—

And felt Gray stir within.

He didn’t know what had happened, and honestly didn’t care. Christ, there you are! They’re trying to kill us, so get out here and help!

Gray didn’t waste time with questions, simply roared to the surface. Caleb fell back, readying his TK to support Gray if need be.

“Where did the demons go?” Gray asked, confused.

The hell?

The woman cowered in front of them, but Gray was right—she didn’t smell like a succubus anymore. Above, confused men and women pulled off their headbands; even through the thick glass Caleb could hear their calls of confusion. “What happened?” “Was that an exorcism? But how?” “Oh God, it was twisting my thoughts, and I didn’t even realize.”

“They have been exorcised,” Night said, sounding disappointed. She rose to her feet in a single, inhuman motion. “There is nothing left to hunt.”

John must be behind this, Caleb told Gray.

Gray looked around them. The exorcists above were no threat, and neither was the woman on the floor. “We must find John,” Gray said. “Night, help me with the door.”

Between the two of them, they wrenched the door open. As soon as they were through, Gray broke into a run, followed by Night. Caleb tensed, expecting shouts or alarms. Some sort of resistance, at least.

Instead, the base remained eerily silent. What the fuck was going on?

John would know. They just needed to find him, then go in whatever direction he pointed them.

“There!” Gray exclaimed.

Two figures stood at the end of the hall, surrounded by motionless bodies. John had a man shoved up against the wall, and as Gray hurried to help him, they caught the scent.

Wet peat mingled with tears, underlain with blood. One demon yet remained in the compound.

And it was inside John.

“John!”

John’s head snapped around at Gray’s rumble. His scent, of petrichor and incense, washed over John, joined a moment later by night-blooming jasmine and copal.

Terror spiked through the banshee, the dreadful certainty that these were predators who wanted to eat it. The base level instinct for survival pumped adrenaline through John’s veins, and he had to brace himself not to run.

“Get back!” he ordered, even though his voice trembled with the banshee’s fear.

“Don’t come any closer!”

Gray stopped, as did Night. A moment later, it was Caleb in front of him, not Gray.

“Sweetheart?” Caleb asked, holding up his hands as if to show he wasn’t going to hurt anyone. “What’s going on?”

Pushing aside the banshee’s panic, John refocused on Harlow. The man’s face was going red as he struggled to break free. John tightened the collar around Harlow’s neck, cutting off even more air. “He wanted us to be his lab rats again.” Fear filled Harlow’s eyes, giving John a burst of savage pleasure. “He killed Ryan. Told me to submit. But I won’t. I’m going to make sure he never hurts anyone again.”

“John, listen to me.” Caleb took a step closer. “This isn’t you. You aren’t like Ryan; you aren’t a cold-blooded killer.”

“See?” the banshee whispered frantically. “They are our enemy! Kill the mortal and run. We will escape; we’ll find all the others who hurt you.”

The ones hidden in SPECTR safe houses. The banshee was right; his job wasn’t finished. He couldn’t exorcise himself yet, not until he made sure they first knew suffering, then knew death.

“I don’t know what’s going on in your head,” Caleb said, voice so gentle it cut through the haze. “But I know you. John Starkweather, Jonathan Low—it doesn’t matter what you call yourself. Because I— we —see you for who you really are inside. And if you ever need a reminder, like I think you do now, we’re here to give it to you.”

John’s hands shook. He stared into Harlow’s wide, terrified eyes, and felt only contempt.

“He deserves to weep as you have wept! Then die, as Ryan died.”

“He deserves it,” John echoed.

“I can’t disagree with that,” Caleb said. “But you don’t. He’s done for, and if you kill him now, it will weigh on you for the rest of your life.”

John wavered, and the banshee sensed it. “You were far more helpless when you were a child,” it said slyly, and he could almost feel fingers riffle through his memories. “Don’t you remember the pain, the terror, the despair? Yours went on for months; killing him so quickly is an act of mercy.”

He took a deep, gulping breath. His hands shook, and he longed to agree. To give in, to stop feeling so torn, to just let it all go and become...

A killer? A monster?

John let go and stepped back. Harlow sank to the floor, gasping for breath, but John ignored him.

“No, what are you doing? Stop!”

I’m sorry, he told the banshee. Then pushed it out of his soul.

It fought, but there was nothing to cling to, all his will bent on ejecting the intruder. With a final snarl, it slipped away, back across the veil.

Caleb rushed to him, drawing John into his arms. As they clung to one another, shouts of “SPECTR agents! Drop your weapons!” rang out from the central tunnel.

Kaniyar had arrived.

FOURTEEN

Several weeks later, Caleb steered the black SUV off of I-95 in Savannah, onto a side street. John sat in the passenger seat, staring pensively out the window, while Night lurked in the back as usual. Zahira was still busy with the Armaros clean-up, but she hoped to rejoin them soon.

Night and Gray were still hunting together, though how much longer she would hang around, Caleb couldn't guess. Things seemed to be working between the two drakul for now, but Night could always get bored and wander off. If so, he had every intention of keeping quiet about it for as long as possible. Give her a head start to get away from SPECTR.

Kaniyar had her excuses for setting them up, of course she did. All along, she'd intended for them to be not only the distraction that would let her forces get inside the compound, but her excuse for raiding it in the first place. After all, she claimed, she'd just been acting as necessary to save an agent of the federal government from an organization summoning demons in violation of both national and international law. With Harlow's wrong-doing recorded and exposed, his Pentagon ties immediately distanced themselves. No one wanted to appear as if they were siding with Armaros over the Department of Justice.

Kaniyar even had an excuse as to why she hadn't let them in on her plan. She'd assumed—wrongly, as it turned out—that Harlow would have an empath on hand for any questioning, if they were taken captive. An empath couldn't tell if Caleb was lying, but John would be an open book.

In terms of cold calculations, it made sense. One could easily argue the human cost was far smaller than allowing Harlow's experiments to continue.

Assuming someone else didn't take up the mantle and start afresh, somewhere far away from the Armaros compound.

"Mortal foolishness," Gray said with disgust. "Why do humans insist on inviting demons into them? In the five thousand years I have walked the earth, they have never learned this simple lesson."

We're really into committing the same mistakes over and over again, Caleb replied. Besides, if they didn't, you wouldn't have anything to eat.

"This is true."

For the moment, Harlow was out on bond awaiting trial. Jo was in jail, but her lawyer was sending statements to the press alleging illegal human experimentation within SPECTR. Harlow's name had already come up, and there were rumors she might get a deal in exchange for testifying against him.

But who knew. It was early days, and Harlow was a rich man with powerful friends.

At least they'd all survived. Well, not Ryan, but everyone Caleb personally cared about. Though when they'd seen John possessed...

Gray growled at the memory. The moment had been horrifying, confusing, enraging. How dare some demon do such a thing?

John had to do something. We were incapacitated, and none of us knew Kaniyar was on her way.

"That does not mean I have to like it."

“Does any of this feel familiar to you?” Caleb asked John as they drove along the tree-lined streets. “I don’t think we came this way last year—not like we were here long enough to really explore the city, and you were still pretty beat up from Charleston.”

John frowned a little. “I don’t know. Maybe? Or maybe my mind is just deceiving itself.”

As they got closer to their destination, John began to fidget. When they turned onto a street with small working-class houses along either side, he bit his lip and looked worried.

Caleb reached over and took his hand. “It’s going to be okay, sweetheart.”

John swallowed hard. “What if she doesn’t want to see me? It’s been so long; she must think I’m dead. What if coming here makes things worse for her?”

The GPS beeped to let them know they’d arrived. Caleb parked along the street rather than in the driveway, shut off the car, and turned to John.

“I don’t think it will go that way,” he said. “But if it does, we’ll be right here with you.”

“I know.” John gave him a small smile, followed by a distracted kiss. “I just need to suck it up and go ring the doorbell.”

“Want us to come with you?”

“Not yet.”

Caleb watched John climb out of the car and walk up the sidewalk to the house. He wore jeans and a sweatshirt, maybe trying to look as normal as possible. Or maybe

he'd just wanted to be comfortable.

John rang the bell and stepped back. After a few seconds, the door swung open, and Caleb got a look at the woman who lived in the house. Even from a distance, he could see the family resemblance, from her dark hair streaked with gray, to her vividly blue eyes.

Thanks to Gray's enhanced hearing, Caleb had no trouble overhearing her say, "Yes?" She frowned, as if she thought she should recognize John but didn't quite.

"Darlene Low? Dolly?" John cleared his throat. "It's, uh, me. Jonathan. Your son."

Her eyes went wide, and one hand flew to her mouth. Then she flung her arms around him.

Caleb watched as they wept together; John said something, but it was muffled in her hair. After a few minutes, Dolly took a step back into her house, drawing John with her. The door closed behind them.

Gray stirred, not entirely certain when it came to human relations and uneasy about the closed door. "Should we go after him?"

No. Let them have their reunion. It's been a long time coming. He'll come get us when he's ready.

"But he will be all right?"

"Yeah," Caleb said aloud. "I think he will be."

That evening, as the last light of the sun clung to the sky, John walked through the historic district with Caleb and Gray by his side. He felt...he wasn't sure, exactly. Exhausted, overwhelmed, happy, sad, angry, all of it tangled in a ball in his chest.

She'd recognized him in an instant, his mother. "I always knew I'd see you again," she'd said, crying into his shoulder.

He'd told her...not everything, not yet. But she'd seen the news coverage of Jo's allegations, and had broken down crying again when he told her he'd been taken away to be another test subject. He explained his memories had been lost until recently, which was why he hadn't come before now.

"I know you would have if you could," she'd said, patting his hand.

As for her, a few lucky breaks had given her the opportunity to get out of poverty. Now she was a community organizer working to help the city's many poor and unhoused. She'd done so much good, even after everything that had happened to her, and he was so very proud.

They'd go back tomorrow and visit her some more, maybe help her with her work if there was anything useful they could do. Technically he was on leave, and he hadn't yet told her he'd be returning to SPECTR despite all it had done to their family.

Because Kaniyar wasn't just going to let Gray walk away and settle down to have a quiet life among mortals.

In the depths of February, few people were out, except for the ghost tours which were as much a part of Savannah as the vampire tours were a part of New Orleans. Caleb paused to listen to a guide's patter as they passed by, then shook his head. "I could do better than that."

"Maybe you should hire on."

Caleb snorted. "Hmm, considering how my last gig ended, I think I'll pass. Besides, Kaniyar probably isn't going to let us stay long enough to bother with a job."

Night was back at their hotel, gone dormant and waiting until Gray returned to hunt. Savannah had any number of old cemeteries, and if the local SPECTR office kept those cleared of ghouls, there were always the swamps beyond where anything might lurk. If nothing else, the two drakul would be happy and fed while they were here.

At last, they reached their destination: the terracotta fountain outside of The Cotton Exchange building, with the statue of a winged lion standing proudly at one end of the pool. The water was cut off this time of year, but in the dying sunlight the lion gleamed red as blood.

John stopped by the statue. “This is where it all began. Where SPECTR agents saved me from that lycanthrope, then betrayed me to the Center.”

“I’m sorry.” Caleb leaned against the edge of the fountain. “We’ll find a way to get free, somehow.”

John didn’t reply, only took Caleb’s hand. Caleb squeezed his fingers, then changed the subject. “So, what name are you going to use going forward?”

“Shit, I don’t know.” He sighed. “Every legal document I have says ‘John Starkweather’ on it. ‘John’ is fine, it’s close enough, but if I want to change my last name back to Low I’m going to have to jump through some hoops. And I’m willing to, but it’s just one more damned reminder of what happened, you know?”

“True.” Caleb let his hand drop and cocked his head contemplatively. “Hmm, you know, there is another way you could change your last name.”

John frowned, confused. “What do you mean?”

He caught a whiff of petrichor; Gray was just on the border of manifesting, apparently wanting to be a part of the conversation. Caleb slid his hand into his pocket and pulled out a small box. “I think John Gris has a nice sound to it, don’t

you?” he asked, opening the box to reveal a plain gold band.

John put his hand to his mouth, feeling tears springing to his eyes. “Y-Yes,” he said, a smile threatening to split his face. “It really does.”

Caleb grinned, then pulled him close, and they kissed before the fountain as the darkness drew in.

The adventures of John, Caleb, and Gray will conclude in SPECTR Series 4.