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Where the Dead Remain

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Bryan Camp

B.A. Southeastern Louisiana University, 2006

December 2010

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for New Orleans, my city, and for Elizabeth, my home

A man's house burns down. The smoking wreckage represents only a ruined home that was dear through years of use and pleasant associations. By and by, as the days and weeks go on, first he misses this, then that, then the other thing. And when he casts about for it he finds that it was in that house. Always it is an essential -- there was but one of its kind. It cannot be replaced. It was in that house. It is irrevocably lost. It will be years before the tale of lost essentials is complete, and not till then can he truly know the magnitude of his disaster..."

Mark Twain - The Autobiography of Mark Twain

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Abstract

Where the Dead Remain is a murder mystery set in a Post-Katrina New Orleans where the gods, magic and monsters of various world mythologies actually exist. The story follows a week in the life of Jude Duboisson, a once magician who is struggling with the loss of his magic and the life he had known in the wake of the storm, as he is pulled out of his torpor and into the affairs of the mighty once again. He is tasked with discovering who murdered Dodge Renaud, the fortune god of New Orleans. What he discovers, though, are some surprising truths about the fundamental nature of things: about loss, about New Orleans, and about himself.

Keywords: Angel, Anubis, Baron Samedi, Detective, Gods, Katrina, Legba, Magician, Mythology, Nephilim, New Orleans, Urban fantasy, Vampire, Voodoo

Chapter One

In the beginning, there was the Word, and the Void, and Ice in the North and Fire in the South, and the Great Waters. A universe created in a day and a night, or billions of years, or seven days, or a cycle of creations and destructions. The waters were made to recede to reveal the land, or the land was formed of the coils of a serpent, or half of a slain ocean goddess, or the flesh and bones and skull of a giant, or a broken egg. Or the land was brought up to the surface of the waters by a water beetle, or a muskrat, or a turtle, or two water loons. Or an island of curdled salt appeared when the sea was churned by a spear. A world populated by men who evolved from a single cell, or were made from clay or from wood or found trapped in a clam shell. Or who fell from a hole in the sky, or crawled up from an underworld of seven caves, or an insect world below. All of these stories, these truths, exist; part of a simultaneous, magical state of being that makes up the world. But it is not a world without complications. Not without conflicts. Not without seams.

Jude Duboisson thought about those seams as he stared out at Jackson Square, at the broad white expanse of St. Louis Cathedral, at the plump, fluttering mass of pigeons, at the tidal ebb and flow of tourists on the cobblestones, seeing none of it. The loud, constant mutter of the crowd fell on deaf ears, as did the hooves clapping on pavement, the hooting echo of a calliope playing on a steamboat on the river. He thought about things he seldom let himself think about anymore, names and magic, lies and myth, his present and his past. Cassandra.

Some of his thoughts spilled onto his face, visible in the dark circles under his eyes, the gaunt hollows of his cheeks, the speckling of gray in his beard and hair, in his stillness, his distant stare. He wore jeans and a long-sleeved shirt despite the cloying wet shroud that clung to

New Orleans in the summer, the heat that made everything difficult, even breathing. Sweat stuck his shirt to his skin, tickled down the small of his back, slicked down his hair. He yawned, holding the back of his hand to his open mouth, a hand he thrust back under the table, self-conscious of the black gloves he wore.

Not that anyone paid him any attention. He'd waited there for five hours already, and only a few people had bothered to ask what his sign meant. None had sat down. His services were, unlike the tarot card prophets and the palm readers, not part of the cliché of the Square, and thus under the tourist's radar. The slow trade suited Jude, who only used the table as an excuse to get out of the house.

A young street performer, Timmy or Tommy or something he couldn't remember, stopped in front of his table, casting a long shadow over Jude's face. He welcomed the intrusion into his brooding as much as the sudden relief from the sun's glare. Jude looked up into a face streaked with the sweaty remnants of clown paint, split by an unguarded grin. The boy wore a golf cap and a tweed vest with no shirt on underneath. Less than ten years separated the two men, maybe as little as five, but to Jude's eyes, he was still a boy.

Grown more used to silence than speech, Jude had to search for his voice before he could speak. "You need something?" he asked, the words scratched.

"Was gonna ask you the same thing," the boy said, pulling off the cap and swiping sweat from his forehead. "Just headed to the store round the corner." He gestured with the limp hat in the store's direction before slipping it back onto his head.

Jude shook his head. "Thanks anyway."

"Ain't nothin," he said. He turned to go, then looked back. "You coming tomorrow

night?”

Jude shrugged and raised his eyebrows. The boy threw his hands into the air. “I only told you, like, twelve times already. My band finally got that gig? At the Circle Bar?”

“Oh, right,” Jude said. He imagined himself crammed into a tight space with a crowd of strangers and lied to the kid. “Yeah, I’ll try to make it.”

The boy’s grin widened into a smile that took another five years off his age and made Jude feel like a slightly older, meaner version of himself. The street performer moved on to the next table, the sole of one of his shoes flapping, pitiful, on the street. Jude sighed, inhaling the rich odor of the Quarter, stale beer and musky humanity and the moist, dark scent of the river. It was hard, sometimes, to live in the seam between the doldrums of seclusion and the demands of community, but, because of things he didn’t like to think about, Jude belonged there. Or so he believed.

A short while later, Jude got his first and only customers of the day, a couple of out-of-towners. College kids, judging by their University t-shirts and the bright green plastic flasks they held. Lovers, Jude guessed, from the way the boy rested his hand on her shoulder, the way the girl introduced the both of them, Mandy and Dave. Mandy seemed, by far, the more eager of the two, asking Jude what his sign meant while Dave looked towards the other side of the Square, as if searching for an escape.

“It means what it says,” Jude said. “If you’ve lost something, I can tell you where it is.”

“Like, anything?” Mandy asked, glancing at Dave to see if he was listening.

“Yeah,” Jude said, “like, anything.” She seemed not to notice the droll mockery in his voice, but Dave turned and frowned at her.

“It's a scam,” he said.

“First one is free if you're not satisfied,” Jude said. “Ten bucks when you are.”

Dave's frown deepened, but Mandy lowered herself into one of the chairs across from Jude. “Come on, sweetie, let me at least try it. My mom will kill me if I she finds out I took her earrings.” Dave rolled his eyes and stayed standing. He acted like someone who had been hustled before.

But Jude was no hustler. He had always had an affinity for lost things. Even as a child, he could point out that a friend had left a toy beneath a sofa cushion, could lead a neighbor to where her cat had stranded itself too high in a tree. Unerring as his knowledge was, it had its limitations. He couldn't find things that he himself had lost, for instance. Things of magic or great age gave him trouble, eluding the grasp of his gift, sometimes staying lost entirely. As he aged or with use, Jude wasn't sure which, this gift strengthened, grew more nuanced. A brush of his fingertips against someone's pillow and he knew her name, knew that she was hungry and cold and alone, knew that she was locked in a basement in Ohio, even though she'd only vanished from her room a few days before.

Then came the hurricane, and a rip at the seams.

The seam split between government and individuals, and the levees that were built to protect, didn't. It split between the people of New Orleans and their lives, the lucky ones cast out like dandelion seeds thrown by a fierce wind. The stitches that held together communities and families and homes stretched in that wind. Some frayed, some tore. In the flood of lost things that followed, the seam between Jude and his magic ripped open wide.

In the aftermath, Jude found his life had become a raw, open wound. Cassandra had

vanished, and his gift had turned on him. Before, he had to focus in order to see or feel whatever his magic would show him. After, he could barely hold it at bay. Like many after the storm, he turned to drinking, then to pills, to numb his senses. The drugs only worked for so long, though. This power was too much a part of him to be denied. Eventually, he'd figured out that he if he kept his hands covered, if he used his gift every once in a while, he could manage. For three years he hadn't really lived, couldn't return to his old life, couldn't move on to something new, but he'd survived in his quiet seam of a half-life. Being nowhere and nothing, he'd decided, was better than feeling all that loss.

Jude slipped off his glove beneath the table and a rush of sensation flickered along his naked skin, like the pins-and-needles of returning circulation. He reached out and took the girl's slender hand within his own, focusing on the idea of an earring. If he had merely touched her, he would have seen and felt everything she'd lost in her young life. Even a seemingly happy and pampered girl like her would have lost enough to exhaust him.

“You lost the earring in your hotel room,” Jude said.

Dave snorted. “Good guess, Sherlock,” he said. “Real big leap to see that we're tourists. Do people really fall for this?”

“Not where you're staying in New Orleans. The room is somewhere else, somewhere you stayed before you came here. You flew there but drove here?” Mandy gasped and pulled her hand away. Jude fought the urge to smile. He'd phrased the last part as a question, but he'd known that, too. He knew more, the name of the hotel, the room number, but he'd learned that if he got too specific, people went from intrigued to scared. Dave took a ten out of his wallet and sat down. “The next one is twenty,” Jude said.

Twenty minutes and sixty dollars later, Jude said something dubious and vague enough that Dave's cynicism returned, and they left. Jude could have kept them there until they were broke, but the money meant nothing to him. He needed the release valve use of his gift more than anything else. He'd been so much more than this, once. As if bidden by the thought of the past, Jude's phone jumped and buzzed in his pocket. He snatched it out, startled. He carried it more out of habit than anything else. No one who had this number had spoken to him in years.

Meet me for a drink in an hour, the message read. The usual place, very important. Have something for you. Then, as he read, his phone twitched with another message. It read, *This is Regal.* As if his phone hadn't said who the message was from. Jude sighed and stood up. He'd have to leave soon if he wanted to make it all the way Uptown in an hour. Why had she sent that second message? Maybe she thought he changed his phone. Maybe he should have.

Walking into St. Joe's bar was like descending into a cave and discovering a chapel. The shock of the colder air made Jude's skin prickle and every hair stand on end. Dozens of crosses hung from the ceiling, not one of them resembling the next, one simple and carved out of wood, another an ornate twisting of wrought iron. The dusty scent of years of cigarette smoke and the sweet, green odor of fresh cut mint leaves filled the tight space, coating the worn church pews and the high bar and the mirrors on the walls, dull in the dim light. Across the pool table in the back of the room, a dark hallway led past an ancient, churning ice machine into another room beyond. Speakers in high corners played a Rebirth song, sharp bursts of brass instruments at a frantic, exuberant beat.

Jude, squinting against the sudden darkness, saw that he had gotten here before Regal. He watched the three others in the bar as he walked in, a man playing the touch screen game on the bar and a young blonde woman talking to the scruffy guy behind the counter. The bartender's hands were busy, chopping mint for the juleps, but his eyes remained fixed on the girl, a slight smile on his thin lips. She leaned across the bar, her shirt pulling up and revealing the dimple of flesh where her lower back met the curve of her buttocks. Jude looked away. He perched on one of the stools, trying to keep his distance from all of them. The man playing the video game stared, vacant, middle-aged but prematurely toughened and wrinkled by years of smoking and hard drinking, tapping the screen and feeding it dollar bills and taking long drags off his cigarette without ever changing his expression. Jude felt a brief tug towards the man, towards his sense of loss. The man called himself Billy, even though his parents named him William. His father's name was William, and he hated him.

Jude cursed silently and tightened his control. Sometimes things leaked in, even with the gloves. This was a mistake. He shouldn't have come here. To hell with Regal and whatever she wanted. The bartender noticed him and slouched over, asking what he wanted. Jude ordered an Abita and eased onto the stool, keeping his gloved hands out of sight below the counter. She had until he finished this beer, he decided. Before the bartender finished pouring the beer, the door opened and she walked in, framed by the fading sunlight.

She'd cut her hair. What he remembered as an auburn, silky drape down her neck was now boyish and spiky. Her eyes, though, remained that clear, molten brown, like honey, and her grin still slanted across the line between amused and mocking.

“Hey, Doobie,” she said. “It's been too long.” Despite everything, the sleepless nights,

his unease at being out in the world, this life colliding once again with his own, the tendrils of loss twisting and curling into the cracks in his resolve, despite it all, the brightness in her voice made him smile. Regal Sloan. His partner and best friend in a life he'd left behind. Or tried to.

“Hey, Queenie,” he said. She rolled her eyes and started to say something, but the bartender returned with Jude's drink. Regal ordered one for herself, and while they waited, they said nothing, an uncomfortable silence. When the bartender returned, Regal reached across Jude's back, close enough that he could feel the heat of her, the brush of her breath against his neck. She folded a napkin in half and traced a two and a zero across it with her fingertip. Regal pushed the napkin to the bartender, who scooped it up without questioning it.

“Keep the change, boo,” she said.

Jude took a sip of his beer, savoring the chilly bite of it. Same old Regal. He didn't realize he'd said that out loud until she laughed.

“Way I remember it, you taught me that particular trick.” She picked up both beers. “Let's talk in back.”

Jude could only nod and follow, discomfort roiling in his gut like water about to boil. As he slid past the blonde woman, whose thumbs were dancing across her cell phone, he tasted the bitter tang of old pennies. Great. Just great.

The next room seemed like a different bar, with small patio tables spread across the bare concrete floor and bright paper lanterns strung above, rustling in the breeze from the large box fan rattling in the corner, stirring the air around more than cooling it. Regal set his beer in front of him, slurping the foam off the top of her own. He wondered if she had seen his gloves yet and if the glass was safe to touch without them. He thought about taking one off under the table,

unsure if he could do it without her noticing.

“So,” Regal said, after licking her lips, “you got your shit together, or you still moping after that chick pulled a Houdini on you?”

Some would call Regal blunt, or tactless. Some had harsher names for it. Once, when she was really on a roll, Jude had heard her called “a gash-mouthed cunt” by a housewife mother of three. In front of her two youngest daughters. He knew, though, how carefully she chose her words, how deliberately she kept people back on their heels. That same housewife had been selling the menstrual blood of her virgin teenage daughter to a voodoo woman in Algiers.

Still, it hurt that she used Cassandra like that. Made him a little angry, too. But mostly it proved that she had more on her mind than a drink with an old friend.

“What do you want, Regal?” He kept his voice level, calm. In control.

She cocked that same grin at him, only this time it seemed insulting. “What, no small talk?” Jude said nothing, waiting. She laughed. “You're a real ray of sunshine, you know that?”

“I know that blonde out front is about a day away from dead. Vampire is sucking her dry.”

She turned her head back the way they had come, probably trying to remember the girl.

“How do you know that?”

“I smelled it,” he said. Close enough to the truth. He hated this, hated knowing these things, hated having to answer for that knowledge. Even after years of not speaking, Jude recognized Regal's posture, her refusal to stay on one subject. She hadn't brought up Cassandra to unsettle him. She was stalling. He leaned forward, the chair creaking under his weight. “Spit it out,” he said. “Mourning sent you to talk me into coming back, didn't he?”

“No. Well, yes, he sent me.” She bit her lip, uncertain. “But not for what you think.”

“Fuck Mourning,” Jude said. He felt his control slipping, anger and magic threatening to wriggle free, to take shape as fire and storm. He shouldn't have come. He should have left New Orleans. He clenched his jaw and focused on each intake of breath, each exhale, pictured the Gulf on a calm, cool day.

“It's not what you think,” she repeated. Regal reached into her purse and took out a piece of paper, folded against itself into an envelope and sealed with red wax. The paper looked thick and old, like parchment. She glanced up, then her eyes darted away, unable to meet his. “I understand if you're mad. He knew you wouldn't come if anybody else asked. But this isn't from Mourning. We were just hired to deliver the message.”

Jude wanted to say that he didn't care. That he didn't want any part in any of this, just wanted to go home and drink until he forgot all the impossible things he knew. Things that had been a part of that other life, like magicians who called up impossible beasts, or animals who spoke with the voices of men, or men who could become animals. Things that were only partly human, or not human at all. Things like the gods themselves. Instead of what he wanted to say, he asked, “A message from who?”

“Dodge,” she said. Her voice caught, close to tears. “Said to tell you he's calling in his debt.”

Of course. Dodge Reynaud, the fortune god of New Orleans. Perfect. Jude started to take a sip of his beer and instead tilted it up, draining the glass, no longer concerned with whether she saw his gloves or not. He found, to his surprise, that his hands didn't shake. Three years. For three years he stayed low, stayed quiet, tucked down in a seam of a life so boring he

thought he'd managed to vanish altogether. Three years away from dancing to the whim of gods and all the nasty bullshit that came with it. Three years, long enough that he started to think they might stretch out into the rest of his life. He should have known better. Three years went like the blink of an eye if you lived forever.

Jude had Regal drop him off in front of his apartment building. It was a short ride, made much longer by her questions. No, he didn't know what Dodge wanted with him. No, he wouldn't tell her why he owed a fortune god a debt. No, he didn't think Dodge wanted to kill him. Yes, he would tell her the truth if he did think that. No, she couldn't help she should go home and try to get some sleep. Yes, he was sure.

Once she drove away, he took the elevator up to his apartment where he showered and changed, switching his dress shirt for a dark, long sleeved t-shirt and his jeans for a pair of loose-fitting slacks, not admitting to himself that he wanted freedom of movement in case he had to run. The message had been worded like an invitation, but the mention of Jude's debt made it a demand, not a request. He looked again at the address and the time. Both were close. Better to just get on with it. He got his bag from behind the false back of the bookshelf, the leather satchel where he kept everything a magician like him would consider valuable. Whirls and angles of protective charms were cut into the faded brown leather, the dozens of pockets inside bulging with vials and coins and who knew what. It had already been full when Jude got it, from Dodge. Maybe this would square them. Maybe Dodge just wanted the bag back now that he'd quit using magic. Maybe. He looked over his apartment before he left, unable to avoid the thought that it

might truly be a last look then locked the door and took the stairs down to the street.

It only took him a few minutes of walking to find his way beneath the roaring interstate overpass and through the night, the city's lost reaching out to him. He stopped where no one else would, before a fence overgrown with thick, clinging vines, beyond which could be seen a mound of accumulated junk: mattress springs and broken chairs and the fin-like curves of an old car frame. The streetlight that let him see even this much went out, buzzing like a huge hornet, plunging him into darkness. He stepped towards the fence, and a shape moved in the shadows, quick and low to the ground, and then burst forward, bright fangs and harsh barking.

“Hush,” Jude said, and the dog quieted, lowering its muzzle to the dirt. It whined once, let out a deep sigh, and lay still. It was large and shaggy, with the high, pointed ears of a German Shepherd. The dog, if it was only a dog, hadn't been here the last time Jude had come to see Dodge, nor had the feeling of repulsion. Jude could feel the place pushing him away, and he'd been asked to come here. A stranger would go out of their way to avoid this stretch of sidewalk. Jude rubbed his gloved palms together, his heart starting to beat faster now. He walked past the beast on the ground and up the few stairs to the door which, despite appearances, swung open on smooth, well greased hinges. Inside, entropy had long been at work, leaving crumbling sheet rock and exposed brick, grime and the tickling scent of years of dust. In the darkness, Jude could barely make out the peeling red paint on the door at the end of the hall. He walked to it, ignoring the scuttling shapes amidst the debris on the floor, and pulled it open, his heart hammering in his chest. Light spilled out.

Floral wallpaper covered the walls, faded and curling at the seams. The air in the windowless room sat thick and heavy, saturated with a haze of cigar smoke. A single light bulb

dangled over the green felt of a poker table. On the wall, a clock in the shape of a cat kept time, its bulging eyes and curled tail moving in synch, a motion made somehow eerie by its wide, knowing grin. Jude heard the snap and rustle of cards being shuffled, the clink of ice against glass. He also noticed a faint hint of cinnamon, coming from the angel sitting closest to the door.

Dodge sat at the far side of the table, fat and bald and ever smiling, face flushed with too much to drink. He looked every inch a New Orleans god of fortune, his twinkling eyes the crisp green color of money, his grin florescent bright. Against his better judgment, Jude stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. He studied the players as the cards were dealt: a man with long, gaunt fingers and skin the purple, bruised color of a corpse; a delicately thin woman, her silver hair swept behind pointed ears, a twisting, flowering vine curled around her temples; the angel, his wings soft and white as powdered sugar, eyes as blank and cold as frozen milk; another woman, wearing a straw hat tipped at a jaunty angle, a pipe clamped between her teeth; a man with the head of a bird, his beak curved and cruel as the blade of a scythe.

All this, and what inspired the most fear in Jude were the cards left face-down on the table, the empty chair at the game. Waiting, it seemed, for him.

Chapter Two

Jude hesitated for a moment and then sat down, not bothering to look at his cards. He could run. He could beg. He could demand to know what was happening. But he knew any of that would be futile. He knew his place. Whatever was going to happen was beyond his control. He felt oddly, impossibly, calm. There was peace, he realized, in giving up. He looked around the table, at the inhuman, immortal eyes watching him. He said the first thing that came to mind not born of fear and uncertainty. “So, who do you have to worship around here to get a drink?”

Laughter followed, a thumping bass drum from Dodge, a throaty chuckle from the woman with the pipe, from the dead god, a high, tittering noise that should have broken every glass in the room. The fortune god pulled a silver flask from under the table and twisted the cap off. He poured into empty air, then gestured casually in Jude's direction. Jude picked up the glass that was now next to his cards and took a sip. Scotch, cool and smooth as a cat's fur.

“Anybody else?” Dodge asked, his voice deep and booming, excessively cheerful. He looked from face to face, his eyes sharp and shrewd. “No? Great. Let's play some cards.” He set the deck down and swept up his own hand, fanning the five cards out and rearranging them as he spoke. “The game, for you new-comers, is Destiny. You make the best or worst fate you can. Minor Arcana goes good for the dick suits with the Lord and Warrior, down for Lady and Messenger. Pussy cards are the opposite. Major Arcana can be inverted. You get one draw a hand, dealer's choice.” He nodded to the god to his left, the one with the corpse's skin.

“Scarpelli, bet's to you.” The dead god inclined his head, baring his teeth in an approximation of a smile. His yellowed incisors stretched long and sharp. Vampire. This got better and better. Skeletal fingers scooped from the pile in front of him, bits of what looked, to Jude, like chips of

broken china. Scarpelli tossed a few of whatever they were into the center of the table, clacking against one another like dice. They were teeth, Jude saw. *Human* teeth.

The woman to Jude's right went next, glancing down at her cards and then spreading the petals of a blue flower on the green felt in front of her. Then the regard of a room full of deities fell on Jude, a crushing weight on his soul. Jude looked at the table. He had a pile of coins like Mardi Gras doubloons in front of him, stamped with odd images. Jude slid his cards forward, understanding enough of what Dodge had said to know that he didn't know nearly enough to play. "Fold," he said. With their eyes on him, the word came out strained, the last breath squeezed from the lungs of a drowning man.

Dodge cleared his throat. "You ain't even gonna look at your cards?" Jude could only shake his head. "You got balls, little one." The fortune god paused, puffing on his cigar. Jude took another drink of Scotch, a long swallow that slid down hot, a burning blossom in his stomach. After what felt like hours, all those heavy stares fell away from him. How many hands did he have to fold before he could leave?

"You're up, Wings," Dodge said, that bright, sharp grin splitting his wide face. "You're always up, though, ain'tcha?" The angel frowned and the vampire laughed, and again it felt like dirty nails scraping across Jude's naked skin. The angel put his cards towards the center of the table without answering.

"Wings folded," Scarpelli said, his voice high and tremulous. He chuckled at his own joke.

"Why can't you ever play nice?" the woman next to the angel asked. She had an odd accent, stretching 'can't' out so that it sounded like 'haunt'.

“What's it to you?” Scarpelli's voice stayed soft, almost feminine, but with an added note of threat. “You think he'd dirty his pure, precious hands to stick up for you, Legba?”

Jude looked at the woman next to the angel, and for a brief moment, saw her as she really was, slumped forward, jaw slack, a man with a straw hat and pipe sitting astride her shoulders. Legba. *Loa* of the crossroads. Nice. Wouldn't be a party without a little voodoo. The figure on her shoulders reached out, and, like a puppet on a string, the woman moved as well, placing a small leather pouch among the teeth and flower petals.

“I tink we should just play cards,” Legba said, once again one person to Jude's eyes. Jude took another drink of Scotch, then another, a sense of dread growing as the gods bickered, intruding on his previous, irrational calm.

“Yeah,” Dodge said. “Who's up? Thoth?” The Egyptian god with the bird's head Jude had recognized, as any New Orleanian would have, from the Mardi Gras parade named after him. Thoth wore a fleur-de-lis t-shirt that showed where the thin, feathered ibis neck tapered to human skin at the shoulders. He held his cards cupped in thick, meaty hands, his eyes moving in quick, twitchy jerks. He folded, as well.

Dodge threw his cards to the center as soon as Thoth dropped his. “Always deal myself rags,” he said, laughing.

As the gods showed their hands, Jude drank again, surprised to find that his glass had been refilled, that his face had become hot and numb. How much had he had already? He'd only meant to take the edge off, not get drunk. Jude felt his panic returning, now that the game was underway, his heart fluttering like a frightened bird, a gibbering, whirling voice in his head begging for this to end. How had he gotten caught up in this? How could he get out? He didn't

want to die, didn't want any of this. He had stayed in his boring, quiet life, would stay there if he could only get out of this room intact. He heard the gods speaking but couldn't concentrate on their words, just waited until he heard the high pitched voice of the vampire followed by the harsh, guttural voice of the woman next to him, so he could push his cards to the center of the table, folding without a word, without hesitation.

He only vaguely understood the rules to the game. They played with a tarot deck, swords and wands instead of spades and clubs, coins and cups instead of diamonds and hearts. The shapes, he had learned from listening to the card readers in the Quarter, represented penis and vagina, male and female. The rest of it lost him, though. He'd never paid enough attention to know what the other cards meant. Legba won the first hand, the vampire won the second, and Jude drank enough that his movements felt sluggish, his vision a little blurry at the edges. The cards were dealt a third time, and once again the gods turned their eyes to Jude, their attention like six feet of earth pressing down on him.

“Fold,” Jude said, as he had before. Then the gods were laughing, all of them, laughing. At him. Jude looked up, coming back to himself, plunged into an abrupt semblance of sobriety, like ice water in his veins.

“Bet's to you, Jude,” Dodge said, the only one not laughing. He rolled his cigar between his fingers, staring at it as he spoke. “You got to make a wager. You got to play.”

Jude spread the coins out, certain that they represented more than just money. The gods played for the highest stakes. Each one he touched sent a shock along his fingertips despite his gloves, like the snap of static electricity. He chose the coin stamped with a stylized heart and flipped it to the center of the table.

Dodge sighed. The vampire tittered again, the noise somehow threatening, violent.

“Too small a wager,” Scarpelli said, sadistic glee in his voice. “What would we want with a broken little thing like that?” He shook his head. “If you bet too little, you forfeit the choice.” He splayed his gaunt fingers across the skin of his dark, blotchy face, a haunting parody of reflection. “I want your blood, I think. Yes, blood.” One of Jude's coins, stamped with a raindrop of crimson, rose up onto its side and rolled next to the one Jude had chosen.

The woman next to Jude leaned close to him, smelling of rich, black dirt, of green, rain-dampened grass, of sticky-sweet sap. She inhaled, loudly, and when she leaned back her mouth hung open as if she were testing the bouquet of a wine. She smiled, shy and sly, her indigo eyes half closed. “I will have his passion,” she said, a thick, Germanic accent to her words.

Another doubloon rolled next to the first two. Jude looked down at his cards, still face down on the table. This couldn't be happening. This had to be a nightmare. It certainly felt like a dream, senseless and fogged, things sweeping along without regard for him. Why didn't he wake?

The angel didn't speak, merely pointed to his own throat and then gestured, as if breath, or words, or song, were coming from his mouth. What did that mean? What did he want? Jude felt paralyzed, encased in stone, unable to move, unable to scream. Sweat squeezed from his every pore. He couldn't stand to look at the gods anymore, their smiles and eyes too bright, something dark and nasty slithering in the shadows, or maybe it was the shadows themselves, shifting and pregnant with something he didn't want to face.

“A sacrifice,” Legba said. Jude saw him again and not the woman he rode, his ancient, wrinkled face full of an unreadable emotion.

Thoth turned one glassy bird's eye toward him, his beak clicking. Somehow, Jude understood him. 'A key,' he'd said, though that wasn't exactly the right word or meaning.

Dodge toyed with his cards, as if he were considering his wager, or whether he should play the hand or fold. The moment drew out, the fortune god's eyes distant. Jude's breath held, tight and painful, in his chest. He had no coins left. "The first wager was enough for me," Dodge said. One by one the gods put something on the pile of coins, covering it with a burial mound of their own wagers, teeth and feathers and scraps of paper and serpent's scales. It felt like a hole opened in Jude's stomach. Of course they wanted to play. He was all in, and everyone wanted a piece.

Legba laid his cards down, a nonsense poker hand of jumbled suits and Tarot symbols. The other gods followed, amid appreciative murmurs or sighs of disappointment. Some of the images seemed familiar, the faces people he had seen before. Dodge turned his cards over one at a time, one card depicting a hairy, bat winged devil, another that had a Queen with Regal's face. From the other gods' reaction, Regal's fate was dark and terrible. A winning hand. The vampire flipped his cards over with a noise of disgust.

Jude turned his cards over and, for a moment, thought his vision had failed him. His cards were blank. The faerie hissed, like a cornered cat, Legba cursed in a language Jude didn't know. The vampire laughed and laughed and laughed. What did that mean? What did it matter? Whatever the cards meant, it was a dead man's hand. He stood, staggering, fear and liquor robbing him of balance. He knocked his chair onto its side, nearly followed it to the floor. The gods only watched him, waiting. Would they divide the pot between them? Would they seize him and rip him apart? He backed away, reaching the door. Still they hadn't moved. His hand

found the doorknob and twisted it open, the door opening behind him, and finally he did fall, the bottom dropping out of the world. He fell and fell into a moving, solid darkness, a shadow that swallowed him whole.

When Jude opened his eyes, he found himself sitting once more at Dodge's table, alone with the fortune god. He knew, somehow, maybe a slight echo to the ticking clock on the wall, maybe the photographic stillness of the room, that this wasn't quite real, that he lay, somewhere, having a vision, having a seizure, maybe dying. Death might not be so bad.

“You say that now,” Dodge said. “You try the thing, you tell me how bad it is.”

“I didn't say anything.”

“Then who did?” Dodge asked and shrugged. “You would know. This is your heart.”

“Don't you mean my head?”

Dodge's eyes glittered. “I meant what I said.” He shuffled a deck of cards. “You know what's next? Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” Jude said, and strangely, he did know. “You have to tell me my fortune.”

Dodge nodded, slow and solemn. “Gotta find it, first.” He spread the cards in a wide fan in front of him. “Choose.”

Jude watched himself pick five cards. He was detached, as if seeing it from a great distance. He turned the cards over. Each one was blank. Dodge picked up the first card, spun it between his fingers, and set it back down. Now it showed an image, a man in robes, one hand pointing to the sky, the other to the ground. The man was Jude. “What does that mean?” Jude

asked.

“You know,” Dodge said. His mouth kept moving, his words fading as a wind rose around them. Dodge's voice echoed among a hundred others, repeating what he'd said. *This is your heart . . . you know . . . who did . . . gotta find . . . are you ready . . .* The voices coalesced, a deep, dark sound like rolling thunder. A single voice. *Find it . . . the thing . . . your heart . . . are you . . . who . . . you know.* The words pulled at Jude, stretched him thin.

Just as he could take no more, the wind died, and Dodge spoke with perfect, terrible clarity. *Find the heart. You know who you are.*

Jude woke, tangled in sweat-heavy sheets, his arms and neck aching, breath coming in quick gasps. His heart pounded, and he tried to calm himself, tried to tell himself that it was only a dream. He lay there, watching the ceiling fan as it swayed with each spin, as the predawn light revealed the room around him bit by bit, thinking about Dodge, and Regal, and Cassandra, and the seams where worlds collide. He lay there, trying to divide dream from reality, meeting Regal in the bar, the card game, those words, “You know who you are, you know who you are” circling his mind. He lay there until his phone rang and a voice on the other end told him that Dodge had been murdered.

Chapter Three

Jude spent the morning in the grip of what felt like a hangover. He couldn't remember how much he had to drink, found it difficult to remember which parts of the night before were dream and which were real. Even after a shower so long and so hot it filled the bathroom with mist, a fresh cup of coffee, and a large, greasy breakfast, his head still felt stuffed with cotton and knives, his throat raw and dry. He thought about calling Regal, but if talking to her had been a dream, he shouldn't call her out of the blue. Instead, he washed his sheets, which stank of smoke and booze-sweat and searched for his clothes, thinking that they must smell at least as bad. If they did, he worried, then maybe none of it had been a dream.

He found them crumpled up by the front door and beneath them, his magician's bag. Ice crept up his spine. If he'd taken this out of its hiding place, then he really had gone to see Dodge, had really gambled with the gods, had really wagered all those impossible things and . . . what? Were blank cards a winning hand or a losing one? How did he get home? Jude's legs went weak beneath him, and he sat, heavily, on the floor. He'd walked away from all this three years ago. He should have walked farther. He should have run.

The phone rang, a shrill, startling burst. He wanted to leave it, to pack a few clothes, take as much money as he could get out of the bank, and just go. Fuck Regal, fuck Mourning, fuck this whole lost and ruined city. He should break whatever hold New Orleans had on him and get the hell out, like he should have three years ago, when Cass left. But this wasn't three years ago. Dodge, murdered. A *god*, murdered. There would be questions to answer. There would be consequences. He heaved himself to his feet and answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“Jude?” Regal. She sounded scared. How much did she know? “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah. I guess. I feel pretty awful.”

He heard her take a deep breath on the other end of the line. “I’m on my way over there,” she said.

“I’m not really up for company.”

“Mourning sent me, Jude. He wants to see you.” She paused. He could hear the background noise of her car in the midst of traffic. “I’m sorry Doobie, but I don’t really have a choice here. You know how he is. He wanted to send his muscle. I told him you’d come easier with me.”

Great, just fucking great. She’d really stuck her neck out, vouching for him. If he vanished, Mourning would take it out on her. He couldn’t leave her twisting on the hook while he ran. No matter that a moment ago he’d been thinking of doing that very thing.

“I’ll meet you downstairs,” he said and hung up.

Regal said nothing on the drive from his apartment to the end of Canal street, just worried at her nails with her teeth, a constant snap-snap noise that would have irritated Jude if he hadn’t been too distracted to care. He stared out the window, his thoughts gnawing with the same focused intensity on the night before, trying to remember something, anything, that had happened after he turned over those blank cards. The absence was maddening. Regal turned off Canal and onto North Peters, easing over to the curb. He pulled the latch, but didn’t open the door all the way.

He felt like he should say something, but his mind went empty, locked up.

“Good luck,” Regal said.

“Thanks,” he said. “Thank you. For everything.” It wasn't enough, but between the uncertainty of meeting Mourning and the weirdness of the night before, he had nothing else. He opened the door and stepped into the oven's blast of heat, the rushing, blaring noise of traffic. He didn't look back as she drove away.

Jude looked up at the Canal Place building, a tower of concrete and glass, with shops and a movie theater and a plush hotel on the upper floors. And something else, something few people in the city knew about, even those who made it their business to know such things. Something old and sly, something that wore a man's shape and called itself Mr. Mourning. Jude had an idea who, and what, Mourning was, and it terrified him.

This close to the Mississippi, Jude thought he could almost taste its rich, brackish flavor floating along on the hot summer breeze. A few minutes of walking would bring Jude to the Quarter, a few minutes more and he'd be back in the Square, at St. Louis Cathedral, Jackson rearing back on his horse, pointing spires and roosting pigeons and crowds of tourists. He wondered if people still claimed sanctuary, if things like sacred ground mattered if the thing chasing him was a myth.

Jude walked up the steps to the glass doors and stepped into the cool quiet of the shopping center. Everything about this space said wealth but said it in a tasteful murmur. Smooth marble floors swept up into massive columns; polished brass and gleaming mirrored reflections surrounded him. He caught hushed whispers of conversation, as if he stood in a library or a church. The chilly air, the silence, the scent of bleach and air freshener, all of it

made Jude feel somehow crude and soiled. Maybe that was just the hangover talking. Or whatever it was. Jude wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve and turned to the elevators tucked away in a corner, the doors sliding open as he approached. He searched through his bag, pulling out a small round object, like a coin, with a stylized sunburst engraved on one side. He thought of the coins he had used as poker chips the night before. The metal felt cool and smooth against his fingertips. It fit neatly into a depression on the elevator panel, the same size as the other buttons, lighting up when he pressed it into place. The doors closed with a soft chime.

The sensation of motion that followed was more complex than the simple up and down movement of an elevator. His stomach lurched, as if he were thrown to a great height or dropped into a deep pit, then twisted, as if he spun in a tight, fast loop. He clenched his jaw and spread his legs, nothing to hold on to, too confused and tired to be as frightened as he should be. Another soft chime sounded, and he jerked to a stop. He pried the sunburst free and dropped it back into his bag. His ears popped, and the doors slid open with a gritty, aged rumble.

The room beyond had thick gray carpets on the floor and wood paneling on the wall, as if it sat, unused, for a few decades. Everything in the room seemed anachronistic, from the metal bench to the right of the entrance to the scent of lemon wood polish in the air, from the rotary phone and the green secretary's lamp and the manual typewriter on the desk to the frosted glass in the door on the far wall, even the tweed vest and coat of the little man sitting behind the desk.

The only things that made the room feel as odd as it should, being a part of Mourning's office, were the segmented ram's horns that curled up from the secretary's forehead and tapered into points behind his thinning hair. Jude stepped into the room, aware that behind him, the elevator doors had closed and vanished. The office was, like a number of rooms and homes in

this city, not one where the entrances and the exits aligned. Jude found himself settling into his old role easier than he would have expected, taking things like this for granted – as if magic and all its implications were a pair of worn, comfortable jeans, loose and familiar so long as they weren't run through the wash.

The horned man, as much a fixture of the waiting room as the carpet and the stenciled lettering on the glass, didn't seem small at first, due to a trick of perspective. Everything around him, his desk, his lamp, even the potted plant behind him, had been shrunk down to his size. In truth, the secretary stood no higher than Jude's waist. Since Jude had never learned his name, and since he had only ever seen one expression cross his face, Jude referred to him as Mr. Scowl.

Scowl turned at the sound of the elevator closing, appeared to recognize Jude and, sure enough, continued the tradition that had earned him his nickname. He nodded toward the bench across from him, a curt, dismissive gesture, then returned to his slow, intermittent typing. Jude sat, his knees popping as he settled on the uncomfortable seat. Getting old, or, at the least, out of shape. Just one of the perils of mortality.

He waited with growing impatience while Scowl removed the page from his typewriter and replaced it, seemed to take a full minute adjusting its placement, and went back to work, never once acknowledging Jude. His nerves, already frayed, seemed to twinge and strain with every hesitant clack of the typewriter's keys. Considering the sort of people that sometimes came to see Mourning, powerful, dangerous beings, Jude found it surprising that the rude little prick hadn't had his spine ripped out yet. He took a deep breath, trying to rein in his anger.

“I'm here to see Mr. Mourning.”

The typing stopped. Scowl clasped his hands together over the keys and turned moist,

almost tearful eyes toward Jude. "I see. And are you expected?" he asked. He spoke with a slow, rhetorical-question sort of cadence, as though speaking to a stupid person who had asked an extraordinarily stupid question.

"Yeah," Jude said. "He sent for me."

Scowl nodded, tracing a finger down a yellow legal pad to his right. "Name?" he asked.

"Jude Duboisson."

Scowl made a brief clicking noise with his tongue, turned a page on his pad. "I am not showing any appointments under that name. Are you certain you have the correct time?"

Without waiting for a response, he returned his stubby, hairy-wristed hands to the typewriter.

Jude clenched his jaw, swallowing down a sliver of anger. He could point a finger and set the son of a bitch's grease slicked hair on fire. He could speak just one word, and those curlicue horns would twist and grow until his scrawny neck snapped from the weight. Most of the contents of his magician's bag were benign, keys and books and protective charms, but he had more than one weapon in there, too. A thunderbolt that would leave Scowl nothing but a snide little smear on the far wall, for one. Coils of magic twisted in Jude's gut, begging to be released. He could do it. It would be easy. Instead, he took another deep breath. He forced himself to stay calm, partly because he'd killed once before and hadn't liked the feeling, partly because he knew most of his rage was only fear and frustration searching for an outlet.

But mostly because as easily as he could snuff out Scowl's mean, petty life, Mourning could do the same to him.

"He sent for me," Jude repeated. "Why don't you check?"

"Mr. Mourning prefers not to be interrupted."

Unbelievable. Jude opened his mouth to say something else, but the phone on Scowl's desk let out a soft buzz. The secretary held up an index finger to Jude, shushing him, and answered it. "Yes, sir," he said. "I believe so, sir." He held the phone away from his ear. "You are Mr. Duboisson?"

"Yes," he said, most of his anger draining away, Scowl's contempt so complete it went past infuriating and entered the realm of the sublime.

"Yes, sir, he has arrived. Yes, straight away, sir." He hung up the phone and turned that suffering gaze back to Jude. "He will see you now."

On the way to the door, Jude twitched a finger and muttered a curse. When it took hold, Scowl's typewriter would type increasingly vulgar obscenities, no matter what keys he punched, for about an hour. Childish, sure, but a little justified, too. The small release of magic itself felt better than Jude wanted to admit, an itch scratched, a muscle stretched. The knack came back easily. It felt natural, felt right, like an athlete finding the groove. Or an alcoholic falling off the wagon.

He opened the door and stepped into Mr. Mourning's office, squinting as his eyes adjusted to the sunlight that poured in through the floor to ceiling windows. Jude tried to keep his breathing even, nervous as he always was when he met Mourning. For one thing, the man was simply too bright. The light from the windows seemed to refract around him like sunlight hitting a prism, shifting, sparkling, making Jude's vision swim. Then, like a switch had been thrown, it dimmed, and he could see again. The first thing he saw, as always, were Mourning's eyes, an intense, impossible blue that glittered like sapphires. Jude couldn't meet that gaze for more than an instant; the eyes were too sharp, too knowing.

His skin was the color of burnt umber, exotic, even for the circles he traveled in. Mourning tapped his full lips with two of his fingers, a smile curling behind his hand. There had been rumors when Jude still worked for him about that blinding radiance, that unusual skin. Some said Mourning had a faerie glamour he cast when people came into the room, magic designed to make him appear beautiful, powerful. Others thought he might be Apollo or Ra, or some other sun god in disguise. Whispered rumors, of course. Jude believed the truth to be something more complicated, more sinister, but had always kept his thoughts to himself. Not even a fool would mistake Mourning's beauty for anything but the shine on the edge of a knife.

Mourning sat at a desk made entirely of glass, which added to his ethereal appearance, bare except for his name plate, which simply said "S. Mourning, Investigator". His silver watch flashed in the sun as he gestured for Jude to take one of the black leather armchairs. Aside from Mourning himself, the most striking thing about the room was its uniformity, everything either transparent or black or white, the floor covered in a checkerboard of jet and slate, the name plate some dark wood etched with pale lettering. The small end table next to the armchair looked like carved ivory with a glass top. Steam rose from the white coffee mug on the table. Jude sat, picked up the mug, and inhaled the scent of chicory, grateful for some sort of normalcy in the room. Mourning himself wore a suit black and shiny as fresh poured tar, a tie the color of bleached bone. He still smiled, still hadn't spoken. Jude tried to speak, found his throat dry, and sipped at his coffee instead. Mourning steeped his hands in front of his lips and waited.

"You wanted to see me?" Jude asked when he found his voice.

"Yes," Mourning said. "I certainly did, Mr. Duboisson. You might say I felt seeing you was of the utmost importance." He had a soft, buttery purr of a voice, a hissing lisp on each

sibilant consonant. Jude found that lisp entrancing. It crept into his thoughts and made it hard to concentrate, like static on a television, in the background at first but growing louder and louder. His heart beat so hard he thought it might burst. He said nothing. Mourning looked down at a file folder on his desk that hadn't been there a moment before. No flourish, no word of command, just magic, used with the offhand, natural ease of a god. Jude put his coffee mug down, sure that any second now his nervous hands would betray him and spill it everywhere.

Mourning spoke, not looking up from the folder. "It says here you have been quiet of late, as far as we have seen." Behind him, downtown New Orleans stretched gleaming to the cloudless, empty sky, the summer heat blanching the blue from the air.

"Yes. That's right."

Mourning looked up, cocking his head to the side, like a curious bird. "It is correct that you have been quiescent, or it is correct that we have only seen it as such?"

Shit. Not the tone Jude wanted these questions to have. He fought the urge to squirm, tried to remain still despite his discomfort. "I've been laying low," he said. "Haven't used magic in three years."

"Except just now, when you cursed my associate's typewriter."

Jude paused. "Right."

"Any particular reason why?"

Because he asked for it. "Your secretary is very rude," Jude said. "He made me angry."

Mourning smiled, a brief flash of white so keen it could leave a blister. "He can be a trifle difficult," he said. "I inquired, however, as to your reason for your withdrawal from our ranks."

Jude thought of Cassandra's eyes, of a spray paint circled X on a door, of the tug of a lost thing. "Just lost the taste for it," he said.

Mourning pursed his lips and nodded. "I understand. For a man of your particular skills, this city must have become quite, hmm, harrowing, of late. Yes?"

Jude nodded, waiting for the ax to drop.

"And yet." There it was. Even though he expected it, Jude flinched from the blow. Mourning leaned forward, the leather of his chair creaking. "As someone who has been in my employ, you are no doubt aware that I take a certain pride in knowing, in being as informed as possible. Here is what I know. Last night, you participated in a game with some rather significant companions. Further, I doubt it will surprise you to learn that one of those opponents has found himself in the most difficult of circumstances. Yes?" Jude nodded, certain that if he opened his mouth he'd only make things worse. "So you must agree, something does not mesh." Jude nodded again, smelled the char of hot metal. "Usually, Mr. Duboisson, this is the point where you would attempt to illuminate me."

The words rushed out of him in a torrent, like water through a broken levee. Jude told him everything he knew, leaving out only the debt he owed to Dodge. He told him about Dodge's summons, who he saw there and what he could remember about them, about being made to play, his cards coming up blank, and about falling and the blank space in his memory and waking up in his own bed. Through it all Mourning said nothing, his only motion the tap of his fingers against his lips. Jude finished, with his throat dry and a rising, embarrassing conviction that he'd started to ramble. He sipped from his coffee, grown tepid, hoping he would be dismissed now that he'd given Mourning what he wanted.

After a silence that went from uncomfortable to shameful, Jude wondering if his presence had been forgotten, Mourning spoke. "Most unusual," he said. "I refuse to believe your inclusion is mere coincidence." He glanced at his watch, the face turned to the inside of his wrist. He sighed. "Brevity it is, then." Mourning put his hand down on his desk, on top of a small pile of folders that, once again, simply appeared. He flipped through them as he spoke. "Mr. Duboisson, in your previously held capacity with this organization, you conducted various inquiries, yes? Likewise, I would like you to look into this matter for me, with all the appropriate resources at your disposal, of course."

"No."

Those eyes, a blue so deep they were nearly purple, bored into Jude, robbing him of speech. "Do not mistake courteous wording as denoting the presence of a request, Mr. Duboisson. I would regard refusal as some measure of complicity with the guilty party, which you would no doubt wish to avoid?"

Jude held his tongue for a moment, more cautious with Mourning than just about anyone else. "I don't have to avoid anything, Mr. Mourning. Any investigation you make will show you that I'm telling the truth. I don't know why Dodge invited me. I'm not involved at all. And I intend to stay that way."

Something passed across Mourning's face that Jude had never seen before, an odd smile, a widening of those unearthly eyes. After a moment, he realized Mourning was surprised. "I see," he said. "Of course, if I were to compel you to my service, I should expect less than exemplary results." He shook his head. "I must confess myself impressed with your clarity of expression, Mr. Duboisson, as well as disappointed in your decision. Rest assured, your

presence in these events will be a feature of my inquiry, but I hope my confidence in your honesty will be rewarded.” He turned his wrist up to check the time again. “Now, if you will be so kind, I have another engagement.”

Jude stood, dismissed, dizzy at the sudden rush of blood to his head. He picked up his bag, swung it across his shoulder, mumbled some parting words. Mourning nodded and waved him off, already turning to other papers on his desk.

It wasn't until later, after he'd stepped out of Mourning's office and into the back room of an antique shop in the Quarter, after he'd called Regal and told her he'd left Mourning's, after he ventured out into the street, that Jude realized that he'd forgotten his gloves at home.

Chapter Four

Jude sat at an otherwise empty table at the Clover Grill, staring at the coffee cup in his hands. He could smell bacon grease and syrup, hot and thick, and underneath that, the sting of bleach. A rush of noise filled the air, the clink and splash of the sink in the back, the hiss and crackle and clank of the open grill, the plaintive croon of an 80's pop hit from the jukebox, the mutter and chuckle and bark of conversation, of food being ordered. Like most diners open around the clock, the lights shone full blast, an aid to the bleary-eyed insomniacs perhaps, or a reminder to the drunks that they'd finally left the bar. Jude had always liked this place. Something in its tenuous cleanliness, blatant disregard for health conscious eating and its raunchy-joke filled menus comforted him. It also, like Jude himself, existed within the seams, tucked onto the corner of Bourbon and Dumaine where the tourist traps and college kid-filled bars and the gay clubs and the quiet residential section of the Quarter all collided. Its patrons matched its eclectic location. Tonight, bright-cheeked twenty-year-olds sat on stools next to middle-aged women trying to keep their tattered feather boas out of their eggs and grits, while tight-muscled, soft-voiced men chatted with a man who might be homeless, considering his worn jeans and his gnarled beard, each of them at varying levels of sobriety and hunger.

All this surrounded Jude, and yet, to his surprise and delight, he found that for the first time in a long time he could shut it out. He sat with a slight smile on his face, staring at the chipped ceramic mug in his hands. In his *hands*. Without gloves, he should be getting images of the waiter who brought it to him, of whoever had washed it, of the dozen or so people that used it that night and the day before. He should know their regretted angry words, the choices they wished they could take back, the things they had lost in the storm. He should be drowning in a

well as black and as bitter as the coffee in the cup.

Instead, for the first time in years, his head felt clear and whole and empty of anything but himself. Part of him knew that he would soon question this gift, where it had come from, how it had happened. What sort of debt he now owed, and to whom. But for the moment, he could only sit and stare. And smile.

Regal rapped her knuckles on the table. “Yoo-hoo, anybody home?” she asked, singing the words at him. Jude blinked and looked up. She grinned her lopsided smile and eased into the chair across from him. “Jesus. I must've said your name like, ten times. You okay?”

“I'm great.”

Her eyes searched his for a moment. “You know what? You look it. Last I saw you, you looked like crap on a stick. What happened?”

Jude spun his cup on its saucer, trying to decide how much to tell her. Before he had to answer, the waiter stopped at the table to take their order. Regal ordered biscuits, a double order of hash-browns, and a vanilla milk shake. Jude ordered a club sandwich and asked for more coffee. After getting the specifics, butter or gravy, fries or tots, his questions punctuated by 'hon' and 'sugar', the waiter left, and Regal turned her attention back to Jude. She looked at his hands, then back at him.

“What happened to those gloves you were wearing?”

Jude told her everything then, starting with the hurricane and his gift turning on him, the way being around people had become almost impossible, what had happened at Dodge's card

game and in Mourning's office. That he had somehow had the burden of his ability taken from him, felt more like himself in years.

Regal sat silent and still while he spoke and for a few moments after he finished. Only her eyes moved, flicking back and forth, looking at the tabletop but focused on something beyond it. Then she shook her head. “That is the biggest crock of shit I have ever heard,” she said.

“What?”

“Things get fucked up and you hide until it gets better?” She leaned in close to the table and spoke in a furious whisper, as though she wanted to avoid drawing attention. “People needed you, Jude. *I* needed you. What you can do. The good you could have done.” Jude opened his mouth to say something, but she kept going. “And you expect me to be happy? That you're back, just in time to be caught up in all this shit? To get me caught up in it? Fuck that. Fuck you, too.”

“Regal, stop.” She quieted, but leaned back, folding her arms across her chest. “You're right,” he said. “I took the easy way out.”

“The pussy way.”

“Fine, whatever. But you're making it sound like I'm some kind of savior.”

“And you make it sound like you're some kind of goddamned martyr. What about that girl you found, the one in Ohio? You tell her you weren't her savior.”

“That was one time,” Jude said, low and growling. Anger and magic roiled in his gut. He took a breath. Steady. “That was one time,” he said again, more calmly. “People get snatched from their lives all the time. You know what I usually see? A length of chain and a

cypress stump. Or a morgue and a Jane Doe toe tag. Or a garbage bag dropped into the Gulf.

There are no happy endings with this. Not anymore.”

She clenched her jaw. He watched as she chose her words. “That doesn't mean you quit,” she said. Jude had to fight back a smile. Even directed at him, her anger felt comforting, familiar. He'd almost forgotten how stubborn she could be.

The waiter returned, slapping plates of food in front of them, seemingly oblivious to the tension in the air. He filled the silence with his own chatter, polite nothings and questions he didn't wait to hear the answer to. After a moment, he was gone again. Regal stabbed at her hash-browns with her fork with one hand, drowned them in tabasco with the other. Jude sipped at his coffee, his hunger driven away by the tightness in his belly.

The longer his ex-partner ate without speaking, the more uncertain he became. How much of his reaction to the storm had been his magic and how much his own frailty? Could he have withstood it if he'd been stronger? Could he have been healed sooner if he'd forced himself to face it head on?

Regal pushed her plate away and wiped her hands together. “I don't want to talk about that anymore,” she said. “I'm too pissed to make any sense. No more about your damn gift, or the storm, or anything further back than two days ago. All I want to talk about is how we get out of this mess.” She kept talking, outlining her plan to him. She thought they should find a way into Dodge's card room, the most likely location for his murder, then examine his body. The first steps, as she figured it, were to determine the way he'd been murdered and try to nail down a motive. She asked him if he thought he could get back into Dodge's place. Jude hesitated a moment before answering.

“Don't take this the wrong way,” he said, “but you don't know what you're talking about. This isn't like back when you were a cop. You've never dealt with anything like this.”

She let out a burst of sarcastic laughter, abrupt, like a slap in the face. “Fuck you again. Sideways. You have no idea what I've dealt with since you've been gone. You think I'm stupid? That I think this is a game?”

He ran a hand over his face, across his scruff of beard, and sighed. “It *is* a game, Regal. You should have learned that by now. These things are not human. To them, it is a game. All of it. You think we're going to check for DNA? Get a search warrant? Make a citizen's arrest and put a fucking *god* in jail?”

“Fine,” she said. “Then what do we do?”

“There is no 'we'. I told Mourning I didn't want anything to do with this, and that was before I knew about this.” He held his palms up to her, showing the lack of gloves. “I don't even know if I can do the lost and found thing anymore. Frankly I hope I can't.”

She sat for a moment, looking like he'd slapped her. Then, with a calm, cold silence, she fished out a handful of bills from her pocket, dropped them on the table as she stood, and then walked out. Jude sipped at his coffee, wondering if he should go after her, if he had made the right choices in all of this. A man walked in the door, one of those “living statue” performers, his face painted a glittery silver to match his cowboy hat and his wide-collared shirt. The sight of him reminded Jude of the kid from the Square, the band playing at the Circle Bar. It occurred to him that he hadn't seen a band in years, not since before the storm. Regal had managed those same years without him. Another night wouldn't kill her.

* * *

Hours later, after the show, as drunk on human contact as he was on cheap beer, Jude stumbled home through empty streets. The band had sounded good, especially Tommy, who carried himself differently on stage, despite still wearing his clown makeup. His voice carried more weary pathos than Jude would have believed if he hadn't heard it himself. The Warehouse District seemed post-apocalyptic at that time of night, block after block of abandoned buildings, broken brick walls and fire-gutted insides. His footsteps crunched beneath him, concrete crushed into gravel, gravel worn down to grit. The nearby interstate gave off an ominous white noise. He could smell nothing, filled as his nostrils were with the funk of the bar, cigarette smoke and spilled alcohol. Jude slid his touch along everything he could, rough and pitted brick, the smooth metal of streetlamps, leaving fingerprints on glass windshields and streaks in the dust of unwashed cars. He'd shaken as many hands as he could in the bar, barely restrained himself from toying with the loose, silken strands of the hair of the woman sitting next to him. Jude thought that he'd never felt so connected, so euphoric. He looked up at the few stars visible through the light pollution of the city, some sort of prayer or gratitude in his heart.

Something moved across the night, only visible in the way the flecks of stars vanished and reappeared. It swam across his vision like ink through murky water, clung to the side of a warehouse across the street, and then slithered out of sight. The swell of joy fled from Jude, driven away by the sudden need to vomit, by the fearful certainty that he had just stood in the shadow of Dodge's killer.

Interlude

You watch from above as it leaves the bar, swaying with every other step. Its presence confuses you, seduces you. You wonder if it knows what it carries, the power it squanders with so little effort, for such small reward. How could it know? It is such a small thing. Shameful, really, to allow what you need to be carried in such a frail, temporary form.

You are moving as soon as you have decided what you must do, slave to the impulse, the need. It looks up, sees you, but its eyes are liquid and clouded, unable to comprehend you. The slow eyes of a beast. You are close, now, close enough to feel it, close enough to see the harlequin's mask it has painted on its face, and then you are upon it, cutting, your edges as sharp as your hunger. Its throat is open and its eyes are wide and you can see yourself reflected there as the light goes out. You feed, and it is dark and rich. It is power.

It is not enough.

Chapter Five

The god dies, the god lives. Torn apart by an enemy, his limbs reattached and joined together, green skin visible between the linen strips covering him head to toe. Or killed by a spear made of mistletoe, or upon a cross of cedar, or in the midst of a ball game. Or devoured, leaving only his heart. He travels to the underworld, for three days, or a year, or nine months, or until the world itself dies and is reborn. These deaths, these rebirths and returns, while they mean many different things, share one important truth: Even the gods can die.

Jude dreamed of gods living and dead and in-between, of funeral rites and after-lives, and woke to the fear that he was not alone. He lay in his bed, convinced that something hovered over him, waiting to strike. He held his breath until his lungs started to burn, his muscles trembling as if he'd had too much caffeine. The only sounds in the apartment were the usual ones, the soft whirr of the ceiling fan, the rattle and hum of the refrigerator's compressor clicking on. No one moving or breathing. He let out a shaky breath and swung his feet to the floor, feeling a little foolish. Just a nightmare sliding over into the first thoughts of morning. Jude stood up and stretched, groaning as his joints popped into place, as the weight of his bladder dragged at him. A spike wedged itself behind each of his eyes, his second hangover in as many days. He tried to remember if he'd had anything unusual to drink the night before, wondering where the terrible taste in his mouth had come from. As he made his way to the bathroom, leaning an outstretched arm against the wall as he pissed, his tongue probed the inside of his mouth to see if he'd bitten his lip. Then he recognized the taste of blood and lurched into his living room. The vampire named Scarpelli sprawled in Jude's armchair.

“Morning, Sunshine,” Scarpelli said in his high-pitched rasp. He wore a dark suit with a

tie the brownish-red color of a fresh scab. His blotchy corpse's skin looked even worse in the daylight streaming through the open shades behind him. Jude tried to keep his breathing calm, hoping the vampire couldn't hear the terror-fueled throbbing in his veins. He wore only his underwear and felt the vampire's eyes traveling up and down his near-nudity.

“I didn't invite you in,” Jude said. Unlike the supposed vulnerability to sunlight, a vampire's need for an invitation had its basis in fact, not fiction.

“That only works for a person's home. You know, home is where the heart is, and all that,” Scarpelli said. He waved a hand around Jude's apartment. “No heart, no need to ask me in.”

“Why are you here?” Jude asked. His magician's bag lay where he had left it the night before, slumped against the bookshelf, right at the vampire's feet. He had no weapon against the dead-god, no defense at all. Though, if Scarpelli wanted to hurt him, why wait for him to wake?

“I'm here to collect you,” Scarpelli said. He snapped to his feet, an abrupt movement, too quick for a creature of flesh and bone, rising from reclined to standing without the stages in between. He smiled when Jude winced, showing his fangs, his gums stained black. Jude balled his fists, though he knew any struggle would be a futile gesture. Scarpelli giggled. “Not like that, sweet meats. Not yet.” Again the vampire eyed him, his gaze full of some combination of hunger and lust that turned Jude's stomach. “I'm here to collect you for the fortune god's funeral. You should dress accordingly.”

As he tried to brush the taste of blood from his mouth, Jude's thoughts lanced from one idea to the next, erratic, like the jagged path of a lightning strike through the sky. These were exactly the sort of situations, the sort of meetings, he'd hoped to avoid by telling Mourning no,

by leaving Regal on her own. He had a vampire, a god of hunger and darkness, waiting to escort him to the grave of a murdered deity. How had he ever convinced himself that he lived a normal life, that he could ever leave this all behind him? He decided to call Regal after the funeral, to try to apologize, to offer what help he could. If the vampire didn't suck the life out of him before then.

Jude put on the only suit he owned, a black coat and shirt, what Cass had called his Johnny Cash costume, and a tie he'd bought for a Mardi Gras ball a year before the storm, vertical stripes of dark purple and green and bright gold. He thought Dodge would approve. He said nothing to Scarpelli when he returned to the living room, just picked up his magician's bag and gestured to the door, following the vampire down the stairs and out to the street.

Outside, one of those perfect Summer days in New Orleans bloomed, a strong breeze sweeping the thick, hot air from the streets, the sky still bright and ceramic blue. Cassandra had loved days like this. Yesterday the heat had been hard to bear, tomorrow it would rain, but this day felt like grace, like benediction. Despite his circumstances, Jude's spirits lifted a little just stepping into the morning light. A Cadillac, long and dark and low, washed and waxed to a polished gleam, idled next to the curb. The chauffeur stretched tall and thin at the rear door, as though at attention, his rigidity somehow unnerving. He opened the door, and Jude followed Scarpelli into the car, the air within as frigid and dim and smelling as sterile as an industrial freezer. Two rows of benched leather seats faced one other. A young blonde waited inside, wearing a long pencil skirt and a silk blouse buttoned tight against her neck. High as the collar rose, it didn't entirely hide the ragged scar on the side of her throat. Jude saw, then, the pale, unnatural tautness of her skin, the red stain in the whites of her eyes, recognized her as the

woman from St. Joe's, the chauffeur as the scruffy-haired bartender. Ghouls. Revenants. The leftovers of Scarpelli's dinner up and walking around, held in the moment of death to be his servants.

The woman turned to the small side-bar, her movements the detached, near convincing mimicry of life, of a marionette controlled by a skilled hand. She opened a glass decanter and poured half a glass of a rust-colored, viscous fluid, the flow of it smooth and gentle, like oil.

Scarpelli took it from her as the car rolled down the street. "Care for a drink?" the vampire asked. "I make it myself. The trick is, you add the gin when the blood is still hot, so it keeps it from coagulating." Jude turned his attention to the tinted windows, trying to hide the revulsion he knew must be in his eyes. The vampire laughed anyway.

They rounded a corner and drove through the flashing lights of N.O.P.D. cruisers and an ambulance. A huddle of uniforms stood around a cloth-covered shape on the ground, some smoking, some talking into the microphones on their shoulders. A leg poked out from beneath the sheet, a shoe with its sole falling away from the toe, like the lolling tongue of a dog. No. It couldn't be. An image flashed in front of Jude's eyes with awful clarity, like the sudden recollection of a dream. He saw the young street performer's face, his painted jester's mask a parody of the terror etched on his face.

The Cadillac swept past the crime scene and the vision, the memory, whatever it was, vanished. Scarpelli, perhaps following his gaze, perhaps actually reading his mind, let out a soft chuckle. "Just one more murder in this town," he said. "Not one of mine, though."

Jude leaned back into the leather seat, wishing he'd had a drink before he left. Not that he needed it to numb him anymore. He hadn't felt the pull of a single lost thing since Dodge's card

game. He reached out through his hands, opening himself to his own magic, and felt nothing.

For the first time, the thought that his affinity for lost things might be dead and gone struck Jude as something to regret.

Jude hurried out of Scarpelli's car and onto Basin Street, grateful for the warmth of the air, for the distance between him and the vampire. He closed his eyes and sucked in deep breaths, unable to think until the chill faded from his muscles and bones. He didn't quite believe what he saw when he opened his eyes. Even after a lifetime of belief in genuine, present magic, after the years working for Mourning's agency and the impossibilities he had seen, even after the odd assembly of deities in Dodge's card room, the crowd gathered on the neutral ground between the Our Lady of Guadalupe church and St. Louis Cemetery #1 defied credulity.

They milled about like the casting call for a madman's hallucinations. A centaur, his hair and beard shaggy and wild, shook the hand of a woman, human from the waist up, her torso resting on the coils of a serpent. A thing with the head of an elephant flicked and curled its wide ears; a giant, hairy man rested in the shade of the oak tree overhead, his huge, bare feet spread out in front of him. A woman who appeared normal save for the white light that flashed from her eyes seemed to be talking to someone high in the oak's branches, though when a mouth formed in the foliage and replied, Jude realized that it was the tree itself she spoke to. Jude saw werewolves and a many-armed goddess of destruction, a Roman god with a face on either side of his face, animals that stood and wore clothes like men, a monkey carved out of stone, and things for which he had no name. While he stood gawking, Scarpelli and his servants crossed the street,

joining the crowd.

A tapping noise invaded Jude's thoughts, growing closer until it stopped with a final clack. Jude felt a tug at his coat. He turned to find an old man next to him, leaning on his cane so heavily that his arm trembled from the tension. He wore a suit of pale lavender, his jacket and pants, his bowler hat and his tie and his gleaming shoes all the exact same shade. Something in the coordination seemed comical, almost cartoonish. The old man held a hand to his hat, keeping it slanted across one edge of his head despite the stiff wind threatening to tear it loose.

“Lend me the strength of them sturdy legs of yours and help me cross the way,” he said in a musical island accent that Jude recognized from Dodge's card game.

“Legba?”

“That's how they call me, true enough.” Wrinkles creased Legba's face, an ancient, gap-toothed smile. He crushed a knob-knuckled grip around Jude's arm and pointed toward the crowd of deities. “They won't wait forever, them.”

Jude chuckled and walked across the street, unsure whether Legba held tightly to him for support or to keep him from getting away. As they drew closer, Jude's nostrils were assaulted by the scent of spices and the odor of hot flesh, the burnt ozone of a thunderstorm, the stink of rot. He picked out others from the card game among the milling group. Thoth, still wearing a fleur-de-lis t-shirt and jeans, rested in the grass with his legs folded, his bird's head buried in a book. The faerie stood flanked by a pair of body guards, one an Adonis with golden hair flowing to his broad shoulders, skin glowing like polished marble, the other a man-shaped cousin to the oak, its long face and gangly limbs made of bark, its hair a limp tangle of vines. The angel swooped in from above just as the crowd began to quiet, his wings snapping, the tips of his toes prancing

along the ground.

Jude turned, as did everyone else, as the doors of the funeral home creaked open, loud enough to be heard across the street, and the pallbearers emerged. The gods hushed, and it seemed like the city itself silenced around them, the only sound that of clopping hooves on asphalt. The smell of sulfur grew overpowering. The wind died down.

When the pallbearers moved out of shadow and into the street, they shifted, flowed out of shape with a liquid grace. Within moments, six men in tuxedos with a black casket hoisted on their shoulders became an ebony carriage and two shaggy-maned horses pawing at the street and snorting gout of fiery snot. The wind returned, as if on cue, kicking up the dust beneath the huge, wooden-spoked wheels, billowing up into a plume of smoke. Where it blew, shapes flickered, vague figures, like someone stepping out of an early morning fog. A single moan hung on the wind, a note held by a trumpet or a trombone. The note doubled, tripled, and then the dust swept away, and the carriage rolled forward, followed by the shades of a brass band, playing a slow, mournful tune. As one, Jude and the assembled deities fell into step with them. Still leaning on his arm, Legba produced a pint bottle of Old New Orleans rum, took a long swallow and then held it up to Jude. He hesitated, but he had a headache and there were traditions to be respected. He tipped his head back and swallowed twice before giving Legba the bottle back.

Jude expected the procession to move across to the cemetery, but it wound its way down to Canal, traffic coming to a halt without the usual need for a police escort. As they turned onto the busy street and headed away from the river, Jude wondered what the tourists and the locals frozen behind their wheels saw when they looked at this. Did they see a normal funeral with a hearse and a convoy of cars, or the somber parade of a traditional jazz funeral, the death of some

person important enough to shut down Canal Street? Did they see anything at all? Then the music caught his mind and his steps and, for a time, he thought nothing at all.

In what seemed like only a few minutes but must have been hours as far as they'd come, they arrived at the foot of Canal, to the cluster of cemeteries there at what had once been the boundary of an older New Orleans. The carriage took a sharp right on the corner, entering a small, always locked graveyard that Jude had all but forgotten existed. Ten foot high stone walls obscured everything in that small stretch of land between the streetcar line and St. Patrick's cemetery. Jude looked up at the words carved in sunken relief on the concrete archway as he passed through the blackened, wrought iron gate. They read, "Oddfellow's Rest." Odd fellows. That was an understatement.

The vegetation beyond the graveyard walls had long ago moved past being overgrown. This was the swamp of hundreds of years ago reclaiming a seldom used patch of land in the center of the city. Most cemeteries in New Orleans were white, the marble and plaster of above ground tombs glaring in the slightest sunlight. Here, grass and vines crept up underfoot while elephant-ear leaves held sway overhead. It seemed larger on the inside than out, which didn't surprise Jude at all. Most things were.

Despite the cooler air of the next day's storm, a patch of sweat damped the skin between Jude's shoulder blades and itched at the edge of his beard. Gnats rose in hordes from every disturbance of greenery, every shuffled footstep and every branch brushed out of the way. They fell on him, irritating pinpricks along his flesh, as if sensing that he among the others was vulnerable. Jude wandered amidst the trees and the graves, awed, falling behind the rest of the procession. By the time he caught up to the gods, they had reached Dodge's tomb.

The angel perched on one of a row of gravestones, his back to Jude, only the tips of his toes touching the pockmarked granite. Occasionally, his wings shuddered, flinging a fine mist of sweat and the scent of spice into the air. Beyond him, Legba leaned on his cane next to Thoth, who still held a book, one of his thick fingers wedged between the pages to mark his place. Scarpelli stood with one hip cocked above the other, his attention riveted on the cell phone in his hand. His posture, the phone, all of it seemed somehow disrespectful, bored. Jude couldn't find the faerie amidst the crowd at first, found her at last nearly hidden by the walking oak, curled into a tight ball at the base of the tree, her bare, mud-streaked feet resting against an exposed root.

The ebony carriage waited in a shaft of pollen-filled sunlight, its doors opened wide, its interior empty. Dodge's body must already be in the tomb. Unlike the others Jude had seen, Dodge's burial chamber was not granite or marble, but bronze, centuries of weather coating it with verdigris, a greenish-black that spread across its surface like some sort of disease.

A tall, lanky man in a dark, pristine tuxedo unfolded from the inside of the bronze structure, spinning and closing the doors behind him. Jude's skin went cold at the sight of him. He had no face, no skin, just the smooth bone and rictus grin of a skull. Whorls and blooming flowers of bright paint adorned the glistening surface of his head, like a tattoo, like the *Dia de los Muertos* pictures Jude saw every November. That grim visage swept back and forth across the assembled gods, jaws clacking as he spoke, words that Jude couldn't hear or couldn't understand, and then he stepped up to the carriage and closed the doors. The horses strained in their traces, pulling the carriage forward, and the brass band ripped the solemn air of the cemetery with the first notes of bright, energetic music. Had the funeral been that brief, or had he wandered longer

than he thought? The gods began to dance, second-lining their way out of the graveyard.

Wings snapped and fluttered, the angel taking flight, followed by Thoth and the vampire, one in the shape of a bird, the other a swooping, winged shadow. The faerie rose into the air as well, her silken robes rising and falling behind her in a flowing wave like a jellyfish gliding through the depths. Jude watched them vanish, shuddering at the memory of that shadow the night before. When he looked back at the ground, everyone had slipped away. Legba shook the skeleton headed man's hand and shuffled off as well, moving much quicker than he had before. Jude wanted to follow him, but the empty eyes of the skull were turned his way.

Then a white gloved finger stabbed at him. Jude felt a weak flutter in his gut and thought, panicked, that he might shit himself right there. The pointing finger crooked, beckoning him closer. With no real choice, Jude stepped out from his hiding place, the ground squelching beneath his feet. As he approached the ghoulish looking man, something soft brushed across Jude's face, like stepping through a spider's web. He ran a hand from his forehead to his chin, to wipe it away, but when he looked at his palm, it was speckled with the tiny, black bodies of gnats. Jude stopped, far enough away that he had to raise his voice to speak, worried that if he got too close, the life might be snatched out of him as well.

“Who are you?” Jude asked.

The voice that responded was deep and sonorous, rasping as though strained by illness. The skull-headed god's jaw clicked as it opened and closed, his tongue a strip of withered leather. “That’s either a real long answer, or a real short one. Which you want?” He took a seat on the tombstone the angel had been perched on, his long arms and legs bending at right angles like a thing made of sticks. He reached into his tuxedo jacket and pulled out a silver flask.

“The short one, I guess.”

“Then call me Saturday.” Saturday unscrewed the cap and took a long drink, something very unsettling in the way his teeth clinked against the glass, in the way the alcohol seemed to vanish in between the bone of his jaw and the pale gray of the cravat that hid his neck. Jude hoped, desperately, that he wouldn't offer to share. Saturday finished and put the flask away, running his gloved hands along his painted skull, like a man smoothing his hair. “I won't bother askin who you are,” he said.

“Because you already know?”

“No,” Saturday said, shaking his head. “‘Cause you don't know your ownself.” Beads of sweat clung to Jude's eyelashes, falling away as he blinked, speechless. Saturday turned his head away, as if, earless, he heard something Jude could not. “You better figure it out, though. And soon. You runnin out of time.”

“Time? For what?”

“For anything.” He turned his empty eye sockets back toward Jude, holes that seemed to fall away to cavernous depths. “You ain't askin the right questions.” He sounded, Jude realized, disappointed.

“Then what are the right questions?”

Bony shoulders lifted up into a shrug. “I know 'em when I hear 'em.”

“Fine. Who killed Dodge?”

Saturday's death grin gaped open. “Better,” he said. “But I don't know that one.” He pulled at his cuffs, an oddly vain, fussy gesture. “Try again.”

Jude asked a few more questions, where he could find certain gods and what he should do

next and who did know who killed Dodge, but they were all met with the same shrug, the same laconic dismissal.

“What the fuck *do* you know?” Jude asked, forgetting caution in his frustration.

Again that gaping mouth, like a serpent's smile. “Somethin you don't.” Saturday said. “I know who you are.”

“Oh yeah? And who am I?”

Saturday reached once again inside his coat, but instead of the rum, he took out something small, an envelope. Jude hesitated, then stepped forward and took it from him. Red wax sealed the flap closed, and flowing, ornate script spelled his name on the front.

When he looked up, Saturday had vanished.

Chapter Six

Jude waited until he made his way out of Oddfellow's Rest and onto the streetcar to open the envelope. The wax broke with a soft snap, not the crack of thunder or the hiss of an extinguished candle or any of the other climactic moments he had half-expected. Still, a surge of adrenaline ran through him at the act of opening it. Nestled inside, he found the playing card from his dream of Dodge's card room, the figure that looked like Jude, pointing to the sky and to the ground. It read, "The Magician." He stared for a moment, dumbstruck, shaking with the sway of the car along the tracks. Was this some kind of joke? He shook the envelope, checked both sides of the card, picked the wax off of the thick paper, but found nothing else. "Son of a bitch," he muttered.

He rode the streetcar down to Chartres where he got off and walked through the Quarter to Jackson Square. Wind rushed down the narrow streets, shoving at him and sending his tie fluttering like a flag. Dusk had descended, stretching afternoon shade into pools of twilight. That, coupled with the dropping pressure of the approaching rain, gave the air an abrupt chill. Jude hurried, hoping to catch one of the regulars in the Square before she packed and left.

The sidewalk in front of the Cathedral looked abandoned by the time Jude made it, tourists and street workers alike seeking shelter before the rain. The tarot reader he had come to see, though, still gathered her things. Opal Brennan was one of the few people in the Square that Jude had more than a passing acquaintance with, the only one whose home he had visited. She wore a long, flowing skirt and a plaid button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. Eyeglasses pushed up on her head held back her curling, gray hair. As she bent to shove something into her knapsack, dangling earrings swung back and forth against her cheeks, her

skin smooth save for the creases at her eyes and the laugh lines around her mouth.

“Need a hand?” Jude asked.

She looked up, startled at first, but then she smiled. “Jude Duboisson, where you been? No, I'm okay. You could fold that up, if you wanted.” She nodded her head toward the small table she had just cleared off. Jude flipped it onto its side and bent the legs up. “Haven't seen you much,” she said. “You gone respectable on us?”

“Something like that,” Jude said. “You mind if I ask you something?”

“Got nothing to do till Sharon gets here,” she said. “And you know she's always late. Shoot.”

Jude took the Magician card from his bag and handed it to her. “Does this mean anything to you?” She studied it for a moment, then pulled her glasses down to her eyes and peered more closely at it. She looked up at him, a smirk wrinkling the folds in the corner of her mouth.

“You yanking my chain?” she asked. “You know I take this stuff serious, right?”

“I don't know what it is. That's why I asked.”

Opal handed the card back to him and rummaged around in her knapsack. She took out a deck of cards, wider and more worn than the one Jude held, sliding them from one hand to another with a sure, deft motion. She pulled one free, and handed that to Jude as well. Studying them side by side reminded Jude of the “spot the difference” puzzles from his childhood. The figure on his card wore the long-sleeved t-shirt he had worn in Dodge's card room and had not just his face but his beard. Opal's Magician was dressed in red and white robes and had a clean-shaven, youthful face. Both cards contained tables, but Jude's held only a circle or a wheel, whereas Opal's had that same wheel as well as a chalice, a staff, and a sword. Her Magician had

the double loop of an infinity symbol above his head, clutched a candle burning at either end in his outstretched hand. Jude's Magician had neither.

“This is a little weird,” Opal said. “Did someone give this to you, or did you find it? Maybe they weren't finished?”

Jude could only shrug. “Can you tell me what the missing things mean?”

Opal sighed and took her card back from him. “It doesn't really work that way,” she said. “They don't mean anything by themselves. It's the relationship, the pattern, that taps into truth.” She tapped her card against the rest of her deck, thinking. Then she turned so they could both look at the card together. “See, the symbols are all pieces that add up to a whole. The Magician card represents the duality of existence, heaven and earth, or the material world and the spiritual one, however you want to think of it. That's why he's pointing to the ground and the sky, why his wand has a flame at both ends, why he has this above his head, why he has the ouroboros as a belt.” Until she pointed it out, Jude hadn't noticed the loop around the Magician's waist, the snake biting its own tail. Jude's card shared this symbol, in the form of a snake's head belt-buckle, which Jude didn't own.

Opal looked up at Jude, to see if he followed her, then continued. “But he also represents the order of the universe. That's why the tools of his trade are on the table, the four signs of the tarot.” She pointed to each as she named it.” “Blades and wands, for the male suits,” she said, pointing to the sword and the staff, “and cups and coins for the female.” So the wheel was a coin. Maybe that had something to do with the Mardi Gras doubloons, the coins, he had used to wager at the card game?

She slipped the card back into her deck, shuffling it, her hands faltering. She turned the

pile face down and mixed them again, as if trying to lose the Magician, to hide it from herself. “I wish I could help more,” she said. “It's definitely supposed to be that card, but without all the symbols it just feels, I don't know, empty. It makes me uncomfortable, truth be told.”

Jude could see the understatement in her discomfort in the lines on Opal's face, in the vertical crease between her eyes, in her pursed lips, in the way she flinched away from him when he moved to put his card back into his bag. For a moment, Jude felt the loss of something between them, as clearly and as keenly as he would have if his gift hadn't been wagered away.

At a loss for a way to break the silence, Jude said the first thing that came to mind. “Have you heard from Tommy today?”

The distaste on Opal's face melted into pity. “Oh hon, nobody told you yet?” Jude knew before she said it, before she confirmed what he'd worried since he saw that worn-shoed corpse a block away from his apartment, since he'd had that vision of Tommy's final moment. The police had come around asking questions, she told him, asking if the street performer had any enemies. Jude barely heard her, nodding and making the appropriate noises as she started the familiar refrain about the unfairness and the random violence in the city, so much worse since the storm. Of course the police only went through the motions. Of course no one really cared. “What's one more murder?” she asked.

Jude left her just as the first raindrops smacked down onto the pavement, fat and loud. What the hell was going on? First a god, then a street performer? They couldn't possibly have anything in common, but Jude couldn't shake the suspicion that the shadow he had seen had killed them both. Jude looked up, moonlight and starlight obscured by thick, fast-moving storm clouds. His thoughts ran through the possible connections, coming back to a strange sensation of

guilt, to the fact that Jude had seen them both just before they died.

Regal.

Jude snatched his phone from his pocket and with trembling fingers found her number. It rang and rang, then went to voice mail. He hung up and called her apartment, thinking maybe she just had her phone on silent, or the battery died, anything but what he feared. No answer. Jude stepped down from the curb and in front of a cab, flagging it down. He slid into the backseat, ignoring the driver's curses, and gave him Regal's address. As the car pulled away, he called Regal's number again. And again.

By the time he made it out to Regal's apartment in Mid-City, the rain had strengthened into a true thunderstorm, and Jude had convinced himself that Regal simply didn't want to talk to him, was fine and just ignoring his calls. He paid the cab driver using a combination of real bills and magically counterfeit ones, slipping his coat on over his magician's bag to keep it as dry as possible. Not that it mattered. So much water sluiced down from over head that Jude's clothes soaked through a heartbeat after getting out of the cab. He hurried through the downpour, through the tiny garden gate creaking open and closed in the wind, and under the balcony. The rich, dark scent of alluvial soil rose from the mud that sucked at his shoes, tinged with the heady perfume of the magnolia trees whipped and tousled by the wind. His heavy, sodden footsteps clanged on the metal staircase as he ascended, trying to piece together his apology to Regal in his mind, hoping she was there.

Jude reached the top of the stairs, and a shiver ran through his wet clothes, his wet skin,

cut down to the bone. Regal's front door swung open into darkness, letting in the wind and the rain and anything else. Jude called out her name, heard nothing but the moan and wash of the storm above him in reply. He thought of coming home to his own house, after the storm, everything ruined, Cassandra lost. He turned on the lights and stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

“Queenie? It's me, it's Jude.” From the amount of water sopped into the rug, the door had been open a while. Jude checked the lock and saw that there were no scratch marks, no cracks in the frame. Maybe the door had just blown open with the first strong gust. It was a pretty old house. He tracked muddy footprints further into her apartment, into her bedroom, calling her name. Empty.

Of course. She wasn't here at all. She just forgot to lock the door when she left. He called her cell phone again, his fingers numb from the cold of the rainwater and the air conditioning left on full blast. He'd have to apologize for messing up her apartment, too. Somewhere in the room Regal's phone let out its frog's croak as it vibrated against a hard surface. He found it on her coffee table as it let out the first ring. Next to her keys and her wallet. Jude sank down onto the couch, unable to deny the truth any longer. One more murder in this town, the song went.

One more.

Chapter Seven

Jude woke stiff and thirsty, unsure for a moment where he was. Then he recognized Regal's living room and it all came back, Dodge and Tommy and Regal and all the madness he'd wanted to leave behind. Weariness dragged at him. If it weren't for the tightness in his back from sleeping in his wet clothes on Regal's crappy sofa, he might have lain there until sleep took him again. He sat up, groaning, the fabric still damp beneath him. He needed a shower and something to eat. He needed to find out who had done this and hurt them as much as he could. He stared for a moment, confused by the the intensity of the light streaming in through the windows. How long had he slept? He stood and walked barefoot to the clock in Regal's kitchen. One in the afternoon. Jesus. No wonder his head felt so thick. He'd been unconscious for over twelve hours.

On top of the floral tablecloth he'd mocked countless times, Regal had left a pile of file folders spread out like a fan. Names were typed neat and precisely centered on the tabs: Thoth, Bartholomew, Scarpelli. Jude Duboisson.

The last time he saw these files, they were sitting on Mourning's desk. Before he could open any of them, he heard his cell phone vibrating in the other room. He ran back into the living room, almost slipping in his haste, imagining Regal, safe on the other end, only to scoop up his phone to find it inert. Regal's. He looked at her screen, saw an incoming call from Mourning. Shit.

Jude dropped the phone as if it had burned him. Why had he thought he'd be the only one looking for her? Why had he stayed here? This looked bad, looked fucked. He ignored his still wet socks and shoved his bare feet into his shoes, pulled the strap of his satchel across his

shoulders. He swept one last look around the apartment. No time to clean up the mess of dark streaks and wet stains he'd left. He needed to get out, get gone.

In full flight, thoughts whirling through his brain, Jude lurched to the door but froze with his hand on the doorknob. The files. They might be all he needed to find out what was going on. But if he took them, and someone from Mourning's office came looking for Regal, found her vanished and her files stolen –

No. Why act guilty? Mourning wanted him to look for Dodge's killer, so he would. If he went right now and told Mourning the truth, he had a chance. Slim maybe, but better than being Mourning's enemy. His mind made up, Jude went back to the kitchen and gathered the files, stuffing them into his bag. He went out into the bright, moist heat of day. He had hoped the heat would suck the remaining dampness from his clothes, but the previous night's rain saturated the air. In moments, he traded cold and slick for hot and dripping with sweat. On the walk to the streetcar line, and waiting for the car to get there, it felt as though every breath came through a wad of cotton. When the streetcar arrived, lumbering along its track like an overweight beast, Jude climbed aboard and fell into his seat, too drained to do anything but wait until he made it to the end of Canal and Mourning's office.

The elevator came to a stop, and Jude snatched the sunburst coin from its slot. He stepped into Scowl's waiting room, his face flushed, almost feverish from the heat outside, his clothes chafing. He had grown more and more angry as he tried to piece events together, more certain that someone somewhere played him for a fool. That rage kept him on his feet, moving in a

fugue that narrowed his vision and clouded his thoughts.

Jude had only taken a few steps into the room when Scowl appeared from behind his desk. He bobbed from side to side as he walked, blocking the way between Jude and Mourning's door. From the waist down, Scowl had the hairy, naked hindquarters of a goat, his genitals swinging free, large and obscene. Jude closed the distance between them.

“You should not be here, Mr. Duboisson,” Scowl said, all pretense of absent-mindedness gone from his voice.

“Oh,” Jude said. “Now you remember my name. I'm going in.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” Scowl said, looking up at him, showing no discomfort despite the way he had to crane his neck back. “I am under my employer's protection. None of your cheap tricks will help you here.”

Jude took his eyes away from Mourning's door just long enough to gauge the distance then kicked Scowl square in his naked balls, hard enough to lift him off his cloven hooves. The satyr, the imp, whatever he was, went down in a heap, though Jude felt no satisfaction as he stepped over him, felt nothing but the doorknob in his palm, saw nothing but the glare of Mourning's office as he opened the door.

Mourning sat behind his desk, those emerald eyes betraying nothing, not surprise at Jude's entrance, no anger or disappointment at the way the door slammed against the wall. He merely held up one immaculate finger, the casual dismissal freezing Jude mid-step. Mourning turned his attention back to someone Jude couldn't see, hidden from view by the high back of the chair.

“Do we have an understanding?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” answered the seated man. The voice, thin and reedy and smug, was one Jude recognized. Cornell Dupree, another of Mourning's investigators. “I got this. You don't even worry.” He rose to his feet, wearing a long leather coat despite the heat, a fedora in his hands. The bastard actually wore a fedora. He watched too many movies. He had skin so pale it seemed translucent, a webbing of thick, blue veins visible on the backs of his hands, his nails long and sharp and dirty, a finer stretch of veins across his cheeks above his smirking mouth and his pubic tuft of a goatee. Dupree nodded once to Mourning and turned toward the door, blue eyes widening when he saw Jude. He slipped his hat onto his head, probably trying to imagine what Sam Spade would say in this situation.

Jude just wanted him gone, wanted to talk to Mourning before his legs gave out. Cornell pointed a finger at Jude, his thumb cocked up like an imaginary gun, then bent his thumb and clicked his tongue, grinning all the while. “Later, hater,” he said and slipped past Jude and out the door.

Mourning spoke before the door had closed all the way. “These are not the most auspicious of circumstances with which you return to me, Mr. Duboisson.” He looked Jude up and down, seeming to take in Jude's slept in, muddy clothes, his bleary eyes and unkempt hair. Jude realized only then that his tie hung open and loose, his shirt half untucked. Mourning glanced at the watch on the inside of his wrist and gestured to the chair in front of him with a sigh. “I presume you have an exceedingly valid and urgent matter to have so indecorously presented yourself?”

“Yeah,” Jude said, rage and exhaustion freeing his tongue. “I know Regal Sloan is missing. I know this situation has gotten pretty fucked.”

One of Mourning's thin eyebrows arched. "Ever the wordsmith, Mr. Duboisson. Do me the ever-so-generous favor of being as marvelously succinct in arriving at your point? I would prefer that your sodden presence not ruin the furnishings any more than is necessary."

Jude told him, briefly, how he had gone to Dodge's funeral, "collected" by the vampire, how he had seen the murdered street performer, found Regal missing. How he had found the file with his name on it. "So I want to hear from you what you think you know about me. And why you didn't say anything when I told you I had no idea why I was at that card game."

Mourning's tongue flicked out between his teeth, the hint of a smile gracing his thick lips. "Had you examined the documents yourself, Mr. Duboisson, you would have seen that the investigation is ongoing. The only certainty I have regarding your identity, I'm afraid, is that you are not as you claim."

Jude's hands trembled, rage slipping away, leaving behind weariness and a vague nausea. "What does that mean?"

"When you first came under my employ, you indicated that you were a man of normal parentage imbued with a gift you did not understand. Subsequent events have led me to doubt the veracity of this information." Mourning cocked his head to the side. His smile widened. "Oh. Oh my. You believed it yourself, didn't you? Well, we know that your mother is mortal, which begs the question, doesn't it?" Mourning leaned back in his chair, steeping his hands in front of him. "Tell me, Mr. Duboisson," he said, a kind of perverse joy in his voice, "what do you know of your father?"

* * *

It is August, the day before the hurricane, and Jude needs a car. He walks up and down the sidewalks in the Garden District, looking for a block where everyone has already packed up and gone. It seems like on every street, there's at least one family still boarding up windows, still walking from the front door to the car carrying boxes and luggage, as though they slept in and are finally leaving for vacation. Usually when he needs a car he borrows Cass' beat up Ford truck, but they had a fight the night before and she is somewhere else, on her way to her folks' place in Baton Rouge, maybe. Jude tries not to think about their fight, the way they'd drowned out the mayor on the TV talking about mandatory evacuations. That had been her last straw, that they were making people get out, but Jude speaks with higher authorities than ol' cue ball Nagin every day. Things are going to be fine. He just needs a car.

He finds one the next block over, a little green Volkswagen, the street empty of curious eyes. A word in an ancient language unlocks the door, a sharply spoken "Hush" quiets the alarm. He reaches into his satchel and takes out the small tin where he keeps the thin strips of laminated paper. When he pries open the lid, the tin still smells like the mints it once held. He spares a thought for the Rabbi that writes these for him, wonders if he has evacuated as well. It takes Jude a moment to find the right paper, with the word in both Hebrew and German. He slides the strip of paper into the ignition and the engine sparks and revs to life.

Jude takes out a pocket-sized English-German dictionary, and after flipping a few pages back and forth, explains where he wants to go. He leans back in the seat as the Volkswagen slides backwards out of the driveway and puts itself in drive, making its way to the interstate with sharp, efficient cuts of the wheel. Trusting the magic, which he'll vow to never do again in the coming months, he drifts off to sleep.

Even with contra-flow, both sides of the interstate going the same way, it takes hours to cross Lake Pontchartrain, a drive that usually lasts 45 minutes. The lake is placid, only slightly rippled by the wind that jostles the cars on the bridge. Jude wonders at the mass of people, at the things they put their faith in, radar and satellites and the educated guesswork of men who are wrong more often than if they'd flipped a coin. He wants to tell them, as he wanted to tell Cassandra last night, what he has been promised, that the storm will turn as it always does, that the city will protect her own. What he really wants is for Cass to call him, for her to have stayed in the city, for them to throw a hurricane party tonight and for things to go back to the way they were. What he gets is a brief easing of the brake lights in front of him, the smell of his own sweat filling the car, another few feet closer to an obligation he dreads. Over the lake and through the woods, to Mother's house we go.

When he finally makes it to St. Joseph's Abbey, somewhat hypnotized by mile after mile of green foliage rushing by the windows, he finds he has to coax the little car off the small two lane road and across the narrow bridge. As he speaks to it in childish, poorly accented German, it trembles like a frightened animal. He wonders if it can somehow sense the approaching storm. If he couldn't calm Cass' fears, what chance does he have with a scared automobile that doesn't even understand English?

He lets the car pull over onto the grass shoulder and walks the rest of the way, a pleasant enough stroll under ordinary circumstances. He looks out over the pond, still and murky as an old mirror, reflecting the tall, tall pines and the bright pink of the huge azalea shrub that grows on the hump of an island in the center. He breathes deeply, savoring the warmth of sunlight along his skin, the dark and wild scents of the flowers and the earth. The first girl he ever kissed,

he kissed by that brightly painted bush just at the edge of the water. Maybe he should bring Cassandra out here. He shakes the thoughts off and focuses, wondering how many cops he's going to have to ensorcel to get back into the city.

The first thing he notices when he walks into his mother's room, the first thing he always notices, is the overwhelming stink of paint. If anyone ever needed proof of his mother's madness, it's here, in her ability to live within this cloud of harsh fumes and bitter oils so pungent Jude can taste them. Her hands have become gray claws, stained to the wrist by a muddle of drying pigment. He sees this despite her back being to the door, because those hands are clasped together behind her head at the base of her skull. Her skin is bare, revealing her terrible thinness, the knots of her spine poking out in a line like cypress stumps breaking the surface of the marsh. Sometimes, he knows, she starts to paint when she is in the middle of dressing or on her way from the shower. The monks here view her nudity as part of the test of her, her care some holy obligation that Jude does not understand or question.

The only thing she paints, the only thing she has ever painted as long as Jude has been alive, is canvas after canvas of swans. Sometimes they are realistic, sometimes fantastic, sometimes abstract, but every moment of his mother's tragic life seems buffeted by those white plumed wings. Jude clears his throat and she turns, a long artist's apron covering her breasts, her face, for the first time in years, breaking into a glorious smile of recognition. Something breaks in Jude's heart at that moment, though whether it is that she knows him, or the fragility of her neck and shoulders, her skin stretched taut across tiny collar bones, or whether it is what she has been painting, a swan with a man's face, Jude does not know. Her expression, changes, a fluid shift from joy to concern. "Such sad eyes," she says to him. "Such sad, sad eyes." She runs a

finger across her eyebrows, leaving a smear of half dried paint on her forehead. “You look so much like your father.”

Jude came back to himself with a slow blink, the world graying out at the edges and seeming to freeze in place for a moment, while he indulged a memory. He had somehow misplaced that moment with his mother in all the insanity that had followed, the storm, the bridges across the lake damaged or swept away, the city abandoned by men and gods alike, his weeks with the monks at the abbey turned shelter. Now, though, parts of it started to make sense. His ability to find lost things, his mother's madness, his invitation to Dodge's card game. Somehow his place in all of this had a purpose, dictated by who, and what, his father was –

“Mr. Duboisson,” Mourning said, snapping his fingers across his desk at Jude. “Kindly regain yourself, or I will be forced to have you bodily extricated from these offices.”

“Sorry. I'm –” But Jude could not say what he was. His thoughts felt slick, his body drained from the events of the previous couple of days.

“Ah yes, the most esoteric of questions. 'Who am I?'" Mourning raised his hands and made quotation marks in the air. “‘What you are' is, I'm afraid, an unknown quantity. I had hoped, given your previous affiliation, that you could be trusted. I fear this was a premature judgment on my part. I am not, however, utterly without caution.” Jude felt foolish, punch drunk. Had he really expected to storm in here and throw his weight around? “Mr. Dupree has kept his rather sharp eyes on you since our last discussion.” Mourning leaned forward, all pretense of refined civility sliding away, leaving something sharp and deadly in its place.

Though wet and chilled to the bone, Jude felt the waves of heat radiating from Mourning.

“You refuse to help me find a god-killer while those around you are murdered or disappear. I wonder what game you play. I wonder if you even know.” Mourning's eyes narrowed to slits as though trying to see inside of Jude. “I wonder if you have the sense to run. I wonder how long you have left.” Then, as abruptly as it had showed itself, this other side of Mourning vanished. Jude would spend hours that night wondering if he had finally seen behind the mask or if he had merely seen a new one.

The self-styled Investigator leaned back, the air shimmering above him like the ripple in the air above the sidewalk on a hot day. His grin returned, mocking and keen. When he spoke again, the sibilance, the pleasant tone had returned. “In light of these developments, Mr. Duboisson, and given your reluctance or incapability to provide any justification or explication, I find myself in an unenviable and unfamiliar position of error, necessitating a rectification of a prior, flawed decision. You may keep the records in your possession. They are not the originals. I hope I need not lower myself to make any crass statements regarding your leaving town or any other such cliché banter? Rest assured, I shall pursue this matter until I secure satisfaction.” He glanced at his watch. “What I mean to say is, Mr. Duboisson, that your services are no longer required. That your employment with this agency is at an end. You are, for lack of a more elegant and appropriate phrase, fired.”

Jude spent the rest of the day in a bar in the Quarter, going through the folders he had taken from Regal's apartment. Only in New Orleans could a man in a disheveled suit, unwashed and wild-

eyed, sprawl across an entire booth and order drink after drink, starting with beer and switching to Southern Comfort on the rocks, muttering to himself, and attract as little notice as Jude did. Mourning's records gave him a few specific facts but told him nothing he hadn't already known. Learning that the faerie called herself Lillian meant nothing compared to understanding the difference between the cute, winged little sprites in children's stories and the true, ancient power of the fae. Nor did learning the angel's name, Bartholomew, or Scarpelli's first name, Umberto, tell Jude why Dodge had invited them to his card game. The files contained nothing about Dodge, or Thoth, or Legba, or the vampire, or Jude himself, that Jude hadn't already figured out for himself. In fact, when it came to Legba, and voodoo in general, Jude had a source of information that Mourning didn't know about.

Jude gathered his things and went to the bar to settle his tab. He realized, as he stood, that he was drunker than he'd intended to be. The girl behind the counter finished typing something on her laptop before giving him her attention. "Get you something else, baby?" she asked.

"Yeah," Jude said. "Do you know if Leon Carter is playing tonight?"

"At the Maple Leaf, same as always." She nodded at his cup. "You want one to go?"

Chapter Eight

In voodoo, the gods are not physical beings but spirits, called *loa*. They are not worshiped so much as invoked, called upon to intercede with the supreme deity, a vast and impersonal entity known as Bondye. The *houngan*, the priest, does not send his prayers to the gods, rather, he calls the *loa* down to him, allowing himself to be possessed. The *loa* rides his body, in the vernacular of the faith, like a man rides a horse. Though he had come in his own form to the funeral, Legba had been riding a *mamba* at the card game, a female *houngan*, one that Jude hadn't recognized. To a believer in voodoo, Jude was not a priest. He was a *bokar*, a sorcerer. The man he sought, though, was neither *houngan* nor *bokar*. Leon Carter was a zombie.

Jude hurried through the Quarter and caught the streetcar down St. Charles, riding it all the way Uptown to Carrollton. He got off at Oak and walked the few blocks down to the Maple Leaf, where the crowd spilled out the door and onto the sidewalk. The ground beneath him throbbed with the music coming from the bar. Jude stopped at the end of the line, his earlier rage returning as a hot flare of impatient frustration.

The girl in front of him turned around, wearing a black Saints t-shirt with the sleeves cut off and her tight midriff bare. She shrugged, waving her hand in the direction of the bouncer at the door. "They won't let nobody in till the band is done," she said. "Bummer, huh?"

"Yeah," Jude said, rummaging around in the magician's bag hanging at his hip. "We'll see." A warmth along his fingertips, like holding a hand above a stove to test the heat, told him he'd found what he sought. That much magic remained to him, at least. He took out a small, dark bottle and unscrewed the top. A slim glass rod extended from the lid, a single drop glistening on its tip. The acidic stink of crushed insect wafted from the bottle.

The girl, still watching him, wrinkled her nose. “Dude, what *is* that?”

Jude didn't answer, just licked the liquid off the dropper and held it on his tongue despite the sudden and potent sting. It felt like he'd stuck a live wire in his mouth. As it faded, he spat into his hand and rubbed his saliva into his eyelids. Again, it burned. He stamped his foot once against the pain and waited for it to pass. He looked at the girl, feeling the magic take hold. “Want to try?” he asked her.

“No wa – ” she began, then fell silent when her gaze met his. Her shoulders drooped, and a sleepy smile spread across her face. She ran the tip of her tongue along her lips before answering. “Sure,” she said. “I'm down. For, you know, whatever.” Her words took on a double, sensual, meaning. Lucky for him, she was into guys. He held the dropper out to her, told her what to expect, when to rub the spit in her eyes, and what he wanted her to say. She held his gaze as she flicked the drop off, somehow making the gesture lewd, seductive. Jude made sure he looked away before she opened her eyes, not sure if the magic would work on him in return. He slipped the bottle into his bag and led her toward the door.

The bouncer held up a meaty hand as they approached. “Whoa there,” he said. “You don't see the line? Full up tonight. No one gets in without a stamp.”

The girl stepped up without needed to be prompted, her voice somehow husky and pouty at the same time. “We don't really need one, do we?”

He looked up and down her body, jerking as if stricken when his eyes met hers. A flush rose into his cheeks and across his bald head. “Damn,” the bouncer said, drawing the word out, probably not realizing he said it out loud. “No, you're good. Go on in.”

As they walked through the door into moist, hot darkness and noise, Jude leaned in and

shouted into her ear so he could be sure she heard. He told her to enjoy herself and not do anything she wouldn't normally. She nodded and went straight for the bar. She'd feel a little bit drunk and have any straight man she locked eyes with eating out of the palm of her hand for the next hour or so. From the way she seemed to take it all in stride, the sensation wouldn't be all that unusual for her.

Jude fought his way through the crowd, crammed in tight between the bar and the walls which were covered with fleur-de-lis stamped tin sheeting. Above the roar of too many people in too small a space, the room shook with a fast bass beat, slapping drums, the pluck and wail of an electric blues guitar. A voice sang out, as thick and smoky as the air it drawled its woes into. Jude forced his way around the corner and onto the dance floor, where, past the rows of outstretched hands and upheld drinks, Leon Sweetwater Carter sat on a stool in the center of a hazy spotlight. He shared the stage with a drummer and bass guitarist and a horn player, but the light and the crowd's focus were only on him.

Sweat beaded on Leon's forehead and fell from the tips of his dreadlocks, black hair streaked through with coarse wires of gray. Wire rimmed spectacles hung low on his nose, giving him the appearance of some kind of mad scholar, shouting as he was with his mouth pressed against the microphone. His fingers stabbed up and down the neck of his guitar with the precision of a sewing machine's needle, weaving a tapestry of sound. A battered black case, too small to hold a guitar, rested against the stool beneath his feet, his sneakers tapping out his rhythm.

Jude stood in the middle of the crowd, a lone, still figure among a seething, writhing dance. It took four songs for Leon to see him, an ache settling into Jude's legs and shoulders

from standing in one place for so long. When Leon recognized Jude, his hands faltered on the strings. Though he recovered, turning it into a slide and groan that seemed deliberate, the other musicians noticed, exchanging a glance behind him. Jude caught the reaction, too. He pointed to the side door and mouthed, 'after'. Leon nodded and turned that into part of the act as well, shouting, 'yeah yeah yeah', and getting an echo from his audience.

Relaxing a little, Jude made his way to the bar. Leon would play for another hour at least. Might as well get a drink and enjoy the show.

Jude watched as Leon got up from his seat, pulling the guitar strap from his shoulders. He leaned the instrument against one of the speakers, which let out a shrill burst of feedback until he cut it off. Behind him, the drummer kept a beat going. Slow, tired, the musician eased back down, then leaned in close to the microphone. "If ya'll don't mind," he said, his speech as thick and heavy as his singing, "I got a real special tune I wanna play tonight." Leon reached beneath his feet and picked up the small case, a number of his fans cheering the gesture, as if they knew what it contained. Jude finished his drink and threw the plastic cup away, rolling his shoulders. Surely Leon wouldn't try something here, in front of all these people. But if he did, Jude wanted to be prepared. Not that he had anything in his bag of tricks that would help him if Leon really cut loose.

The musician opened his case and pulled out a violin, the varnish gleaming in the light of the stage. An audible hush moved through the crowd like the sound of a wave retreating from the shore. For a moment, the room was silent save for the thump-thump-thump of the drum, like

the beating of a huge, patient heart. Leon looked straight at Jude and smiled. "Listen now," he said. "Listen close and listen good. You give ol' Sweets just a little of your time, I got a story might save you a whole mess of trouble. You see, I had this here fiddle a long, long time." He toyed with the pegs of the violin as he spoke, as if out of his hands it might have gotten just slightly out of true. "Means a lot to me, this fiddle, more than any hunk of wood and strings ought to mean to any man. It means so much, y'see, cause on a hot summer night just like this one, at midnight, I met the devil at the crossroads." Cheers went up at this, a few at first, then more and more, as people caught on. "I sold that ol' devil my soul and this is what I got," he said, settling the violin between his chin and shoulder and raising his bow. "Ya'll tell me if I made a good deal." And then he played.

What came from his violin was far more than music. It was more, even, than magic. It sounded like the blues, but somehow more haunting, more evocative. Music could be ignored, magic could be fought, but what came out of Leon Sweetwater Carter's violin settled on the skin as gentle as a lover's sigh, seeping down into the meat and marrow of a person. He could open a door into someone's soul in a way Jude knew he could never hope to do, not without giving up more of himself than he was willing to. Because, Jude knew, Leon's story had more truth to it than fiction. All those years ago, Leon had met someone at midnight, but not the devil. It had been Legba, the voodoo *loa* of the crossroads. Legba had shaken Leon's soul loose from his body, leaving him a zombie, a creature not alive and not dead, existing in the seam between this world and the world to come. This music, this power, was what he'd gotten in return.

Jude slipped through the crowd and out the side door, where he waited for Leon to finish weaving his spell, whatever it might be, on his unsuspecting audience.

* * *

A short while later, the metal door opened with a hollow bang, and Leon stepped out into the small alley. A shallow drainage ditch, still slick from a recent rain, ran down the center of the cobblestones and disappeared beneath the locked iron gate that blocked the way out into the street. A high wooden fence separated the bar from the restaurant next door whose dumpster filled the alley with a pungent, moist odor of fried oil and vegetables spoiled in the heat. Jude's ears still rang with the insistent whine of speakers turned up high and loud. Between the heat and the stink and the past two days, his skin felt like it had a coating of grime. The beginning of a headache tightened at his temples. He wanted, badly, to get a name out of Leon and get home to a long, hot shower.

The musician looked back and forth as the door swung shut behind him. Jude had instinctively put his back to the wall, half-hidden by shadow. "You sounded great, Sweets," Jude said. He hoped Leon's reception would be more friendly than the past few days.

Leon squinted into the darkness and nodded. He held his violin case in a loose-fingered grip at his side. "I appreciate that, Jude," he said, falling silent for a moment. "Thought you was gone."

"I was. I'm back."

The musician nodded again, looking up and away into the night sky where thin wisps of clouds obscured a sliver of moon. He sucked his upper lip between his teeth, making a hissing sound. "So you just catchin up, or there somethin you need?"

"I'm not here for just the music, I'm afraid."

"Yeah, I thought not."

“You hear about Dodge?”

Leon's head dropped down, staring at his feet. His grip tightened on the violin case's handle, his shoulders stretching taut. His whole body seemed to clench. “Got nothin to do with that,” he said.

“I never said you did. I just need to know – ”

“No, you ain't heard me. I got nothin to do with that, don't want nothin to do with it. You'd keep clear yourself if you had any sense.”

“I need a name, Leon.”

Leon shook his head, his dreads fluttering at his shoulders. “Boy, you got full on stupid since I seen you last. You think just cause a nigga got some magic he got to be your magical Negro? You think this is some movie? Shittin me, son.” He turned to the door. Jude whispered, and the lock clicked shut with an audible snap. Leon turned to him, the small discs of his glasses glowing in the moonlight. “I ain't gonna ask twice,” he said, his hand still on the knob.

“Me either.” A sour taste rose in Jude's mouth, a sick twist to his stomach. Damn it all to hell. He took a glass bottle from his bag, uncorking it. He poured a fine, powdery sand into the palm of his hand. “You know how you make a zombie, Leon?”

The musician's mouth hung open. Then he closed it and swallowed. “Bullshit,” he said. “You aint got none.”

Jude curled his hand into a fist. “I mean, I know you are one. But do you know how it works? You need zombie powder. You blow it into your victim's face and poof.” With his other hand, Jude made a waving motion. “Knocks the soul right out of them. Nasty stuff.” Part

of Jude felt sick. This wasn't him, wasn't his way. But he'd been summoned and toyed with and threatened, when all he wanted was to be left alone. Enough. He wanted this done. "Now, I don't know what this will do to a zombie. Maybe it'll rip the rest of your soul loose, knock you dead. Maybe it will pull your soul back to you, like reeling in a fish that gave up the fight. Maybe it won't do anything at all. We'll find out. Or you can tell me the name of the *mamba* Legba rode to the game. Your call."

He raised his hand to his lips, his fist making a kind of blowgun tube. He inhaled, deeply, through his nose.

"Dorcet," Leon said, pronouncing it 'door-say'. "Celeste Dorcet. Used to live in the East, fore the storm. Think she got a shop off North Rampart now." He shuddered, turning his head away. "Now put your damn hand down." Jude swallowed and couldn't tell if the tightness in his throat was from choked-back tears or the sudden need to vomit. He lowered his fist and let the door unlock. Leon snatched it open but paused in his flight to look at Jude. His eyes were dark pools above the shimmer of his spectacles. "Y'know, bein a *bokar* don't have to mean black magic. That shit come from you. That shit come from your heart." Then he closed the door and was gone.

Jude thought about those words as he let the salt sift through his fingers to the ground, as he rode the streetcar home, as he stood in the shower, the water scalding hot but failing to rinse him clean. *Black magic . . . come from your heart.* Dodge had said something about finding the heart, in his dream. *Find the heart. You know who you are.*

But he didn't know. Not anymore.

Chapter Nine

Jude nearly walked past Celeste's place when he found it. The sign swinging in the breeze advertised it as "Mama Celestine's Voudou Shoppe", the words painted in shining acrylics in the shape of a child's scrawl. From what he could see from outside, through the dirt-crusted windows and between the bars, the contents were like every other tourist trap like it, votive candles and copies of The Serpent and the Rainbow shelved next to "herbal" remedies and glass pipes colored with tie-dyed neon swirls, the kind of place that was more likely to offer a dime bag of weed from behind the back counter than anything of genuine magic. The chalk drawing on the sidewalk, though, said otherwise. To most people, it would look like nothing special, an abandoned game of hopscotch, or the incomprehensible marks of a civil engineer signaling the location of a gas main or a sewer line. Jude looked at the drawing, two wide V's intersecting to make a diamond shape between them, the inside thatched like a stylized leaf, the outside surrounded by asterisks, and saw the veve, the sacred sign, of Ayizan, the first *mamba*, the *loa* of the marketplace.

He had dreamed of Dodge again the night before. Fitful, disquieting dreams where Dodge kept slipping away, changing into Leon or Tommy or Regal, the card room becoming the alley beside the Maple Leaf, or Regal's apartment, or the street in the Warehouse District where Tommy had died. Sometimes Jude had dealt the cards instead of the fortune god. Sometimes he had poured a handful of powder into Dodge's drink, knowing it was ground glass or poison or true zombie dust. He had killed them all over and over again in his haunted sleep, drawing Leon's violin bow across their throats. He dreamed of pursuit, of being chased by something vast and hungry through the streets of an empty, ruined New Orleans. He caught glimpses of the

thing over his shoulder. Sometimes it was Thoth, black-eyed and blade-beaked. Sometimes the vampire's rotten, sharp smile hunted him. He ran from Leon and Mr. Mourning and the angel and once, terribly, from himself. When the dreams finally left him, he'd slept all the way until noon and woke feeling more tired than when he'd fallen asleep.

The bell above the door jingled as Jude walked in though he doubted the girl at the counter heard it. She seemed focused on the magazine in front of her, white wires trailing down from her ears and disappearing into her pocket. She could have been the goth sister of the girl from the Maple Leaf, her t-shirt torn at the collar and sleeves, her lipstick a dark stain on her mouth. Piercings dotted her nose, her eyebrow, her lip. Her head bobbed in time with the music, and when she opened her mouth, to Jude's surprise, she didn't let out a death metal screech. "*I'm mad about you, baby,*" she sang, the tone like something from a 50's rhythm and blues song.

Jude walked up to the counter where tea pouch labels promised everything from sexual potency to spiritual enlightenment. The girl looked up, her eyes wide with surprise. She pulled the buds from her ears, and sure enough, the music coming from them was soft and easy.

"What are you listening to?" he asked.

She bit her lower lip, coloring a little. "Wear Your Black Dress," she said. "It's by this guy, Willie Egan? I got it cause the album's called The Devil is a Busy Man, and, y'know." She shrugged and waved her hand around the room, as if that explained her choice. "Wasn't what I expected, but I'm totally in love with it now."

Jude nodded. Cass had loved that kind of music, too. He might have that exact record back at the apartment among the things she had left behind, he realized. He wondered if "Mama Celestine" had any measure of forgetting among her potions and trinkets.

“You need something?” the girl asked.

“Yes. I'm looking for Celeste.”

Her brow furrowed. “Who? You mean Miss Celestine?” She glanced over her bare shoulder, looking at the beaded curtain that led into the back. “She uh, she ain't in today.”

Jude caught the hesitation, heard the lie in her voice. “Look,” he said. “I'm not the D.E.A. or anything, okay? I'm just here to talk to her. You tell her Leon Carter sent me. She'll see me.”

A voice came from the darkness behind the thick glass beads, rolling and imperious like storm clouds on the horizon. “Sweetwater ain't sent you here, no,” it said. “He called and said you was coming, though.” A hand split the curtain, rings on every well manicured finger, thick bangles clattering on the wrist. Celeste Dorcet followed. She wore a loose, flowing gown of thin, yellow fabric, her arms and shoulders bare. Everything about her seemed different than he remembered, the sound of her voice, the expression on her face, her posture, the tilt of her head. But then, everything about her was different. Jude had met Legba in Dodge's card room, not this woman.

The girl behind the counter looked from Jude to Celeste, eyes wide and darting. “Miss, I mean, Mama, I'm sorry. I tried to, I – ”

Celeste turned to her, a warm smile spreading across her face. “He ain't no concern of yours, child, don't you worry. You just mind the store, hear?” She looked back to Jude, frowning as if she didn't like what she saw. She held her arm up higher, opening the hole in the strings of beads wider. “Well young man, you comin in or you gonna make an old woman beg?”

Beyond the beaded curtain a short hallway led into a small, dimly lit room, decorated

more like a den in the suburbs than the lair of a voodoo queen. Thick carpet covered the floor; a lumpy, threadbare sofa stretched along one wall. The only other seat in the room, a wicker framed futon with a thick, green cushion, creaked and snapped as Celeste lowered herself into it. A ceiling fan cut lazy circles overhead, its light turned down to a soft glow, making it too dark to be sure what color the walls were painted. A candle burned on a table in the corner, the scent of vanilla in the air. An ancient behemoth of a television huddled in the other corner, tin foil patched rabbit ears on top of it. Celeste had the news on, the sound turned low. She reached over and clicked the knob, the picture squeezing down to a flickering point before vanishing. Faintly, from the front room, the girl sang to herself once again.

Jude eased himself down onto the sofa, sure that wherever he sat, a spring waited to jab at him. The voodoo priestess picked up a sweating glass of what looked like tea from the top of the television, drinking from it in large, thirsty gulps. “So,” she said, gesturing at him with the glass. “Why don't you say your piece so you can be on your way?” Jude thought about asking for something to drink, but something in her dark, glittering eyes said she wasn't in a hospitable mood.

So he told her about meeting Legba at the card game among other gods, about Dodge being murdered, about his need to find the killer. When he finished, she took one last drink from her tea, smacking her lips as she set it down. The gesture seemed false, somehow, part of an elaborate act. “I don't like this,” she said. “And I tell you right now, I don't care for you none, neither. But I'll tell you what I know to keep your shadow from off my doorstep.” She gathered her dress in one hand, drawing her legs up beneath her. She gripped the fabric so tight that her knuckles whitened. Jude looked up from her fist to her clenched jaw, to her glaring eyes.

It was, Jude realized, fear that he saw in her. The thought saddened him. He tried to think of something he could say that might reassure her, might let her know that he posed no threat to her. Then he remembered the look in Leon's eyes and kept his mouth shut. Everything had consequences.

“It ain't much,” she said. “Nobody remembers what happens when the *loa* ride you. All I know from that night is one minute I'm asking Papa Legba's leave to talk to the spirits, next thing I know it's morning and my mouth tastes like . . .” She made a face. “Legba always rode my husband, Damballah protect us. He liked the pipe Legba smoked, him.”

“I don't see how this helps me,” Jude said.

“Hold your water,” she said. “I'm getting there. I got no idea what happened that night, but the next day, my nephew come and see me, the one my husband was training to be *houngan* before he passed. My nephew says I talked to him, only it was Legba, see? He had to get a suit and be ready for the funeral.”

Jude nodded. “Yeah, I saw him there.”

She shook her head. “No, you don't see. Legba went to the funeral, but that ain't his place. The crossroads is his, see? Not the grave. Three days after the body is buried, the soul moves on. You want to see Papa Legba again, you be at the crossroads tomorrow night, when he show that luck god the way home.”

Jude left the voodoo shop with no idea where to go next. Before the storm, when he worked for Mourning, he had followed his gift at times like this. The results might have been cryptic, once he'd been drawn to fire hydrants, another time to a certain vintage of wine, but once he understood, his gift had always proven itself unerringly accurate. Living without it felt like

being in a foreign town, as though he had no landmarks to orient on. Jude reached for the flask in his magician's bag, unscrewed the cap, and took a long pull of the still chilled booze. The thought had occurred to him, while he filled it with scotch that morning, that he'd started drinking too much again. Or maybe he'd just finally taken a close enough look at himself to realize that he'd been drinking too much for a long time. Like the gloves, though, a little taste now and again kept things manageable. Kept him from shutting down completely. He had a list of gods to question about Regal, about Dodge's murder, but without magic, how was he supposed to find them? Thoth came from ancient Egypt, long before social security numbers. Angels had no mailing address. The gods didn't live off the grid, they existed beyond it. Which explained why he had never found his father. His gift refused to work for things Jude himself had lost, and nothing else could tell him where his father had gone. Except, maybe, his mother.

He took another swallow, savoring the burn. He might not be able to find any gods without his gift, but she should be right where he left her.

The car steered itself into a parking spot in front of St. Joseph's Abbey and died, a faint wisp of smoke coming out of the ignition as the tiny scrap of paper burned away the last of its magic. Jude slid out of the car, leaving behind the envelope of air-conditioning within. Beneath the canopy of oak and pine, amidst the rustling of the leaves and the rapid, chattering song of birds and squirrels, with the fragrance of flowers and the reek of pond scum in his nostrils, somehow the pervasive heat along his skin and within his lungs felt more appropriate, more natural. Or maybe he'd just been cooped up in the car for too long. He took another drink from his Scotch.

The ride over had been tough, his first trip across the lake since the day before the storm. A lean, smiling man walked toward him, wearing the black robes and rope cord belt of a Benedictine, his face wrinkled and worn as the spine of an old Bible. The monk waved. Jude raised his hand in return, forgetting as he did that he held a flask.

“Little early for me,” the monk said.

Jude looked at his hand. The corner of his mouth turned up in a sheepish grin. “Oh,” he said. “Sorry about that, Brother Gus.” The monk's full name was Augustus Coyle, but he insisted everyone call him Gus, as though extending his order's humility even to the extravagance of his name.

The monk made a brushing motion in Jude's direction, shooing away the apology. “Don't worry about it. Only joking.” He sat at a nearby bench with a drawn out sigh, as if easing into warm bathwater. “It's been a long time, Jude. Started to think you weren't coming back. How is it I always know when you're here?”

“Magic,” Jude said.

Augustus chuckled, a quiet, gentle sound. “Ah, yes. Of course.” He stretched out his long, slender legs and clasped his bony fingers in his lap. His voice had a calm confidence to it, filled with gravel from years of cigarettes, his movements an easy grace. “How have you been, son?”

The word, the voice, brought back a memory. For an instant, Jude held his Aunt Sara's hand, looked up from his child's height at a man in a black and white collar, a man who called him 'son.' He thought, until his aunt explained it weeks later, that he had finally met his father. Jude blinked and returned to himself, looking up at the abbey, its brick bell tower rising high

above the trees. He had come here to see his mother, so the words that came out of his mouth surprised him.

“I did something. Something I’m not proud of,” he said. “Can monks grant absolution?”

Augustus' eyebrows rose, but his voice remained level. “I didn't know you were a Catholic.” He straightened up, his feet flat on the ground, his fingers interlaced on one of his knees, going from lounging to respectful in one gliding motion.

“Not exactly,” Jude said. “I was. Once.” He took a seat next to the monk, leaned over and set the magician's bag at his feet.

“I see,” the monk said. Jude could almost feel him considering, remembering the conversations about gods and magic they had shared in the past. Or perhaps Augustus knew more about his father than Jude did. “Well,” Augustus said, “some monks are priests, but not all. Only the ones that are can hear Confession. You'd like to talk to one of them?” Jude shook his head, and Augustus nodded. “I can always lend a friendly ear, son.”

Jude told him, then, about what he had done to Leon, explaining that he had used his greatest fear against him. He told him about the revulsion he had felt. When he finished, Augustus stayed silent for a few moments, his chin cupped in his gnarled hand. “I think it is a good thing,” Augustus said, “that you recognize that there are sins of intent, just as there are sins of action.” He waited for Jude's nod before continuing. “I also believe that forgiveness comes to those who seek it. You say you are no longer a Catholic, but do you remember the Our Father? The part about the forgiveness of trespasses?” Again Jude nodded. *'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.'* “We all make mistakes, son. We all hurt one another, sometimes by accident, sometimes in what we do, sometimes in what we mean to do.

There's no helping that. The trick is not just being sorry but in forgiving each other. Will you say the prayer with me?"

Once again he thought of his childhood, Sundays with his Aunt, the cadence of the rosary, prayers said alone or in a sonorous chant with the congregation. The words came easily, rolling off his tongue. As they spoke, Augustus rested his hand on Jude's shoulder.

He felt relief, a muscle unkinking that he hadn't known he'd tensed. Augustus always had an indulgent smile when Jude used the word magic, but what, then, was this? They sat that way for a moment, monk and magician, holy man and sinner, and then Augustus gave his arm a tight squeeze and stood up. "I should get back," he said. "And I'm sure your mother will be happy to see you."

Jude's thoughts returned to his reason for coming, the circumstances that led to his treatment of Leon in the first place. "Can I ask you something?" he asked. "Something else, I mean." The bells tolled the hour. Augustus stood, settling his robes about his legs.

"Of course. Walk with me."

Jude rose to his feet, slinging the leather satchel onto his back. He'd tried to think of a subtle way to ask the question he had in mind, but if the words existed, he hadn't found them.

"Where would you start looking," he asked, "if you had to find an angel?"

The monk sighed, softly, as if he'd expected just this sort of question. He pursed his lips as the two men made their way across the parking lot and through the grass. Whether he made the gesture in distaste or in thought, Jude couldn't tell. "I take it this isn't an idle question?"

"No, it's not."

"In that case," he said, "I would pray."

Jude snorted, a bitter noise. “Ah, yes,” he said, echoing the priest's earlier words. “Of course.”

Augustus smiled, revealing uneven teeth, small against thick, pink gums. “I wasn't done. When angels show up in the Bible, they're messengers. If you need to see one, I'd ask God a question. One He's going to send a messenger to answer.” He shrugged. “It's either that, or get yourself cast to the lions.”

“Little late for that.” They came to the steps of the rectory, and Jude held out his hand. “Thanks for the help, Brother Gus.”

Instead of returning the handshake, the monk reached up, digging under the thick cloth around his neck. He pulled something out of his shirt, a wooden cross on a leather cord. “Here,” he said, pressing it into Jude's palm. “I want you to have this.” A thin wire bound an old, square-headed nail to the wood. Jude opened his mouth to protest, but the monk closed his hand around the cross. “Just take it,” he said. Then, in a gesture that took ten years away from his face, he winked. “Can't hurt, right?” He waited, as if to see that Jude would keep the gift and let Jude's hands go. “Take care, son,” he said and and walked back into the rectory.

Jude held the cross in his hand for a moment, imagined himself looping the cord around his neck, followed by a bolt of lightning from the cloudless sky, retribution for his blasphemy. He shook his head, grinning, and slipped the cross into one of the pockets in his bag. No sense risking it. He hadn't wanted to contradict the monk, but faith *could* hurt. Sometimes, it could kill.

* * *

His mother's room at the abbey looked, and more importantly, smelled, exactly the same, a stink of oil paints and chemicals that slapped him in the face as soon as he opened the door, lodging in the back of his throat. He couldn't see her from the doorway, just the huge, half-finished painting that took up the center of the room, what seemed to be a city skyline sheltered by the wings of a swan. Jude studied the image for a moment, surprised. She only painted swans. He hadn't seen another element in something she'd created in his entire life. He felt a twinge of guilt at letting years go by between visits. He reminded himself, in his defense, that sometimes years had gone by without a moment of recognition. Jude stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, hoping that this painting represented some new coherence in his mother. Maybe the clouds of her madness would part just long enough for him to discover, at last, his father's identity.

The door to her bathroom cracked open, one of her pale blue, bloodshot eyes visible in the slim space. Her words hissed through. "You aren't one of the brothers. What do you want?" Jude heard the mania in her voice, the confused, frantic sound of her insanity. He sighed.

"I'm here to see you," he said. "I came to see your art." Even on her worst days, with the fissure between her mind and reality at its widest, his mother loved to show people her paintings. His aunt had taught him to say whatever he needed to say, to be whoever his mother needed to be, in order to stay in the room. After he had realized that since her madness had nothing to do with any curse or black magic, and thus, that no *gris-gris* or power at Jude's command could heal her, Jude had settled for these deceptions when he had to.

The door closed, a chain-lock rattled, and then the door opened fully. His mother stepped out, barefoot, wearing a thin brown sundress, splotted and filthy with paint. Why did she have

a lock on her bathroom door? She approached him, wary as a stray cat, her gray-stained hands clenching and relaxing. Jude kept his face neutral, knowing from past experience that anything, even a smile, could set her off, get him sent away. It took effort for Jude to hide his disappointment. He wouldn't get anything out of her like this. Maybe he should just sleep here tonight and try again in the morning. After all he'd done during and after the storm, the brothers had assured him he could not overstay his welcome.

His mother's posture shifted, as abrupt and fluid as a spill of water. She smiled and stretched out a hand, her thin, delicate wrist bent like a queen receiving a courtier. "Lydia Duboisson," she said, her voice warm and calm now. "It's a pleasure."

"Jack," Jude said, using the name he'd decided on years ago. "Jack Crow." His mother led him around her small room, never commenting on her artwork, only questioning him, asking what he thought, if he preferred abstract or fantastic or realist styles. She seemed happy, relaxed, if somewhat clouded. Relaxed enough that Jude risked engaging her a little, asking questions about her family, about her inspiration for the theme of swans. Her responses were either evasive, drawing his attention to another painting, or outright ignoring that he had spoken.

Until he moved towards the restroom.

Her eyes narrowed, that feral caution returning as sudden as it had vanished. Jude pretended not to notice the change, shrugged and said he'd had too much coffee in the same amiable, non-threatening tone he'd been using. He reached toward the bathroom door, and she lunged for him, for his eyes, her hands curled into a harpy's talons. Jude fell back, spoke a charm in self-defense before he could stop himself. He felt the magic leave him, felt it tighten around her neck like a noose and draw tight. His mother jerked to a halt, her legs collapsing beneath

her. She went down in a heap, knocking a can of old brushes clattering to the floor. Jude went down to one knee, reaching out to her, all his hair standing on end.

A wordless snarl came from her as her teeth snapped at the air just short of his fingers. Jude recoiled, springing to his feet. The magic he'd spoken would paralyze her but wouldn't hurt her. She growled, spitting words of nonsense at him, her chest rising and falling in ragged gasps. She drew in a deep breath, and Jude waved his hand over her face, saying 'Hush', before she could shriek. The wind went out of her, and her eyes slid closed.

"Fuck," Jude said.

He waited a moment until his pulse slowed and his hands stopped trembling then opened the door to his mother's bathroom. What he saw stopped his heart for a beat. In the tiny closet of a space, a single, bare bulb glared on the bright spray of colors on the walls. She'd coated them, floor to ceiling, with a mural of the past few days of his life. She'd recreated one of his conversations with Mourning, getting all the details right down to the steaming cup of coffee, with the Investigator's face a blank oval of pure white, broken only by two globs of bright green to represent his eyes. Above the toilet, a painted Legba clutched a paint Jude's arm, while nearby Mr. Saturday removed Dodge's casket from the carriage. In charcoal, she'd sketched out an outline of the card game, recognizable by the round swoop of the table, by the twin arches of Bartholomew's wings, and by Dodge's fat, bald dome of a head.

The first part of that scene she'd started to fill in was the fan of cards in Jude's hand. Four of them faced away from him, only the blue and red paisley background visible. The one turned towards him, the Magician, looked like the card Jude had in his bag, only she'd put a sword on the table where his card only had a coin.

Jude's legs went weak, and he fell with a hollow thump onto the toilet seat. On the opposite wall, a cartoonish streetcar curved with the twists and hills of a track that wove, like a rollercoaster, through lightning-streaked storm clouds. A strange figure stood in the front window, in the driver's place, winged and robed and beast-faced, while in the passenger windows Jude could see Dodge's gleaming head and Tommy's clown-makeupped face. Above this, in dark purple, were the sharp abrupt lines of a stylized star, or a compass on an old map. At its center, the doubloon with the heart shape that Jude had wagered in Dodge's game.

Standing and leaning closer, he saw that it wasn't a paint copy of the doubloon. It was the coin itself, stuck to the wall with coat after coat of sticky, clear varnish. He reached out to it, and at the slightest brush of his fingers, it seized him, like touching a live wire, his muscles clenching and rigid at once, his arm numb to the elbow. He saw an antique shop, the neutral ground in front of St. Louis Cemetery #1, rows of bookshelves, the Mississippi lapping against its beach of polished stones, a house on stilts above the swamp, a red, dying sun against billowing clouds, and then he saw Cassandra's face, turning to him as if he'd just called her name. A white light burned his eyes, and he fell into darkness.

Interlude

You look down at the chalk marks at your feet, certain that you once knew what they meant.

There is so much you have forgotten, so much you are figuring out as you go. You look up at the sign above your head, “Mama Celestine” barely visible in the dying light. The dying light.

Then you break the lock and you are inside, tasting the air for what you sensed before. It is sweetness and power, and you must have it. You prepare yourself to hunt for it, but it comes to you, from behind the beaded curtain, eyes blinking and movements sluggish, like any animal roused from slumber. It cannot see you. You are in the corner where the roof meets the walls, in the shadows.

You fall upon it, one delicious, piercing scream leaving its throat, and then you open its neck. The meat of it twitches and flails, but you are already at its essence, drinking it deep, your cup overflowing. It is sweet, so sweet. It is power.

You want more.

The other one watches you from the darkness, its eyes wide and trembling. No, not trembling, muttering, chanting. It recognizes you, is begging for mercy or calling for help or working its magic. Such power, such waste. You must have it. You leap, you cut, you drink.

You must have it, so sweet, you take it.

You want more.

Chapter Ten

A father gone ten years at war, ten years more lost on his way home. Or a father who swallowed his children whole, for fear that one day one among them might rise and slay him. Or who nearly sacrificed his son for the sake of his faith. Son after son left in the womb, after lust was sated and the father returned to the underworld, or the heavens, or whatever other realm the son, when grown, would have to struggle through in the search for that half of his identity. In myth, it seems, fathers and sons stand separated by seams of mortality and divinity, by the divide between the gift of power and the curse of abandonment.

When Jude opened his eyes, his mother stood over him, facing away, the familiar rolling shoulder and swinging arm movements of her almost constant work. The tile floor beneath him had sucked the heat from his body, and he ached where something in his magician's bag dug into his side. His mouth tasted like blood, and for a panicked moment he thought Scarpelli might have followed him here, but then he felt the slight sting where he had bitten the inside of his lip when he fell. He shifted his weight to ease the pressure of whatever was poking his ribs, and his mother turned at the sound.

“Finally up, sleepy-head?” All traces of mad hostility had fled from her voice. She seemed, in fact, to recognize him. “I was so busy working I must not have heard you come in. If you wanted a nap, you could have asked one of the brothers. You didn't have to sleep on my floor.” She giggled. Jude pulled himself up onto the toilet seat, groggy and stiff, a headache beginning to tighten between his temples. “I'm glad you're up,” she said, ignoring the way he held his head in his hands. “I have something for you.”

She slipped out of the bathroom with dainty, energetic footsteps, as though Jude's magic

hadn't ever stolen the use of her limbs. Jude glanced up at the new addition to her mural where two new passengers had joined her strange streetcar, a young woman with white wires coming from her ears, and Celeste Dorcet. Jude fought the sudden urge to vomit. If Dodge and Tommy were dead, did that mean Celeste and the girl in her shop were dead, too? Or were they next? He considered asking his mother just as she came back into the bathroom with a wild gleam in her eye and a knife in her hand.

Jude had no time to react, no time speak a spell or reach for a weapon of his own, or even to wonder where she'd gotten it. He just flinched. Rather than violence against him, though, or against herself, she bent at the waist, slid the point between the wall and the doubloon stuck there, and pried it free with a soft, dry crunch. Jude's mother turned to him, her eyes moist, and wrapped the coin in a paint-splattered oil cloth which she held out to him.

“It's a gift,” she said. “From your father.”

As with anyone else, Jude's childhood was punctuated by moments of normalcy and oddity. He knew, even as a young child, that other children went to school, whereas his education came from a combination of home schooling and lessons from the brothers at the abbey. He knew, too, that not every boy knew his father, that children didn't always live with their parents. His mother's strangeness did not embarrass him, not as it would as he grew older; he had his aunt for mothering, his mom for her pictures of birds and the secrets she would whisper to him. He understood that the way he found lost things was special, something no one else could do, but to him, the magic of it was no less than the magic of Brother David writing with both hands at the same time, or the way a friend of his could remember every book he'd ever read. He never knew his father and so never thought of him as lost, never considered using

his gift to find him.

Jude sat on his mother's unmade bed, the cloth-wrapped doubloon throbbing in his hand, a constant warmth and swell coming from it like something asleep, something *alive*, in his palm. She had said his father left it for him, though, beyond that, she claimed to know nothing, bustling around her small room, searching amid her canvases and tubes of oil for something that she'd lost.

“What is it you're looking for?” he asked, his shock worn off and becoming impatience once again.

“A picture. I wanted you to have it, but I think I lost it. Oh!” She spun in place, her gray hands flapping. “You can find it,” she said. “You were always so good at that.”

Jude itched to do that very thing, having been so long without his gift. Until he held it in his hand like this, he hadn't realized the full effect its loss had on him. He wanted it back, wanted to be himself again despite the problems it had brought him, but he couldn't shake the fear that touching the coin would knock him unconscious again. Or worse. Bracing himself, he flipped open the wrapping and pressed his thumb against the metal. The sensation was like a long drink of cold water. He could feel the magic running into him, filling the empty space where it once lived. His free hand snapped forward, pointing. “There,” he said.

She lifted the canvas he'd indicated away from the wall and pulled a photograph from behind it. Jude covered the coin and hid it away in his bag, resisting the sudden, irrational temptation to swallow it whole. If nothing else, now he had the means to look for the one who had killed Dodge and Tommy, the one who had taken Regal. His mother studied the picture, and for a moment, the room fell silent save for their breath and the soft patter of rain on the roof.

While her eyes were on the photograph, she became a woman Jude had never seen. No giddy confusion or barely restrained malice or drugged languor. Instead, Jude saw an instant of true clarity, of recognition, and thought that he had seen his mother for the first time.

Then she looked up at him and that woman vanished. She blinked, once, slowly, and when she spoke again, her words came out slurred. “Off m’bed,” she said. “Wan’ sleep. Zosted.” The picture slipped from her fingers and fluttered to the floor like an autumn leaf. Jude helped her into bed, as he’d done since childhood. She’d ruined canvasses, falling asleep mid-brush stroke and falling on top of them. She started snoring before he pulled the covers up to her shoulders, a delicate, timid sound. Even as strange as Jude knew reality to be, his mother lived outside of it. He shook his head. How could he ever trust what she told him, about his father, about anything?

Jude plucked the picture from the floor: a man, a woman, and a baby. The woman, his mother, the woman he had seen for that slight instant of clarity, stood at the man’s side, her hand on his arm, a tender smile on her face. The baby, held out to the camera in the man’s outstretched arms, fat-faced and laughing. The man, dressed in a mechanic’s one piece jumpsuit, his face obscured by the baby cradled in his thick, wide hands. His name tag read ‘Joe’ or ‘Lou’ or something like that.

On the back, in his mother’s handwriting, a date shortly after Jude was born and the words “Lydia, Luc, and Jude.” Luc.

His father.

* * *

Jude returned the car to the parking garage he'd taken it from and walked toward his apartment, turning things over in his mind. On the one hand, he had the question of his own identity. He knew his father's name, or, at least, the name his father had given his mother. He had the knowledge of his father's divinity and of his own dual nature, but questions still remained. As glad as he was to have his gift returned to him, the fact that Luc, or someone his mother believed to be Luc, had given her Jude's coin was also puzzling. Did that mean Luc, in some form or another, had been at the card table? Jude could pursue this. Maybe he should pursue it. Maybe if he knew who and what Luc was, it would tell him about himself, tell him how to control his magic. If Jude could control it, he could find Cassandra.

On the other hand, though, he had everything else. Murders and kidnappings, his own involvement, his obligation to Regal. He had driven past Celeste's shop on his way back into the city, yellow police tape across the door telling him all he needed about the accuracy of his mother's painting. Somehow, those deaths, like Tommy's, lay at his feet. Jude knew where Legba would be tomorrow night, and with the coin returned, Jude could find the others. Maybe he would find out that these things were related, that his invitation to the card game and his father's identity and Dodge's murder were all related. Maybe he could find some sort of justice. Or redemption.

He looked up from the sidewalk, cracked and bent up at an angle by an oak root stretching its way beneath the earth. His feet had betrayed him or were perhaps guided by a wisdom his conscious thoughts lacked. Instead of the crumbled brick and faded, unreadable signs of the Warehouse District, he'd wandered Uptown amid the palatial homes and the spreading, reaching green arms of the trees above. Sweat streaked down his face, dripped in fat

drops from his nose. The overly-rich stink of rotted fruit came to him on the hot breeze, peaches left on the branch until they had fallen to the dirt and spoiled. A cinder block wall rose just over his head, topped by wrought iron spikes, some of them in the decorative shape of a fleur-de-lis. The house beyond: cracked and fading pink paint on the outer walls, a sagging and busted porch jutting into the overgrown yard and wrapping around to the back, kudzu clinging to the shingles and dangling off the rain gutter, disappearing into a broken window. The house he had shared with Cassandra before the storm. His feet had carried him home.

Jude stood there, staring and remembering, until the sun dipped below the eaves and twilight descended. He could go in, if he wanted, a short hop over the chain-link fence along one side of the yard, the realtor's lock on the front door no trouble at all, but something greater than the physical barred his way. Shame, more than anything, kept him on the outside. He'd been so full of himself before the storm, not just that day but for a long time, secure in his abilities and the rewards those abilities entitled him to. He'd been so certain that the message he'd gotten from on high had been honest, trusting the word of those same gods who had ignored the storm and flood like someone avoiding a puddle without bothering to look down. And after, just like Regal said, he'd hidden. He'd let his own fear and pain define him, had ignored those who needed him. Maybe, just as Cassandra had known how bad things would be, she'd known how badly he would fail. Maybe shame kept her away, too.

No. No more. No more indulging himself and his own stupid fragility. His father, his past, all of that could wait. It was time to stand up, to speak for those who couldn't. He might not be fully human, but it was time, past time, to be a man.

Chapter Eleven

Jude hunched on the low steps in front of the Louisiana Court of Appeals, his forearms resting against his drawn up knees, the green-splattered statue of some Judge at his back. The quiet and the darkness wrapped around him, camouflaging him against the smooth, gray stone. He sat just a block off of Bourbon, but that neon blur and hollering, drunken sprawl might as well have been another world. In front of him, Royal Street glistened, still wet from the recent cleaning. Across the street rested Camporesi and Sons Antiques, where his gift had led him.

After some difficulty with the coin, feeling the loss of the people near him instead of the deity he sought, or seeing the same empty bookstore and the same antique shop despite trying to pinpoint a specific god's location, Jude realized that having his gift pulled out of him had changed it, or changed his relationship with it. Before, it had been a part of him. Finding lost things had been an instinctive act, like pulling away from a hot stove. He'd never had to think about how he saw where something lost had ended up, or how he felt the direction he had to go. He'd just seen and felt and taken it for granted. Trying to force the magic, though, felt complicated and unnatural, like isolating the act of running into each step, each indrawn breath, each lifted leg, and each twist of the body, whereas before he had just picked up his feet and run. So he'd let the magic lead him where it would, and found himself back in the Quarter, outside a darkened shop front.

It took only a moment for him to recognize this as the same shop Mourning's office door had exited to, a curious coincidence that had to be something more. If he got into the storeroom, would that send him back to Mourning's office? Or had his magic tried to lead him here days ago? No, that couldn't be it. He'd wagered his gift away already, by then. So why here? He

hadn't noticed anything special about it when he'd been here last, but he'd been fleeing Mourning's presence and shocked by the absence of his gloves.

Jude slipped his flask out of his bag and drank, the scotch now warm and nearly empty, the heat of it along his face mingling with that of the summer air. Part of him wanted to rush headlong into where his gift led, but the night sky above him, the death that seemed to stalk him on silent wings, made him cautious. He looked up and down the street, hoping to appear as inconspicuous as possible when he actually crossed over and broke in. Another swallow of Scotch, for luck, then he put the flask away and stood, looping the leather strap of his satchel across his back. A figure appeared in his periphery, turning the corner onto Royal, and something in its sudden presence or something odd in its gait made Jude crouch into the statue's shadow, a guilty reaction that brought a flush to his cheeks.

Jude saw that a fedora hid the figure's face and a trench coat draped from its shoulders despite the heat, and he was glad for his caution. Especially when the head turned Jude's way, as if sensing him, and the dancing flame of a nearby gas-lamp revealed the pale, blue-veined face of Mourning's lackey, Cornell Dupree. Jude held his breath, tried to hold himself still and unseen. After a heart-seizing moment, Dupree looked away, fished in his pocket for his keys as he crossed Royal, and entered the antique store.

Jude let out a long, shaky breath and eased back down on the steps. Was his gift sending him here after Dupree, or could this just be another coincidence, Dupree stumbling across the same path as him? Dupree had taken keys out of his pocket, but he could easily have some sort of skeleton key or lock-opening charm on his keyring. He certainly seemed familiar with the place, though. Jude hadn't seen lights go on when Dupree entered, so he must have gone straight

through the showroom in the dark.

Jude opened his bag and rummaged through it, searching his various potions and amulets, hoping for some sort of edge. He had magics to make him invisible, or strong, or that would let him leave his body so he could see in the shop without actually going in, but those all had pretty serious consequences and were solutions of last resort. Other things wouldn't help at all, a locket made out of the scales of a river dragon that would keep him from drowning, rose oil that, if rubbed on his eyelids, could show him hidden doors, a powder that changed fire to water or water to fire.

Then his fingers touched cool, smooth fabric, and he had an idea. On its own, it was just a strip of cloth with an oval cut out for each eye, like a simple Mardi Gras mask. When worn, though, it would make him appear to be the reflection of whomever looked at him. It was simple magic, but a magician like Dupree probably wouldn't be able to see through it, not immediately. If it worked, he could confront Dupree as himself.

Jude pulled it on, wincing at the pinpricks along his scalp as the magic took hold. Numbness crept over his face, like standing outside in a frigid November rain. He went about replacing the vials and pouches he'd taken out of his bag when the door to Camporesi and Sons opened once again and Dupree emerged, sliding something into the inner pocket of his coat. His keys, maybe? Or had he found something? Jude cursed.

The other magician checked up and down the street before heading toward Canal, his steps more hurried than they had been before. Jude slid a hand into his bag to touch the doubloon, to the pleasure of his gift spilling into him, the relief as it guided him, still, to the antique shop. Whatever Dupree had taken, Jude's gift still strained forward to some lost thing

inside. Jude waited until Dupree turned a corner and then darted across the street, spoke the spell he'd learned from Dodge to open the lock, and slipped through the door, a bell overhead tinkling to announce his arrival.

Inside smelled of history, both of objects: musty paper and tarnished metal and cracking leather, and of people: heavy dust and old carpets and decades of glass cleaner. As Jude's eyes adjusted to the lack of light, he saw the rows of display cases, their presence a dull shine from the streetlamps outside, a suit of armor and a wooden globe crowding together in the front window, the walls adorned with the thin, curved lines of cavalry swords, the straight, squat lines of flintlock rifles, their uniformity broken by the occasional odd shape of an axe-head or the jagged edges of an unusual blade.

The cases, he discovered as he crept through the room, held mostly coins, some the shiny full moons of recent mintings, pockmarked by the faces of rulers both familiar and foreign, others with chipped edges and brown faces, gnawed by time. Jude's breath rasped in his own ears, amplified by his nervousness, by the silence. He resisted the urge to run his hands along all of these artifacts, just so much steel and silver with his gift pulled out of him, no overwhelming sense of loss or flashes of memory. Instead, he touched the doubloon in his bag, muscles tensed in case the magic overwhelmed him like it would have just a week ago. His arm snapped forward as it had in his mother's room in the abbey, pointing at a display case against the far wall.

Jude took wide steps, once to the left and once to the right, amused despite his surroundings by the way his hand seemed to be locked onto its target, shifting with his motion like a compass needle clinging to true north. He followed his outstretched finger around the

back counter, past the register and the mounds of receipts and billing and shipping records, to the case where his nail tapped against the glass with a hollow thunk above a revolver inside a velvet-lined wooden box. Releasing the doubloon, he muttered the lock open and lifted the top of the case.

The box within felt smooth to Jude's fingers, varnished to a slick gloss. The gun, a worn and heavy looking chunk of steel, lay nestled in the depression that matched its shape, along with a round metal disk and some kind of strange clamp. There were spaces for six bullets, two were empty, and one had been fired already, some unusual nostalgia driving the owner to keep the brass shell casing.

The bell above the door rang, a cheerful, pleasant sound incongruous with the panic it inspired in Jude. He snatched the revolver out of its case just as the lights flicked on, all but blinding him. The gun-grip hurt, that mingled sensation of hot and cold that greeted skin either burning or freezing. Jude nearly dropped it but brought his other hand up to clench around his wrist and squeeze against the pain. At the front door, Cornell Dupree grinned at him, toying with the fedora in his hands.

“Thought I didn't see you hiding across the street, huh? I got you good.” His voice had a fluting quality to it, high-pitched and mocking. Jude swallowed but said nothing, just kept the gun pointed at him. Dupree ducked his head and peered up at Jude as though trying to see under his chin. “That's a cute trick. Looks just like me.” He lifted one hand to his face and stroked his smooth cheeks and mostly hairless chin. “Little scruffy, though. Better shave, next time.” Dupree waved his hat at him, at the gun. “Go on and put that down. Even if it was loaded, how you know it ain't just gonna blow your hand off?”

Jude lowered the gun by degrees, watching the other magician for any body language, anything that said he might be going for some weapon or magic. As often as he wore that trench coat, Jude suspected it was his bag, secreted about with pockets full of surprises. Letting go of the grip was a relief, the pain lessening as he slid it into its place, fading entirely as he pulled his hands away.

“That was a good move,” Dupree said. “A smart move. This here?” He held up a thumb, showing a ring made of some reddish metal, copper or bronze. “This here is one of Solomon's rings. Know what I'm sayin? Don't speak, just nod.”

Jude nodded. Solomon built the first Temple using the forced labor of djinn he had imprisoned in his ring. If Dupree had one of those rings, it might explain a lot of his swagger. Djinn were more than gods, they were more like conscious storms of magic. They couldn't be destroyed or controlled, only contained or aimed. Jude couldn't take the risk that he was bluffing.

“Good, that's real good. But don't worry, I ain't gonna use it. Be like smooshing a bug with an a-bomb, right?” The magician leaned to the side, looking at Jude from another angle. “That sure is some trick.”

Jude shrugged. Maybe Dupree was just screwing with him, but it seemed like he hadn't recognized him, hadn't seen through the mask. He opened his mouth to ask what Dupree what he intended to do with him, hoping to disguise his voice, but the other magician cut him off.

“No, don't speak. That way I know you ain't trying nothing, okay?” He sniffed the air, deep indrawn breaths through his nose, as though trying to identify a perfume. “Here's the thing, I know what you are. I can smell it. You're like me, am I right?” Jude nodded, dumbfounded, unsure how to respond. Like him how? What did he smell? “Here's what I want you to do.

Take that gun. I mean it, close up the box and put it in that bag you got there. Be careful though, and do it slow.” He shook the thumb with the ring, reminding Jude who held the upper hand.

Jude did as Dupree told him to, confused but not wanting to call his bluff. He dismissed the idea of grabbing the thunderbolt he had stashed in his bag. Like Dupree's ring, it was overkill. He pulled his hands slowly out of the bag, fingers splayed to show his empty hands.

“Good, good. You're playing this smart. I like that. You keep this up, things will be just fine. That gun? That's a show of good faith. It don't mean nothin to me, but you obviously want it bad, so you can keep it, right? But I want something from you.”

Jude's mind raced. He was going to ask for the mask, and when he discovered Jude beneath it, what? Would he be shocked? Was this all a game? Jude imagined himself throwing his legs over the counter, leaping at the magician and bolting past him out the door.

“Things are gonna change in this city,” Dupree said, pressing the fedora onto his head, flicking his fingers against the brim. “Soon. When they do, we're gonna need people. People who are different, like you and me, you know? I'm gonna leave you my info.” He rolled his fingers, and a business card appeared with a small snap, a little flourish of magic. Jude resisted the urge to sneer. He should have just thrown a spell at him. The little prick had to be bluffing about the djinn. Dupree set the card on the nearest display case and made a gun with his finger and thumb, clicking his tongue. “Shoot me a call in the next few days, you hear? Remember, show of good faith.” He opened the front door, the bell tinkling its merry jingle. “I'm gonna come back in ten minutes. You better not still be here. Call me. We'll talk about all, you know.” He waved a hand in front of his face. “Turn the lights off when you leave, bro.”

Dupree left, peering in through the window as he went, as if the refraction of the glass would affect the magic. Jude counted to ten, then took a deep breath, and counted to twenty before walking to the door. He flipped the lights off, picked up Dupree's card, and slipped through the door, staring a long time down the street in each direction before he stepped out onto the sidewalk, going in the opposite direction Dupree had gone.

He made it to the corner, all of a dozen steps, before he bent at the waist, clutched the bricks beside him, and vomited everything in his stomach.

Jude went down to Bourbon Street, threaded his way through the crowd for a few blocks, and turned onto Orleans toward the Cathedral. He snatched the mask off, the needles in his scalp digging deeper when the magic ceased. After a quick glance behind him, he hurried down the wet and broken cobblestones of Pirate's Alley, tearing Dupree's card into tiny pieces and scattering them in the gutter. His pulse began to slow. Jude entered the bar named after the alley, ordered a beer, and chose one of the two small tables where he could watch the street.

After two beers and a Southern Comfort on the rocks, Jude decided he'd either not been followed or had lost Dupree in the crowd and relaxed. He tried to recall everything Dupree had said to him, tried to figure out what that meant, why his magic had sent him there. His gift could be oddly prescient, forcing a meeting or an event that would lead Jude to what he sought, especially when dealing with something as elusive as a hiding deity. Dupree had said, "we." Did that mean Mourning? Was the antique shop some sort of front for Mourning's investigations? And how were things going to change? Was that why Dodge had been

murdered? But if that were true, what did the other deaths have to do with anything? He thought about that weird streetcar, its gaunt and hooded driver, his mother's new and unexplained ability to see things beyond her sanctuary at the abbey.

Jude searched through his bag for the tarot card, wondering at the difference between the one he possessed and the one painted on her wall. It only took a brief glance to see that it had changed. Now the table at his side held a sword and a cup in addition to the coin, the cup's surface grooved with the concentric loops of a record, the sword's blade rounded, more a spike than the knife edge he expected. The top of the candle in tarot-card-Jude's outstretched hand was lit by a white flame.

As Jude peered at the card, trying to find some minute detail that had escaped his notice, a shadow blocked his light, the overhead lamp occluded by the presence of someone hovering over him. He looked up into Opal's kindly eyes, her head framed by a nimbus of light like a halo. "Thought I might find you here," she said. "Mind if I sit?" Jude nodded to the seat across from him, the table small enough that their knees touched when she lowered herself into the chair.

"Get you a drink?"

Opal shook her head. "Thanks, but I'm okay." With one finger, she spun the Magician card so it faced her right-side up. "You got another one?"

"No."

She smirked, a wisp of a smile that blew away when she lifted her eyes to his, saw he wasn't kidding. Her finger moved to tap the table with the new objects. "This isn't new? These weren't here last time."

“I know,” Jude said.

Opal pulled her hand away from the tabletop slowly, as if afraid of spooking an untamed dog. “Oh Jude. What have you gotten yourself into?” Her head swept around the bar, searching for someone. Changed her mind about that drink, maybe.

“I wish I could explain. Really.” She stared at him, and in the shifting wrinkles around her eyes, Jude saw the questions and comments that flickered through her mind and were discarded.

“Is your friend involved with this, too?” she asked at last.

“What? What friend? Was her name Regal?”

Opal blinked, seemed startled at the sudden intensity in his voice. “No, not Regal. Not a 'her', either. This guy came asking around yesterday, said he was a friend of yours.”

Shit. “Did he give you a name?”

“No,” she said. “I told him the truth. I said I hadn't seen you. Was that wrong?” She twisted the fringe of the woolen tablecloth, coiling it around her finger.

“That's fine,” Jude said, trying to put more confidence than he felt into his voice. “What did he look like?”

Opal's hands stopped playing with the cloth, eyes shifting up and away. “He had bad skin,” she said. “Like he didn't get enough sun.”

“Greasy?”

“No. I mean, yeah, he seemed greasy, but that was more his attitude, you know? Kind of a sleaze-ball. No, his skin was more, blotchy. But bluish.”

Jude clenched his teeth. “Veiny?”

Her eyes came back to him. “Yes! That's it. His skin seemed like you could see right through it to the veins. So you do know him?”

“Maybe. Anything else?”

“Yeah, he wasn't sweaty. Not at all. I remember that distinctly, because he had on this long jacket and I wasn't even wearing sleeves.”

“Fuck,” Jude said. Opal raised an eyebrow. “Sorry.” That damned coat. Always trailing him like some kind of pet shadow. Jude flashed back to that night in the Warehouse District, the rippling, flapping shape, like wings. Could it have been Dupree's coat sweeping behind him as he cut through the sky? It could. And now he knew Opal. “Is Sharon on her way to get you?” he asked.

“Oh, no. I've got the truck. Sharon's home packing. Going out of town day after tomorrow. Why?”

“I think you should leave tonight.” Opal's lips tightened to a thin, bloodless line. Jude cut her off before she could protest. “This has to do with Tommy, Opal. I mean it. Tonight. Right now, even.”

“Jude, I – I can't. I'm thankful for your worry, really, but I just can't. Sharon and I both have to work tomorrow. We need the gas money to get all the way up to Baton Rouge.”

“I'll give you gas money and more besides. This is important.”

She frowned, skepticism written all over her face, but she nodded.

“Great. We can stop at an ATM on the way back to your place.”

* * *

Opal smirked at him, again, when he told her that he needed to go to the machine by himself. She had been confused when he told her that it didn't matter what bank they stopped at, and again when her assurances that she wouldn't remember his account information didn't convince him to let her go through the drive-through. She seemed to understand, maybe from the wary way Jude kept watching behind him, kept peering into the night sky, that Jude's insistence that she leave town was not idle whim or alcohol-fueled madness.

Alone at the machine imbedded in the concrete of the bank wall, Jude searched through his bag for the charm he needed. It was a small disc, about the size of the doubloon that held his gift, which he found first. As his fingers touched it, he felt a brief spark and saw once again the vision of the cramped bookshelves where his gift compelled him to go next. One thing at a time. He pushed the doubloon to the side, and found the coin he wanted. It had a gold tint but was cast of some stronger, lighter metal. A square had been cut away from the center, and Chinese characters were stamped around the rim. Jude had seen similar coins between the lips of toad statues, Chinese fortune symbols.

He tapped the coin against the ATM's glass screen. It crackled and went black. He tapped again, and the screen clicked back on, showing only a blinking cursor. Jude leaned around the corner, checking to see that Opal still waited in the truck, where he'd left her. He rapped the thin coin against the concrete wall, which set the sliver of metal ringing between his fingers, like a tuning fork. The hum it let out warbled, skipping up and down various frequencies in a delicate song. Musical notes appeared on the screen, the cursor typing them out at an increasingly confident pace. The notes flashed across the screen faster and faster, and the coin in his hand continuing its vibration longer than it should have, actually growing stronger. Just

before it shook itself free of his fingers, Jude clenched it in his fist, stilling it.

Words typed across the screen one and two letters at a time, the choppy speed of someone clacking away at a keyboard with two fingers. *“An honorable greeting, o illustrious one,”* the screen read. *“What may this one do to please you?”*

“Just cash,” Jude said. He could never tell, since he couldn't hear its voice, if the machine mocked him or if it meant what it said.

“This one exists but to serve, masterful one. What amount shall this one be allowed to bestow?”

Even on a good day, Jude knew, Opal only made around minimum wage. The same went for Sharon. If he gave them a few hundred, they might see it as a windfall, but not enough to skip a day's work, especially during hurricane season. He couldn't handle another death on his conscience. He had to be sure they'd go. “A thousand,” he said.

“This one is honored.” The machine clicked and whirred, twenty dollar bills shuffling out into its tray. When it finished, Jude tapped the screen twice more, returning it to the bank's usual 'insert card' message. He folded the money in half into a thick wad, a gangster's roll, smiling as he walked back to Opal's battered truck. He'd pay everyone he knew if it kept them out of his mother's painting.

Interlude

You watch as the pickup truck comes closer, bouncing over ruts other wheels have cut into the grass and mud. You followed the trail here from the city, curious. And empty with need. You watch, wondering if it will see what you have done in time, or if it will drive right into it. The truck's headlights cut through the night, falling raindrops frozen for an instant as they pierce the twin beams. There is a certain beauty to that, a beauty you have never noticed before.

The truck makes a sound when it tries to stop, when it sees the boulder you have plucked from the earth and placed in its path, the tires sucking and spinning in the mud, an ugly noise, but in context, there is beauty in its futility. The same is true for the crunch of metal against stone, the tinkle of breaking glass. Why have you never noticed this before?

It managed to stop its truck in time, did not go flying through the windshield as you thought it might. No matter. It leaves the truck, black robes flapping in the storm, muttering to itself as it tries to understand how the rock got there.

You make no sound as you drop from the branches where you have been watching, reveling in the high wind against your skin. You fall on it, letting it see you, know you, understand what is happening to it before you take what you need. Its eyes show you its fear, and there, finally, is a familiar beauty, one you have come to savor almost as much as what you take from these fragile creatures.

You recognize the words coming from its throat, the prayer. You cut and the prayers stop, become a new sound, a new beauty. You taste, and where the others were sweetness this is bitter and there is beauty in that, too. You drink deeply, unsated, never sated.

There is so much beauty in the world.

Chapter Twelve

The next morning, the doubloon led Jude downtown to an abandoned building on the corner of Perdido and South Rampart. The structure rose three stories from the pavement, isolated all around by wide streets and parking lots. An awning jutted from the front above which tall, thin windows spread across the face, six of them, all but one boarded up. One of the exterior walls was left bare where another building had been torn down, the brick and mortar showing like a scab, a scar. Around one corner, a fire escape clung with all the tenacity of the moss and kudzu Jude found in the back, where a chunk of the third floor had been torn away, covered by wood as though it were just a giant, ragged window. The building had been empty for so long that even the plywood used to seal the windows looked aged, the padlocks on the doors more rust than metal. Jude's first impression was of the single tower of a sandcastle that managed, through luck or providence, to survive the destructive tide.

At his feet, amidst the thick, reaching weeds and the knee-high mounds of rubble, were the remnants of a tile floor, still laid out in its red and black checkerboard pattern but splintered and swept or stolen away. Standing there, Jude expected to be able to smell the desolation, to feel the entropy working with its inexorable will. All he smelled was exhaust from the city bus rumbling by behind him, the dirt and the dust and his own sweat, sliding wet and slick between his skin and his t-shirt. All he felt was the tentative drizzle of rain, more a suggestion than any actual threat of a downpour, as though the heat of midday sapped the will of even the clouds overhead.

He couldn't get to the door in the back, not without clambering over an undulating dune of scree peppered with underbrush and, undoubtedly, broken bottles. A quick swipe of dust from

the glass at the front door showed that the front had been boarded up from the inside, so the door beneath the fire escape, a behemoth of cornice work and made of thick, solid wood seemed his best bet for entry. The lock, though, ignored his magic. No matter how loud or how many times Jude spoke that strange, harsh word that meant, merely, 'open', the lock stayed closed, either rust or age or some combination of the two rendering it inert.

Jude reached into his bag for the round, bright yellow tin where he kept the rose oil. It smelled of roses, of course, when he opened it, but also of the beeswax that had been used to help bind it together. He pressed his thumb into the pale substance, soft and greasy, like lip balm. Closing his eyes, he rubbed the unguent across each one of his upper eyelids, which left an abrupt, icy sensation, so cold it stung. He opened them to a world in sepia tones, nothing visible but light and shadow, everything in between reduced to a dull brown congruity. He dabbed a small bit of the rose oil in the dark, sleep-deprived circles beneath his eyes, and, to complete the spell, stuck his thumb in his mouth, sucking the oil that remained from it. It tasted sweet and bitter at the same time, like honey mixed with *maror*.

His vision wavered and a wave of euphoria passed over him, and suddenly everything seemed sharp and clear to his eyes. He tracked the path of a single raindrop through the sky, held it in place with his eyes as it shimmered, a jewel of the air in a ray of light reflected from a nearby office building. He examined the fine hairs on his hand, his skin a rough patchwork, a cobblestone wall holding back the moist, red meat of him, down to his bones, porous and pitted as any New Orleans street. His sight traveled through the pavement to the earth and the network of pipes and water mains beneath, down among centuries of silt left by the Mississippi, the remains of uncounted dead, before birth certificates, before records, before names. Jude

clenched his eyes closed, afraid of what that searching, perfect gaze might show him in the depths.

When he opened them, the intensity had passed. He still saw the world through the haze of an old photograph, but without that terrible clarity. Jude walked around the abandoned building, scanning up and down the walls for anything his new sight might reveal to him. In the back, Jude found a stepping stone path through the rubble, a glowing neon sign above the door that read 'Libros de Perdido', and no lock to bar his way.

Jude raised his hand to knock then shrugged and reached for the knob. It shook in his grip, like many in New Orleans, unseated by years of the wood shrinking and growing around it, as though breathing. Jude stepped inside, the long, mournful creak of the door announcing his presence to anyone within, into a dark and stifling room, the lack of electricity, of air-conditioning, trapping the heat, entombing it. He felt the insane urge to call out, to shout into the dust and emptiness that he was here. Jude wiped his face on his sleeve, using the sweat from his forehead to wash away enough of the oil to break the spell. Too much focus was as dangerous as too much of anything else.

Color, if only shades of gray in the darkness, returned to the world with an almost audible snap. Jude crept past abandoned counters, his sneakers silent on the bare concrete floors. Interior walls had been gutted, sheet rock ripped away, leaving only the skeletal wood framing. He couldn't tell if this had once been a restaurant or a store front, or if it had some other purpose. He smelled now the decay he had expected outside, rot and the dank, the scent of black mold, unmistakable since the flood. What if this 'Perdido Books' had moved, had been washed away? What if his gift, torn from his body and mashed into a slim metal disk, had weakened and failed

him at last?

Jude started up the stairs which bowed and trembled beneath his weight, groaning as if they were about to collapse. He tried to swallow past a lump in his throat, fear that grew with each lurching step, with each vision of himself, arms pinwheeling, stepping into empty air. He might be half-man and half-something else, but he was pretty sure the man half could still die all the way. With slow movements and his breath held the entire time, Jude made it to the door at the top of the stairs.

This door opened into air that was almost chilly after the room downstairs, a soft, inviting light spreading through the cramped hallways between lengths and heights of books. His footsteps, despite his caution, set the polished cypress floorboards snapping with his passage as he threaded his way through the maze of bookshelves. Looking closer, Jude saw that the shelves were themselves made of books, that the archways overhead were formed by volumes stacked so tightly together that they held each other in place, that, in fact, the room was filled, literally, with them, its architecture merely a feature of negative space, a grudging admission that someone might want access to them.

The light came from a phosphorescent glow that shone from some of their spines, a synchronized dance, like candle flames all moved by the same gentle breeze. Whatever breath stirred the air also kept it clear of dust, the only scent that of supple vellum and fresh ink. Jude turned down one narrow corridor after another until finally coming to an intersection that he recognized from the vision that led him here. He slipped his hand into his bag to touch his coin. As the magic poured into him, his hand swept forward, just as in the antique shop, only this time his palm swung out and up, smacking against the wall of books at his side. A tremor ran

through them at the disturbance, a shudder that threatened to topple the precarious balancing act around him. He heard a rustling, like the sigh of trees in a high wind. He let go of his doubloon and lowered his hand, slowly, not wanting to disturb the books further, not wanting to die suffocated beneath a thousand books any more than he wanted to break his neck at the bottom of rotten stairs. His gift seemed to be pointing up, to a floor above this one.

A rectangle of light, harsh and bright, shone against the wall above him. Feet appeared, descending along invisible stepping stones. Once the waist came into view Jude saw the trick of it, books stacked so cunningly that they appeared to be one solid wall but were in fact a stairway. Then the figure came all the way into the lower room. His long legs bent at an awkward angle, lean arms curled at the elbow and tucked against his chest, the elegant swoop of neck and sharp dagger of a beak.

Thoth.

The Egyptian god shook his bird's head, an erratic motion, violent. His features shifted and stretched and softened, becoming a man's face. He wore round spectacles and his nose, like his beak, made a long, smooth, downward curve between his eyes. From the few remaining wisps of white hair at his temples, to the crusted, yellowed toe nails of his feet, he looked like the image of a kindly old man, every bit but his smile. Jude assumed it was meant to be reassuring, but it crept too far up his cheeks from his bony chin, nearly reaching his eyes, the grin of a kidnapper in a child's nightmare.

“Mr. Duboisson,” he said, “I expected you sooner. Won't you come upstairs?” He had a hesitant cadence to his speech, as though composing each word or phrase in his mind before he spoke. Jude settled the strap of his bag across his shoulders like a gunfighter laying a hand on

the butt of a gun, and followed the Egyptian god into the light.

The scent of dust prickled his nostrils, undercut by the thick clay of river mud. Sunlight filtered in through dirty windows, shimmering along the surface of the rippling pond in the center of the wide, otherwise empty room. Water bubbled and splashed, accompanied by the constant murmuring song of cicadas, the thumping bass beat of frogs. Thoth stepped in among the cattail and the ferns, flexing his hands as he waded deeper into the pool. Once the water reached his double-jointed knees, he stopped, settling into place. He nodded toward a high-backed, claw foot chair, the cushions threadbare and worn.

Jude sank into it, almost sighing. When he looked back at Thoth, the avuncular kindness had slipped from his eyes, replaced by a raptor's shrewdness. "What were you doing down there?" he asked, his pauses again bringing an odd rhythm to his words. "Why did you not come from above, like the others?" One thick, calloused finger pointed, indicating yet another set of stairs.

"What, from the roof?" Jude laughed. "I can't fly."

"Can't you?" He tilted his head to the side, studying. "No, I suppose you cannot." The grin returned, cutting a chill up Jude's spine. Thoth adjusted the way the glasses rested on the bridge of his nose. "You have come to discuss the game, I should believe." Jude nodded, transfixed by those dark eyes, that ghastly smile. "I must say, I am impressed by your move. I have not seen someone play their own fate in many years. And an uncertain one, at that."

Jude held up a hand. "Wait a minute, wait. What are you talking about?"

"The game we are playing. With the cards, the game of fortunes?" Thoth's grin vanished. "You do not know." It was not a question, but Jude shook his head anyway. "This is

most unpleasant.”

“You're telling me. I would love for someone to explain what the fuck is going on here.”

Thoth trailed his fingers in the water and ran a wet palm along the top of his head. He repeated the gesture, silent but for the trickle of drops against the surface. When he spoke, something in his restraint, in the timbre of his voice, bespoke smothered rage. “The rules, to begin with. You are owed that much. The object of the game is to make the most impacting fate possible with the cards you are given. It may be the best or the worst, but either way, it must be the most. Do you understand?”

Without waiting for Jude to respond, Thoth continued, explaining that Jude, either by accident or by being tricked into it, had played his own fate in Dodge's card room. It was a risky move, like 'going all in' in poker. Especially for Jude, because of his dual nature. Mortal destinies were malleable, subject to the will of the gods, but ultimately hidden from them. For the gods themselves, Fortune was the only force they worshiped, the only thing about themselves beyond their influence. Even the most fundamental deities who obeyed no other rule must obey this one, Thoth told him, perhaps referring to himself. Demi-gods, though, contained elements of both. With the power of a god and the changeable fate of a mortal, demi-gods could steer their own course.

“My thoughts are these,” Thoth said, bending one leg underneath him, his sodden jeans clinging to his scrawny frame. “Dodge, a fortune god, could not countenance the idea that he could see so many destinies but do nothing about his own. It has happened before. We are playing this game so that you may change your fate, and in so doing, change his.”

“That's impossible,” Jude said. “It already happened. He's dead. The game is over.”

“No no, young one. We are not as you are.” He leaned in closer, something reflecting in his glasses. “We are still playing, we gods. Even if we do not wish to. Even those of us who are already dead. Even those of us who will die. Even for you, the game goes on.” Thoth's neck had stretched long and thin, sprouting feathers like a plant growing in time-lapse footage. Jude could see, in the mirrors made by Thoth's lenses, the table in Dodge's card room, his fan of cards, one painted, the others blank. “You have only turned over one card, Mr. Duboisson. I wonder what your fate shall be?”

Thoth pulled his neck back, becoming once again the ibis-headed god, his beak snapping shut. All at once the insects and the frogs in the pool fell silent. Footsteps thudded above followed by a pounding, a fist against a door. Thoth splashed to his feet, leaving the water in one bound. He turned, stabbing a finger at Jude and then at the stairs to the lower level, the maze of books.

Jude grabbed his bag and ran, lowering the trapdoor behind him. He paused, breathing heavy, not sure what he should do next. Did Thoth merely mean for him to hide? Or should he flee? The glow from the book spines flickered to life around him. He heard a voice from upstairs, angry, with a heavy cockney accent. “Oi! Where've you got im? No need to change on my account, coz, I'll hear that bird talk plain as Doris.”

A series of grunting honks followed, Thoth's ibis-voice, Jude guessed. He eased his way down the book stairs, trying to remember the winding path he'd have to retrace to get back to the street. Though he moved away, he heard the second god's reply clearly. Shouting? Or moving closer? “Ahh, you're talkin shit,” the cockney god yelled. “No need to fret. Soon as me china is done down below, we'll all have a look about. He as somethin as don't belong.”

Down below. Shit.

He heard it now, the shuffled, heavy tread somewhere in the maze, slouching its way nearer. He tucked the bag against the small of his back, no sense going through it; in this tight space, he had no chance of finding the right magic before whatever was looking for him found him. He hurried, trying to find the right balance between caution and flight, not wanting to give himself away but not wanting to get caught out of cowardice, either.

Then he saw it. At first it looked like the corridor in front of him came to a dead end, but something about it made him pause. He nearly turned away but recognized the shape protruding from the book spine just in time. He ran for it, full speed, not caring now if whatever was behind him heard him. He seized the doorknob, nearly hidden by another optical illusion, the short squat volumes that made up the door swinging open into sudden, harsh light and empty space.

He fell, as he'd imagined he would earlier, arms flailing for purchase in a way that would have been funny if he hadn't been so piss-your-pants scared, and then his foot came down the short drop to the fire escape, and he banged to a stop against the loose, rusted railing, all the wind going from his lungs with a woosh. His vision went gray at the edges. The effort to get breath into his spasming chest was like trying to get a milkshake through a tiny straw, and then Jude wheezed, once, and sucked in a deep draught of air. No time for weakness, for human frailty. He turned, and there at the end of the hall stood one of the faerie Lillian's bodyguards, the creature made of bark and vines. Its bulk kept it from coming any closer, but it stretched its long arms into the narrow hallway, its many fingered hands like branches which grasped and, as Jude watched, grew longer.

Jude kicked the wall of books, hard enough to hurt his foot, and slammed the door. A

satisfying rumble followed, both the sound and the vibration, shaking flakes of rust from the fire escape loose, one of the screws tearing free of the brick with a harsh squeal. Jude rushed down, stomping, feeling the thing swaying beneath him, swirling around one flight and then another, grabbing hold of the weighted section as it crashed down on protesting chains, sparks flying up from the concrete. He hit the pavement, feet first but sprawling, almost falling. He caught himself and ran. A quick sprint across the street and a block over, he made it to the stop just as the bus did. He pulled himself up into the frigid air conditioning, gasping. He grinned at the driver, happy to be alive. Out the window, he saw the lack of pursuit and dropped into his chair, still gasping for breath. Something scratched against the small of his back. Reaching behind him, he found a short, straight stick tucked into the waistband of his jeans. One of the tree man's fingers must have just reached him, snapped off as the door slammed shut. Jude thought about throwing it out the window but felt no magic coming from it, nothing more than a slim, knobby stick. He dropped it into his bag and forgot about it. Outside, the sun slipped behind the relatively short expanse of City Hall, and the sudden shadow reminded Jude of Legba, and Dodge, and their meeting at the crossroads. His smile evaporated.

He started to piece things together as he transferred from the bus to the streetcar at Canal, heading towards the cemeteries. Dodge wanted to use Jude's uncertain future to alter his otherwise unalterable one. But how? And why would someone murder him for that? Or was the murder the fate he hoped to avoid? Jude thought about his narrow escape. If the tree-god had been the one downstairs, it stood to reason that the one upstairs had been the golden haired faerie he'd seen with Lillian at Dodge's funeral. He'd said that Jude had something the faerie wanted. The wager he'd made? Something else? It occurred to him, picturing her floating away

from Oddfellow's Rest, that Lillian could have been that shadow-winged shape he'd seen in the Warehouse District, that she might have killed Tommy and Celeste and that girl whose name he didn't even know just to get to him, that her goons might have been the ones who took Regal.

The lights on the streetcar flicked off and then back on as it lurched to a stop. Benches shifted and banged as passengers got up, pulling Jude out of his thoughts. Full dark had fallen outside, at the intersection of Canal and City Park, at the crossroads between cemeteries, between the land of the living and the land of the dead. The end of the line.

Two hours later, the adrenaline long since worn off, Jude sat with his back to the gritty stucco wall of Greenwood Cemetery, his ass numb from the concrete, his arms itching from the sweat and the mosquitoes, fighting the fatigue and the boredom that weighed at the back of his head, pressing his chin towards his chest. He'd woken himself with his own snoring twice already, jerking with that sensation of falling, that uncertain passage of time that came with struggling to stay awake. A stiff, intermittent breeze swept along the street and through the treetops, the remnants of the storm front that had passed through earlier in the day. The white noise of the nearby interstate did nothing to help his drowsiness, his thoughts wavering from his present circumstances to memories of his childhood, of his life before and while he worked for Mourning, of his time with Cassandra. Without realizing it, his head bowed a third time, and he descended into sleep.

In the dream, the shadow from the Warehouse District circled above and then swept down to land an arm's length away, feet caressing the sidewalk with the delicate touch of a

dragonfly alighting on a branch. The figure, folding wings of ink behind it, turned to Jude so that its face was revealed. Jude stared through a glass, darkly, into his own eyes, his own lips curled into a sneer. The other Jude reached around to the back of his head, tugging, as though pulling away a mask, peeling the flesh away from his skull with a moist slurping sound, like an oyster being shucked. He dropped the bloodless mask at his feet, and Saturday's skeleton face stared at him. He threw his hands wide, a performer's "ta da" moment, and hooked a thumb under his chin, pulling a second mask up, a cheap plastic Halloween skull, Dodge's bald and sweating face beneath it. The shadow swept gloved hands in front of his face, and turned them to the side as if opening french doors, playing a nightmare game of peek-a-boo, becoming Mourning and Dupree and Lillian and Bartholomew and Scarpelli and Dodge and Saturday and then Jude again, but an aged version, hair almost entirely gray, frown lines at the corners of eyes and mouth, gloveless hands bent and spotted.

He wore a mechanic's jumpsuit with 'Luc' written on the pocket. "You looking for me?" he asked, eyes piercing and sad. "Hey! I said are you looking for me?"

Jude roused from sleep, groggy, aware somehow that the voice had come from outside his dream. He looked around, clearing his throat. "What?"

"Up here." Jude twisted around so he could see above him. Mr. Saturday perched on the cemetery wall, his legs dangling, kicking his heels against the stucco like a bored child. "I said, are you looking for me?" he asked again, his rattling rasp coming from deep in his chest.

"Not exactly," Jude said. He stood and wiped the dirt from the back of his jeans. "I'm looking for Legba."

Saturday held a hand over his skinless leer in mock surprise, the gesture somehow

effeminate. “Why Mr. Duboisson, the crossroads at midnight? You mustn't believe everything you hear in Sweetwater Carter's songs. Ain't no *gris-gris* worth the price of your immortal soul.”

Jude laughed, the remaining discomfort from that odd dream melting away. “I'm not here to sell my soul, Saturday. I need some answers.”

Saturday made an ambiguous noise, either interested or agreeing or placating. He reached into the inside of his tuxedo jacket and took out a cigar, long, dark and phallic. With quick, sure movements, he spun it around, his teeth scissoring off the end, and lit it with a flame thumb-flicked from the palm of his empty hand. For an instant, Jude's dreams and memories intertwined. He saw Dodge and Saturday superimposed, cigar clamped between teeth and smoke wreathed about the head.

“You any better at asking questions?” Saturday asked after blowing out a plume of bluish smoke.

“I doubt it.”

Saturday chuckled, a deep, sonorous roil that seemed to come from a cavern in his chest. “Doubt. That's a good place to start.” He nodded as though to himself. “Yes indeed.” Saturday tapped his cigar against the wall, knocking ash from the tip. “You know who you are yet?”

Jude shrugged. “I know my father wasn't mortal. I know I'm a demi-god.”

Saturday tsked, the tip of his leathery tongue caught between his teeth. “Wrong again. And you were doing so well. That's a 'what', mon frere, not a 'who'.” He sucked in another drag, let the smoke roll from the twin slits of where his nose should be. The wind rose around them, a hollow moan, snatching the haze floating around Saturday's floral painted skull. “Knowing 'what' is a step in the right direction, though. 'Where', 'when', and 'how' are easy to figure. After

'what', 'who' is all you got left.”

“What about 'why'?”

Saturday threw his head back and laughed, and again Jude couldn't tell if it was in mockery or genuine amusement or some combination of both. “Don't none of us know 'why', brah. Myself included.” He slid his hands along the bright colored whorls and flowers decorating the white bone of his head. “What you messing about with him for anyway? You in a hurry to leave all this?”

“I need to talk to Legba to find out who killed Dodge.”

Saturday shook his skull, his cigar tucked into the crease of his jaw. “Don't work that way. Papa Legba's place is the crossroads. The in between. You two don't meet unless he wants to. Unless of course, he's taking you to the other side, in which case it don't matter what you want.”

“He'll see me. He has to. I have to figure out how to make things right.”

“Right? Who says things is wrong?” Jude started to tell him what Thoth had said but barely got the Egyptian god's name out of his mouth before Saturday set to laughing again. This time, there was no questioning that his mirth was somehow cruel. “Thoth? That senile old fuck? You can't trust a word he say. You might not know who you are, but that fool don't even know where his feathered ass is. He thinks he's gonna make this city some kind of new Egypt. Like anybody can make her be what she don't wanna be.” Saturday rose to his feet, doing a little soft-shoe dance. “Bet he spun you some fine words about fate, too, huh?”

“He said because of who – I mean, what, I am – that I can change my own fate. That I can change other people's fates as well.”

Saturday spun in a circle, legs pistoning up and down, letting out a moan of glee. Then, abrupt as if choreographed, he stopped. He stabbed his cigar in Jude's direction. "What happened to all that doubt? Doubt is healthy, keeps you asking questions, keeps you alive. You believe him, you believe me, you'll find that tight ass of yours riding those rails with Papa Legba, sure as sin." Saturday pinched the lit ember off the tip of his cigar and tucked it away into his jacket. A change had come over his voice, weighed by disappointment or weariness. Something about that change, about his posture, made Jude imagine a frown on Saturday's face. "You start believing," he said, "you might as well come in here with me and pick a place for your remains." Jude heard, faintly, the bells at St. Anthony's tolling the hour. Saturday pulled a round watch from his vest pocket, glanced at it, and returned it to his pocket. "Time's up, I'm afraid. You'll want to direct your attention across the way." He pointed, using two white gloved fingers, to the gate of Oddfellow's Rest, where Legba, in a suit of canary yellow, led Dodge from the darkness of the cemetery.

The moment stood still. The humid air thickened to gel. The interstate's drone faded and fell silent. The stoplight caught in the change from red to green. Though Legba leaned on his cane as he walked, Dodge was the one who faltered, swaying from one foot to the other, supported more than guided. He seemed ancient, shrunken. The dome of his bald head, mottled with age spots warped by wrinkled flesh, trembled atop a thin neck and sloped shoulders. As far away as Jude was, he saw the confusion in Dodge's eyes. Saturday dropped to the sidewalk next to Jude, landing without a sound.

They crossed the road, heading toward a streetcar parked on the tracks of Canal. With slow, leaden comprehension, as though he were stoned, Jude recognized the car from his

mother's painting, the non-euclidean joins of its shape, the lines of it painful to look at. It lay nestled on a cushion of fog, lit from within by undulating blue flames. Saturday crossed towards the car as well, growing hazy, indistinct with every long-legged stride. One moment broad, feathered wings sprouted from his shoulders, the next a dog's furred and fanged snout replaced his painted skull. As Jude watched, unable to move or even breathe, Saturday reached the car, the doors opening with a wave of his hand, and he, Legba, and Dodge climbed inside. The doors folded shut. The streetcar lurched and pulled away with a squeal, less like that of metal wheels on metal rails but that of a bow dragged across discordant strings. It faded from sight like an old special effect, turning transparent and then disappearing entirely, its cyclopean eye of a headlight winking into darkness.

Chapter Thirteen

Doubt was a splinter, a knotted cord Jude used to whip himself as he made his way from the cemetery back to his apartment. Who should he trust? Who *could* he trust? His mother, his own lost and broken mother, even she had lied to him. Nor could he truly trust his magic, the ability he'd followed his entire life. It had showed him the way to Thoth, but the Egyptian god might be lying, or senile like Saturday said, or both. It had sent him after a useless gun and had nearly gotten him killed. In the past it had led him places that confused him and found things that seemed worthless before, but in the end, his gift had always proven true. That magic, that affinity for lost things, had always been his one edge, his one chance of making it through the clinging morass of the supernatural. He thought of his mother's painting, the doubloon at the center of a compass. Maybe that had been more true than he'd realized.

He yawned as he fished for his keys at the front door. He couldn't relax his mind's grip, the constant circling of what he'd done and failed to do, the pieces that he could connect only showing how few pieces he had. Tomorrow. A hot shower and a few drinks to help him sleep, and maybe tomorrow he would see things more clearly.

His door groaned open, the apartment dark within, keys still in his pocket. Had he left the door unlocked? No. A sudden, vivid memory flashed in front of his eyes, of standing in the doorway of Regal's place, the intrusion, the violation. Jude entered, found his life ransacked, books and dvds littering the floor, sofa cushions torn open, kitchen drawers ripped out, overturned. Who did this? Had they come and gone or waited for him? He reached into his satchel, unsure if he wanted the pretend threat of the revolver or the over-abundant threat of the thunderbolt. He had the flap open and his hand inside and then the world tilted sideways. He

felt his feet leave the ground and the lights went out.

The next thing he knew, he lay on the floor, a tender bruise on one side of his head and his phone vibrating in his pocket. He flopped over onto his back and answered. Someone from the abbey, wanting to reassure him that his mother was safe. When Jude asked why she wouldn't be safe, the priest on the other end got flustered, nearly stuttering. It took a few tries back and forth, between the priest's nervousness and the headache ringing in Jude's ears, for him to understand that Augustus, the monk, was dead, some strange accident out in the woods behind the abbey. It seemed he'd been driving in the rain and wrecked his truck, his throat cut by the broken windshield. When the priest started his platitudes about Gus being in a better place, Jude hung up.

His throat cut. Jude saw it happening, pictured Gus' last moments in the wind and the rain. The fear in the monk's eyes. Just as Jude could summon up images of Dodge's death. And Tommy's and the girl with the headphones and Celeste. One more death on his conscience. One more murder in this town.

Jude stood, the room spinning for a moment before settling. Bile rose into his throat, bitter and thick with phlegm. He staggered to the kitchen sink and spat, ran the water to rinse his mouth. Concussion, maybe. Who could have done this? Why? The knot on his head throbbed, an ache burrowing its way into the space behind his eyes. He found aspirin, took twice the recommended dose, and started cleaning up the mess his attacker had left. In the short hallway by the front door, little magics were strewn across the floor like so much junk. The small, round container of rose oil, the glass vial with the sex potion he'd used to get into the Maple Leaf, a pearl, the dragon scale amulet, a stub of a candle, the cross Brother Gus had given him, all lay on

the floor as if thrown there. He remembered, then, digging in the satchel as he walked through the door, the blow to the head. His heart seized in his chest. Jude tore through the apartment, rifling through the chaos, though he already knew what he'd find. His magician's bag, with the thunderbolt and the doubloon and his assorted magics, was gone.

Jude leaned back against the headboard, naked except for the towel around his waist. The moment he'd stepped into the hotel room, he'd stripped and climbed into the shower, turning the heat as high as he could stand it. He sank deeper into the cushioned softness of the down comforter beneath him, trying to relax, letting his muscles go limp from his toes to his calves to his thighs all the way up to the stiff, clenched fists of his shoulders and neck. He'd been on autopilot since regaining consciousness in his apartment, in full flight from his obviously unsafe home. He should have known when Scarpelli showed up in his living room that he wasn't safe, but he'd been reacting since all this started, not planning, not thinking things through. Relied too much on his magic to point the way.

He tried to reason out what someone could want out of his bag enough to steal it from him, but honestly, it could be anything. There were things in that bag whose purpose Jude had never discovered, magics either beneath him or beyond him. Of course, the satchel itself might have been the reason behind the theft. The same words Jude used to open and close locks worked on the bag, sealing it, until the same voice told it to open. He cursed. If only he had sealed it, maybe the thief would have left it. Of course, if his attacker hadn't been able to open the bag, he might have waited around for Jude to wake up. Either way, Jude had no idea what to

do next, now that the satchel had been stolen from him.

Thinking back, Jude began to see that his life had been slipping away from him long before the flood. He could divide his life into before and after he'd bargained with Dodge for the satchel just as easily as he could pre- and post-storm. Before, his life had been about Cassandra and her art, Kermit Ruffins at Vaughn's on Thursdays and crawfish boils and Saints games. He'd had friends, had one job at a coffee shop on Oak, another at a bar at the edge of the Quarter. Using his gift, working with Mourning, that had been an occasional thing, an easy source of cash. Some uncharacteristic ambition had risen in him at the seemingly boundless potential offered by Dodge.

He'd gotten in deeper with Mourning after that, partnered with Regal instead of just freelancing, quit his jobs, quit talking about going back to school, quit visiting his mom. Argued more with Cassandra, made love less. Mostly they argued about where his money came from. That much, that fast, and that secretive? It had to be illegal. Jude sighed. Maybe losing the bag would be a good thing. Maybe, piece by piece, he could take that life back, however much of it remained in the aftermath of Hurricane Jude. If he earned it. If he was worth it.

First, he had to get out from under this. He owed too much, too many lost and too many dead, to walk away now. The resolve he'd found outside the house he'd shared with Cassandra, worn down by Dupree and Lillian's goons and Legba and whoever had stolen his bag, returned. He didn't know what he could do with a handful of magics, didn't know who he was up against or why he'd been caught up in this in the first place. But he thought he knew where to start finding out.

Jude dressed, a black Saints t-shirt with a faded gold fleur-de-lis on the front, a pair of

cargo pants and sneakers. He stuffed the bits of magic he had left to him into the wide pockets on his thighs, the vial and the amulet, the pearl and the candle and the rose oil. A deep breath, a strange, powerful calm. He thought of the debts he owed, to Regal, to the dead, then slipped the leather cord of the cross Augustus had given him around his neck, the iron nail cold against his skin.

The heat enveloped him as soon as he left the lobby of the Lowes Hotel, the night thick and humid. He checked the sky as he crossed Canal and walked through the lights and the noise of the Quarter, watching, waiting for that shadow to return. In the few blocks between the Lowes and his destination, his shirt clung to his skin, wet and tacky. Jude ignored it, just as he ignored the doubts and the impulse to second-guess himself. His gift had led him here and to Thoth. He thought he understood why he'd been sent to the Egyptian god but not what was important about the revolver from Camporesi and Sons Antiques, the lost thing he'd found and lost again. Going back to something left unfinished, actively choosing which aspect of the knot to untangle, felt good, felt better than anything had in a long time. As Jude made his cautious way down Royal Street, he watched the skies for a stalking shadow and the ground for an asshole named Dupree. Instead, he saw a long, black Cadillac with tinted windows and a fresh wax job parked on the curb in front of the antique shop. He might not have noticed it during the day, but at that time of night, it was the only car on Royal. As he drew closer to the car, the coppery taste of blood pricked along his tongue. Scarpelli.

Remembering the way the darkened steps of the Appeals Court hadn't hidden him last time, Jude continued past the antique shop and across St. Louis, stopping beneath the balcony of an art gallery on the opposite corner. It took a minute or so of pacing back and forth, but he

managed to angle himself so that the glare of the gas streetlamp disappeared and he could watch the shop reflection in the gallery window. As he waited, with the whispered white noise of traffic coming from Decatur a few blocks over, he mourned the loss of the slips of paper that brought life to the inanimate. With one of those, he could have taken a car to stake the place out instead of standing out in the open again. He began to lose that calm confidence he'd felt in the hotel room, started to feel a creep of dread up his spine.

A single headlight pierced the night, coming down St. Lois in his direction. A girl on light blue scooter pattered to a stop behind him, resting her foot against the curb. She looped the strap of her helmet through the grip of her handlebars and cut her engine off. Jude hoped she would leave, that she wouldn't think he was watching her in the window. The last thing he needed was to draw attention to himself.

Across St. Louis, figures came out of the antique shop, indistinct from one another in the vague reflection. Jude took his phone from his pocket and pretended to use it as he turned around, head bent toward the screen but his eyes and attention focused across the street. Scarpelli's ghouls, the blonde woman and the scruffy bartender, threw a long, squirming bundle into the trunk and slammed the lid closed. Dupree? Could be. The bartender, or what used to be the bartender, went to the driver's door with awkward, shuffling steps like that of a horror movie zombie. The blonde went back into the antique shop.

Jude's mind whirled. They were probably bringing whoever was in the trunk to the vampire. Jude couldn't miss this chance. He had to do something. The girl. The scooter. The Cadillac's engine growled into life. Shit. He'd have to risk it. He dug in his deep pocket until he found the vial, licked the bitter, stinging potion from the glass tip, hurrying to follow the girl

towards Bourbon as he wiped the burning spit into his closed eyelids. The slap of the magic taking hold did nothing to help his headache. He caught up with her halfway down the next block, taking her arm and staring into her eyes with little grace, less a seduction than a seizure.

The potion held up, though, inspiring lust and obedience instantly. It took longer for her to get the ignition key off the ring than it did for her to agree to give him her Vespa. Jude ran back, starting the hiccuping little engine just as the low Caddy pulled away from the curb. He nearly crashed the scooter twice in the first thirty seconds, the first time barely missing a column holding up a balcony by yanking too hard on the throttle and driving up onto the sidewalk, the second by squeezing the brakes so tight it bucked like an unbroken pony. He paused, slapped the helmet onto his head, then eased into the street after Scarpelli's ghouls.

Jude followed them across Canal and through the Warehouse District, around Lee Circle, down St. Charles and through the Garden District, past the homes, then the mansions, then Audubon Place, where the ultra-rich had their own street, all the way Uptown to Carrollton. The Caddy glided along the street like an oil slick, easing around bright orange traffic cones and swooping through the curve onto Carrollton as though its tires never touched the pavement. Jude sputtered and bounced behind it. The drive seemed to take forever, his nerves stretched tight and fraying, constantly scanning the canopy of oak branches arcing overhead, reminded of his visions of Gus' death, and Tommy's, the drop from the trees, from above. He smelled rain on the warm breeze, the fragrance of oak and magnolia, damp grass and sodden earth. He must have just missed the downpour, one of those evening summer storms that were an almost daily mixed-blessing in New Orleans, a brief reprieve from the tropic heat that only added to the humidity. Blood raced through his veins, fear and anticipation and the aftereffects of that potion threading

into one another until they were indistinguishable. The vibrating engine between his legs teased him erect, unexpected and awkward. Sometimes, not often, but sometimes, the potion worked both ways, leaving him so horny it affected his judgment, every touch a caress, the scent of every woman that of an animal in heat. Great. A hard-on was just what he needed while trying to confront a vampire.

The Caddy's turn signal flicked on and its brake lights fluttered as it slowed and turned, giving Jude barely enough warning to avoid ramming into the back of it. The car rolled through a gate that slid away to allow it passage, down a long, curved driveway to a massive house, protected by high hedges and floodlights. Jude sputtered past and turned at the next corner, parking the Vespa in the grass. His breath came in pants, both from the heat and the insanity of what he contemplated. He knew that the potion was acting on him, impairing his thoughts, but like a drunk, he believed he could handle it.

Scarpelli's house and land took up most of the block between Freret and Zimple and stretched nearly all the way from Carrollton to Short Street. Palm trees sprouted up from the manicured lawn and leaned against the tall fence of thin, black iron bars. Jude walked along the sidewalk, past the front gate, trying to act nonchalant, certain that more than a few cameras scanned the outside of the mansion. The hedges growing against and through the fence hid him from anyone inside but blocked his view of the house as well. He paced along, feeling like one of the big cats at the zoo.

He made a full circuit of the block, looking for a weakness, a way in. The word Dodge had taught him to open and close the satchel would probably work on the gate, but he'd be exposed in the floodlights, would probably be caught and murdered before they swung closed. If

only he could fly, the way Thoth had assumed he could. If only he had his magics to choose from. Maybe he should find the bag first, but what if Scarpelli was the one who had stolen it?

He found his way in. An oak branch, thick and old, curved out over the fence where its weight pulled it back to the earth. Metal rods held it over the sidewalk, guided it away from the street. The dense canopy of the rest of the tree spread above the branch, shrouding it and the concrete beneath it in darkness. If he could reach it, he was in.

Jude gathered his legs beneath him and jumped, reaching as far as he could. His hand swept through empty air. He tried twice more, nearly pulling his arm out of its socket. He got a running start and threw himself at the branch. Fingertips grazed the rough bark, the underside of the limb, and he staggered when he landed, falling sprawled in the dirt between the sidewalk and the street. As he stood and brushed the grit from his hands and clothes, he felt the charms and magics in his pockets. He pulled out the pearl.

He thought for a moment, unsure whether he should risk its effects or not, but the sex potion in his veins overwhelmed his inhibition. Jude held the pearl to his lips, ran his tongue along its smooth, cool surface, tasted the dirt still on his fingertips, and then dropped it into his mouth and swallowed it. He felt it roll down his throat like a pill, squinted his eyes shut and braced himself for its effect. He'd only used it once before and had been afraid of it since. As long as the little sphere remained in his body, he would have access to a terrible, Herculean sort of strength. Once he vomited or shat it out, though, it would take back what it had given tenfold.

The only time he'd used it, for the span of only an hour or so, one of the few bits of magic he'd dared right after the storm, its absence had left him bedridden and febrile for three days,

tender and weak as wet paper for a week after that. If he held the pearl within him for more than an hour, he feared, its removal would kill him.

A sudden flush along his skin, a coil drawing taut within his muscles, told him that the magic had taken hold. Jude flexed and released, the easy motion of a basketball jump-shot, and pulled himself into the tree's embrace. A few steps brought him over the fence, and he dropped down, landing easily on the balls of his feet. The thought occurred to him that he should stick his finger down his throat, should protect himself from the pearl's heavy cost, but then he remembered Scarpelli's intrusion into his life, the naked terror and helplessness the vampire had thrust upon him. Jude wanted something he could not name, not vengeance or retribution or anything so easily articulated as that. He knew only that Scarpelli had taken something from him, something he wanted back.

Fueled by magic, a drunken confidence swelling his veins, Jude sprinted through the scent of fresh cut grass and the burn of chlorine from the nearby swimming pool toward a side door. He tasted blood, a faint presence that grew stronger the closer he came to the house. Vampire.

Enough of his caution remained that he didn't kick down the door like he wanted to, the energy in his body straining to be released, eerily similar to the affinity for lost things he'd wagered away in Dodge's card game. Jude spoke the guttural word that meant 'open' and eased into the cool darkness, eager and aching for a fight.

Inside the large house, Jude found an unsettling sterility, the crisp, cool air devoid of any scent, the furniture ornate and expensive but uncreased, unblemished. It looked so staged, so un-lived in, that Jude had to fight the urge to check for price tags. Art hung on the walls, the

generic, impersonal art chosen to fill up space. There were no mirrors, no photographs. Silence reigned within, broken only by the hum of the air conditioning and the refrigerator. Jude glanced into the kitchen at the gleaming silver tower of the vampire's fridge and imagined one of two possibilities: either it was as empty, as sterile as the rest of the house, or it was filled with a hellish assortment of whatever meals Scarpelli might consider worth saving. He shook himself, told himself to concentrate, and followed the taste of blood deeper into the house.

He crept up the stairs, his footfalls silent on the thick carpet, his eyes adjusting to the growing darkness. On the second floor, he snuck down a long hallway of closed doors, the entrance at the very end left ajar, where a flickering blue light seeped through the cracks. Jude eased the door open, grateful when it didn't creak or groan, and slipped inside.

Bare stone walls, oddly rounded, curved from the granite floor to the ceiling studded with pointed spires, a cavernous space made eerie by the dancing blue torch flames that spotted the walls. Despite these flames, Jude's breath misted in the frigid air, a shudder running across his skin. The taste of blood grew stronger inside, twisting his stomach. In the center of the room, a dais of carved stone rose from the floor, a squat table, an altar, which held the lumpy, black vinyl shape of the body bag. The ghouls stood on either side of the dais, heads bowed, arms dangling limply at their sides. On the far side of the room, framed by an incongruous window of frosted glass, lurked a figure shrouded by shadow. Jude's heart began to pound, his fists clenched. The figure turned revealing, not Scarpelli's bloated corpse but a trench coat and fedora, skin blotchy with veins spider-webbing underneath, bright blue eyes and a wisp of facial hair.

Cornell Dupree.

Chapter Fourteen

Dupree smirked at Jude and thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his coat. “What up, Jude?” he asked, walking towards the body bag on the stone table as though he didn't really expect a response. Jude could not respond, baffled by the switch. He'd expected to see the other magician in the vinyl shroud, and his mind, already confused by the lust of the potion and the strength of the pearl, whirled as he tried to adjust. Dupree plucked at the zipper of the body bag, toying with it. “You got here right on time, bro. You gots to see this shit right here.” He opened the bag, the sound of the zipper stretching through the silence. Within, Jude saw short boyish hair and naked flesh, bound by manacles of black metal at the neck and wrists, lips blue and nipples erect in the nearly frozen air.

Regal Sloan.

Dupree made a noise of surprise, a slight huff of air, then grinned. He looked up at Jude and to the two ghouls standing at his sides, jerked his head in Jude's direction. “Get him,” he said. “Fuck him up.”

Rage boiled within Jude's belly, a physical heat that radiated out along his skin. The bastard had Regal. The ghouls, their flesh so rotten now that it was hard to say which had been male and which had been female, turned towards Jude in a synchronized glide, their movements both smooth and listless, like automatons. They came at him, in a shambling run, desiccated hands clutching, mouths gaping wide in soundless battle cries. Jude had time enough to change his footing, to see Dupree remove a strange, two-pronged blade from his coat pocket, and then the ghouls were on him, grasping hands and filthy, rotting flesh.

Jude hit one of them, the pearl's magic giving him such strength that he felt skin split and

bone crumble beneath his knuckles. The other one lunged at him, teeth snapping together inches from his cheek. The thought ran through Jude's mind that, magic or not, aided by the pearl's strength or not, he could die here. Jude's rage overtook him, billowing up from his stomach and rising, burning, into his throat, taking shape as flames spewing from his mouth. His fire touched the first ghoul who went up like so much kindling, as though its rotting flesh had been soaked in alcohol. Jude spat fire at the second one, who joined the first. Through a red haze, he saw them consumed, collapsing under their own weight as his magic ate through torn skin and rotten, bloodless meat.

He stepped over the small mounds of burning detritus that had been full human lives just a few days before, the petty insults and grand hopes and the *life* that had been reduced to a shambling, incompetent machine. There were few words for his anger, for his hate, but with his focus latched onto Dupree, who held that strange knife at Regal's throat, his eyes wide at the ease with which Jude had dispatched the ghouls, Jude did his best to speak his mind. He shouted words of magic, of fire and storm. Magics designed to cut, to maim, to break and bludgeon and burn.

Retreating before Jude's onslaught, Dupree called out his own spells, hands waving in the air as he managed, barely, to preserve himself from Jude's power. Wind, cold and cutting then searing with flame, howled through the room, singing the edges of Dupree's coat, extinguishing a few of the torches. In the dimmed light, he could barely make out Regal's nude form, couldn't tell if she still breathed or not. Jude screamed, casting a spell that would crush Dupree's bones beneath its weight, that the other magician hurled behind him, the force of it shattering the window.

The other magician, a gash stretching across his cheek, fear in his eyes, lifted his hand, the holding up the thumb with the brass ring, the djinn imprisoned within. Jude leaped at him, amazed at the strength his body possessed, flying through the air and tackling the other magician to the ground. Straddling him, Jude grabbed the front of his shirt and slammed his head against the stone floor. It felt good, a dark, menacing thing within him stretching and licking its chops. The wind died around them as their magic ceased, as Jude hit Dupree again and again, letting his red-hot rage pound out through his fists. When he realized the other magician had gone limp, he stopped.

His fists ached, and a sour taste burned at the back of his throat. Revulsion twisted, like a burrowing snake, through his guts. The hot air swirling in through the broken window felt good on his face, dispelling some of the unnatural chill. Jude stood, swaying, and went to Regal's side. With the pearl fueling his strength he pulled open the manacles, though his muscles tore with the strain. Raw, angry welts marred her skin where the metal had scraped against her, where she had struggled against her captors.

Jude didn't know what Dupree was doing with the vampire Scarpelli, didn't know what he wanted with Regal, but he knew it wasn't good. A shudder of relief ran through him at the feel of her pulse beneath his fingers, at the mist of her breath in the cold air. Jude tried to pick her up, but with the potion still surging in his veins, the feel of her nudity, the press of her breasts against him, sent a much different shudder coursing across his skin. Cursing, Jude clenched his eyes shut, tried to force himself calm. He could still taste blood, mingling with the cayenne pepper burn of his magic, knew that the vampire could return at any moment.

As quickly as he could, hands trembling from the fading adrenaline, Jude stripped clothes

off of Dupree, dressed Regal in his dress shirt and pants. He hesitated, considered taking the trench coat as well. No telling what sorts of magics Dupree had hidden on his person. But the other magician stirred, twitching and letting out a soft groan, so Jude abandoned the thought and scooped Regal up, fleeing the tomb-like mansion.

Later, after convincing a taxi driver that Regal had simply had too much to drink, Jude left Regal resting on his hotel bed and showered, trying to wash the grime of his fistfight with the rotting corpses from his body. He found a fingernail in his hair, whole and still stained with a bit of polish, and it took all his control not to vomit, desperate to keep the pearl inside him. Instead, he gave himself permission to weep, but the tears did not come. He kept seeing Dupree beneath his fists, kept seeing Leon Carter's eyes when he threatened him. What was happening to him? What was he supposed to do with so much rage? He needed a drink.

With only a towel wrapped around him, Jude stepped out of the steam-filled bathroom, still filled near to bursting with the pearl's energy, still uncomfortably hard from the potion's effect. He had to do something about that pearl, had to talk to someone who could help him remove it without it killing him. He turned the corner and found Regal standing at the foot of the bed, confusion in her eyes, removing Dupree's shirt button by button. His heart began to pound. She flinched from him, something strange and frightened in her eyes.

“Regal,” he said, surprised at how husky his voice came out. “Hey, Queenie, it's me, it's Jude. It's okay, you're okay.” He held up one hand, the other clutching the towel around his waist.

“Jude,” she said. “Yes.” Her voice had a slur to it, as though she were drugged or in pain. She undid her last button, left the shirt hanging open, her near nudity seductive, entrancing. “Rescued me,” she said. “My hero.” Regal stepped close to him, her slender hand chilly against the skin of his chest. A wry smile tugged at her lips. “Must be rewarded.”

“No,” Jude said. “This isn't right. This is a mistake.” She smelled strange but good. Earthy. He couldn't think clearly, didn't want to think clearly. More than magic aroused him, more than potions moved through his blood.

“I want this,” she said, smiling at him. “I want this.” She moved her hand lower. If this was a mistake, it was freely made, freely granted. Jude took Regal in his arms, let the towel fall to the floor, and let Regal, her arms insistent and surprisingly strong, pull him to the bed, where they made no more mistakes.

Jude woke in the darkness, in sheets still warm and damp, reeking of passion. He stretched, languorous and sated, the potion driven from him at last. Images flashed through his mind, the memory of flesh against flesh, tongue against skin, the taste and the supple energy of Regal Sloan. He felt a brief pang of guilt as he compared her to his recollections of Cassandra, but he pushed those thoughts away. He hadn't been unfaithful. Cassandra left him. He reached for the other end of the bed, for Regal, only realizing when he found her absent that he heard cascading water, the sound of a running shower. He'd told her, in the tender moments between, about the pearl he'd swallowed, about how in the morning he'd have to figure out some way to remove it without dying. He leaned back against the pillows, smiling, and fell asleep in moments.

* * *

He woke, again, the sound of water stronger now, moaning wind and a clash of thunder. A storm, then. Regal was not in the bed, the sheets cold on her side of the bed. Where? He felt groggy, as though he'd slept for hours. Another flash of lightning lit the room and revealed a figure standing at the window, just one shadow among the others. He started to speak, but the shadow came for him, cold hands, strong as the grave, wrenching his jaws open, a dirt-tasting finger forcing itself to the back of his tongue. He gagged, unable to stop himself. He tasted bile, and then he was released, curling onto his side as he vomited. Jude felt the pearl leave him, felt the strength siphoning out of his limbs, abandoning him, like water swirling down a drain. Jude lay tangled in sex-heavy sheets beside a pool of his own vomit, the light going out of his eyes, thinking that he'd been wrong, that he had betrayed Cassandra.

And then, to his great surprise, against every effort to the contrary, Jude Duboisson died.

Chapter Fifteen

After death, the soul must balance the weight of its heart against the feather of truth in order to pass into the realm beyond, or it must cross a bridge as narrow as a knife's edge, or brave a mountain pass where the mountains clash against one another, or it must pay the boatman to ferry it across the river. A river of blood, or of tears, or of waters that will make it forget. Or it rides a horse that gallops on the ocean's surface, or in a boat made of glass. Or it must descend into a frozen pit, or climb a vast mountain to the celestial spheres, a journey that may take three days, or a year, or four, or that is outside of time entirely. Its destination is a meadow, or a field, or a green, or hunting grounds, or an island, or the first village, the first home of mankind, where the food is plentiful and disease does not exist and it is always summer. The valorous dead are carried from the field of battle to a great feast, the benevolent find themselves in a garden of eternal joy, and the wise become one with all. The sinful dead are faced with poetically relevant punishments in a maze, a lake of fire, or a dark and frozen cave, or they are returned to the world, given another birth, another life, another death, in which to redeem their mistakes. Or the dead are simply dead. Their bodies rot and join the soil. Their energy returns to the universe, their elements the same as the living and dying stars. Death is the beginning of a journey, a doorway to another world, one part of an eternal cycle. It is never the end.

Jude ran through the storm and ducked under the streetcar overhang, an embarrassed grin on his face despite the empty bench. He wiped rain water from the sleeves of his suit coat, a gesture he gave up immediately as futile, realizing he was soaked to the skin. With a shrug, he eased down onto the rickety bench, leaning forward onto his knees. The rain shrouded him as completely as if he were engulfed in fog, the noise of the city drowned out by the static roar of

the water pelting the fiberglass roof, the brick and neon of the buildings across the street almost invisible through the thick downpour, curtains of rain undulating like tall grass in the wind, like waves against the shore. Water hissed against the hot concrete, scouring away the vomit and booze and funk of the nearby Quarter. With every rolling peal of thunder, the thin wooden slats vibrated beneath him, as did the overhang's mural-covered Plexiglas. The storm clouds obscured the light of day and buried Canal street in darkness.

Jude reached for his cell phone, wondering what time it was, but his pockets were empty. No keys, no wallet, no phone, nothing. Lightning flashed, individual drops of rain caught by its crystalline flare, and in that same instant thunder roared, the strike so close it shook Jude down to his bones. He checked his pockets again, patting himself down like a cliché of confusion. An uncomfortable chill, a *frisson*, rose along his skin everywhere he pressed wet, cold cloth to his flesh. It occurred to him, for the first time, that he didn't know why he wore a suit, didn't know what he'd been doing before the rain. Something strange had to be happening, a dream, maybe. What other explanation could there be for wandering around during a storm in a suit and tie with nothing in his pockets? He closed his eyes, willed himself awake, and opened them to the wind and the rain and the empty streetcar stop.

The seat trembled beneath him, thunder without lightning, growing stronger instead of fading away. He had to be dreaming. He closed his eyes a second time, pictured his bedroom, the sound the rain would make against his window, and opened them once again to Canal street. He tried a third time, smiling when the shaking beneath him ceased. Awake at last.

Jude opened his eyes and saw the overhang and the storm and an odd streetcar, battered and worn like the archaic cars on the St. Charles line, but unlike the cars on either line, this one

was painted a glossy black. The doors folded open and Saturday leaned out, raindrops splashing against his floral painted skull.

“Told you we’d be seeing you if you weren’t careful, didn’t I?” he asked, his tone both rhetorical and scolding. “Now look at you.” He shook his head, a slow gesture that would have been grave if not for his mocking, death’s-rictus grin. “Well, come on in then. ‘Fore your catch your death. Again.”

Wavering blue flames danced in the glass and iron cages of antique gas lamps, lighting the interior of the streetcar with a gloomy, entombed sort of illumination. Thick cushions of molded leather covered the seats, the dark reds and browns of a coffin lining. The air smelled of candle wax and a pungent oil that almost hid the faint, lingering bite of bleach. Music played, so quietly that Jude thought at first that it was only in his head, a slow blues riff, one of Sweetwater’s tunes. One other passenger sat way in the back, face hidden by the shadow of a hat brim. Jude started toward the back, curious, but stopped when Saturday, behind him, cleared his throat with exaggerated impatience.

“Where you think you’re goin’?” Saturday asked. When Jude turned to face him, the voodoo *loa* had changed, his skull naked, bleached white bone, his tuxedo replaced by wool robes. Ashen gray wings arched from his shoulders, almost brushing the streetcar’s ceiling. The blue light seemed to reflect from somewhere deep within his eye sockets, his lipless mouth no longer a grin but a snarl. Jude had no answer for him, could not find his voice. The music punctuated the silence and the space between them. Saturday rubbed his thumb against the first two fingers of his hand. “Nobody rides for free,” he said, at last.

Jude searched his pockets again, knowing he would find them empty. Pants, coat,

nothing but damp cloth. Did he need to ride the car to wake up, or would getting out in the storm shock him awake? What if he wasn't dreaming? He opened his mouth, wanting to explain, but nothing came out. He struggled, like trying to find a word that had escaped the grasp of his mind, but it was as if speech itself had vanished, a vast gulf yawning between his thoughts and his tongue. Straining so hard that that he trembled, he managed only a wheeze, a gasp that might have only been the moan of the wind outside.

A strong hand grasped his shoulder, and the tension eased. A voice, heavy with an island accent, spoke from behind him. "Leave de boy be," it said. "He got enough to deal wit, him. Don't need to put up with your meanness, no."

Jude turned and looked into Papa Legba's wrinkled face, gnarled and weathered as an oak root. He wore a pastel blue suit, his tie and vest and cap all the same shade. Something about the matching colors felt comforting to Jude, familiar. He opened his mouth to thank the voodoo god, but Legba frowned and shook his head.

"Won't do you no good," he said. "Not now." He pointed towards Saturday. "You got to pay de fare. Everybody do."

"How come it's only cruelty when I say it?" Saturday asked. "I said the same fucking thing."

Legba frowned, all the lines on his face bending towards the floor. He kept his eyes on Jude but spoke to Saturday. "It is how you talk, you know this. You are meant to guide them, but you delight in taunting them."

"You just don't know how to have fun anymore." In Jude's periphery, Saturday made a rude gesture, which Legba seemed to both notice and ignore. Their words seemed well-

practiced, as though they had had this argument many times before, and they needed only to recite their lines. It was strange, seeing two gods bicker like an old married couple. Outside, the storm pounded against the streetcar, the wind and the rain making it totter back and forth like a drunk, like a ship in high seas.

“Open your mouth,” Legba said. It took a moment for Jude to realize that the *loa* spoke to him. Without questions, trusting to the “this is a dream” logic that had carried him this far, Jude obeyed. Legba motioned for Jude to lean down, to lower his head to the small god’s level. When he did, Legba reached inside Jude’s mouth and touched his tongue. Legba’s fingers, warm and tasting of tobacco and rum, scooped the sensitive underside of Jude’s mouth and pulled something out. Jude hadn’t felt it until Legba touched it, something hard and round. The entire moment had an eerie echo in Jude’s memory like a parody, an inversion, of Communion.

“There it go,” Legba said, holding up the wet coin to Jude’s eyes, one of the doubloons from Dodge’s card game, a stylized heart, stamped into the metal. The *loa* pressed it into Jude’s palm. “Go on now. Pay the fare so we can be on our way.”

Saturday, returned now to the floral painted skull and tuxedo, waited with his hand out. Jude dropped the coin into Saturday’s upturned palm, his gloved fingers bent into the shape of a cup. The skull-headed god looked down at it and laughed poking his leathery tongue between his teeth. “Heart?” he asked, laughter in his voice. “Who you think you foolin?” He flicked the doubloon up to his fingertip where it spun on its edge, whirled so fast that it blurred into a sphere. When it slowed, Saturday presented it back to Jude, the heart replaced by a stylized penis. “There, that’s more like it. Truth in advertising, I say.” He held the coin up to his empty eye socket, peering at it like a jeweler looking through a loupe. “And you had this in your

mouth? Damn. If I knew you went that way, I wouldn't have made you pay." Saturday pivoted on his toes, giggling as he fell into the driver's seat of the streetcar. He pulled a lever and the engine chugged to life, pounding beneath the floor like a clutching, struggling heart.

Legba pulled at Jude's sleeve, turning him away from Saturday and towards the back of the streetcar. "Leave the clown to his foolishness," he said. "There is much you must understand." He led Jude down the rows of seats with slow and cautious footsteps as the car lurched down the tracks, buffeted by the storm. Legba sat and pulled one leg on top of the other, his ankle balanced on top of his knee. It was a surprisingly nimble gesture for as old and frail as he appeared. He held out a hand to the seat next to him.

Saturday, without turning his attention from the window in front of him, yelled over his shoulder, "Don't settle for that old man, Jude! You want some, I got the biggest cock of all the *loa*. You count on it!"

Jude smiled, and beside him, Legba laughed. "He clever, I got to admit," Legba said. He took a hand-carved wooden pipe from his coat pocket, chuckling and shaking his head as he knocked it against the heel of his polished dress shoe. "Too clever, I say." From his vest pocket came a clump of dried leaf which he pressed into his pipe with a thumb. Jude stared, half hypnotized, half hoping Legba would produce the flask of rum they'd shared at Dodge's funeral. The voodoo *loa* reached into the lantern swinging overhead and plucked the blue flame free as easily as stripping a leaf from a branch. He used it to light his pipe, taking short puffs on the stem until a rich, minty smoke rose from the bowl.

The memory of sharing a drink with Legba at Dodge's funeral sparked another memory, but as soon as it came to him, it vanished. Jude struggled to hold on to it, sure that the memory

was somehow important, but his thoughts felt as elusive as his voice. Why couldn't he remember how he'd gotten here? Why couldn't he say anything?

Legba took the pipe from between his teeth with a quiet click, used it to point at Jude. "The thing you must understand," he said, his words quiet and grave, "is that you have died."

Jude felt no surprise at these words. No sudden increase in his pulse, no rush of heat along his skin, no amusement at the silliness of the idea. Nothing. As he realized this, he began to wonder if he was dreaming at all, began to believe that this might all actually be happening.

"This is why you can not speak," Legba said. "Why you cannot remember where you were before you came to me. These things are difficult for the newly dead." He stared out the window as he spoke. Following Legba's gaze, Jude saw that they were on the Riverfront line, hurtling between the levee wall and the river. The voodoo god waved a hand at the window, seeming to indicate the levee and the buildings peeking over it and everything else. "Here, in this place, the dead do not come easily. Some refuse to believe that they have died. They hold on to the world, to the memory of flesh. Some fear the journey into the next world. Some choose to stay." Legba turned away from the window, his ancient eyes boring into Jude. "For whatever reason, New Orleans is a place where the dead remain."

The car squealed as the brakes caught, the gas lamps swinging so hard they nearly slammed into the roof. "First stop," Saturday yelled from the front. "Elysian Fields!"

The party spilled out of the large house and into the well-manicured lawn, a black-tie affair. The revelers outside, whispering pairs or bullshitting groups, seemed unconcerned with the storm

raging just beyond the borders of the house and its grounds, as though certain the wind and the rain knew better than to bother them. Every light in the wide, two-story house burned, a warm glow emanating from the windows and the open front door. From that door wafted sounds of joy, laughter and jazz and conversation, all mixed together in one happy roar. As Jude stepped out of the rain, through the high stone gates and onto the gravel path that wound a lazy meander to the porch, a breeze blew into his face, cooler than the summer air behind him, sweet with the scent of magnolia blossoms and fresh clipped grass.

Though he had been here at the end of Elysian Fields before, at the edge of where the Quarter and the Marigny neighborhood met, he had never seen this house. Always before, walking from the streetcar to one of the bars on Esplanade, or to the Krewe de Vieux parade, this had looked like nothing more than an intersection and a tiny neutral ground, a thin strip of grass and a couple of spindly trees. He stood for a moment, amazed that something like this had been hidden from him. He wondered what other wonders he might have walked past, unknowing.

Papa Legba leaned on a cane beside him, the colors of his suit muted, as though he had stepped out of a poorly developed photograph. “Come then,” he said, “you might as well have a look around.” They followed the walkway toward the house, one limping, one strolling with his hands in his pockets. Brittle crunches ground beneath their steps, an ashen dust rising in their wake. None of the party guests stopped them, or questioned them, or seemed to even notice them. Jude helped Legba up the steps to the porch and followed him inside.

The interior of the house matched the outside: wealth and extravagance, charm and mirth. The doorway led into a huge, crowded ballroom, floors of dark wood polished to a mirror’s shine, twin staircases sweeping along each end of the room to the landing above. Satin curtains

hung in heavy drapes from each of the windows, smooth and dark as an expensive red wine. Grey plaster covered the walls, artfully crumbling in places to reveal the red bricks beneath. The chandelier hanging from the ceiling was not the glittering thing of crystal and light that Jude expected, but a massive bronze sculpture, seven winged figures holding pitchers or vases in their outstretched hands, flames crackling within the containers. Other statues decorated the room; plaster men and women leaning out of the walls, arms lifted over their head in exaltation or prayer and marble angels at the base of each stairwell. Above them all, on the landing, a jazz band played a slow, mournful song that Jude could almost place, but the memory kept sliding away from him.

The swarm of guests swayed to the music, moved by the sounds but not quite dancing. They laughed and talked and drank, the men wearing suits or tuxedos, the women in elegant gowns from a variety of time periods, here a simple piece of slinky fabric, there a construction of lace and volumes of fabric. Save for a few exceptional riots of color that proved the rule, everyone wore black or white or some combination of the two. The scene had a patina of antiquity about it like an antebellum ball, but unlike that time period, the divide between guest and servant was not a line between black and white. Jude searched the crowd, the drinking, laughing, arguing, smoking, kissing, seething crowd, and saw a variety of ethnicities, skin colors of every shade, everyone enjoying the party. There seemed to be only drinkers, only feasters, no one to mix the drinks, no one to serve the food.

Curious, Jude made his way to the back of the ballroom, slouching along the wall as he went. It was only when he reached the far side of the room that he noticed that Legba had stayed behind, leaning on his cane in the doorway.

The hallway beyond the ballroom was dark, like a tunnel underground, the noise of the celebration behind him muted to a dull pounding. As Jude's eyes adjusted, he saw slivers of light along the floor at regular intervals, closed doors, private parties. The lights winked out, one by one, as Jude approached. He came to the end of the hallway where he faced a final door, the glow beneath this one shining brightly enough that he could make out the red paint that covered it. When Jude opened the door, its rusted hinges squealing, the light spilled out, blinding him, though he felt no pain, no surge of anticipation at what might be revealed. When he could see again, he saw floral wallpaper, the pattern like that on Saturday's skull, faded and curling at the seams. A cat-shaped clock clung to the wall, sharp horns sprouting from her head, the lower half of her a sinuous, scaly curve. The felt of a poker table glared an impossibly bright green, like emerald fire, like Mourning's eyes. Memory assaulted Jude, sudden, heavy, and sharp. He remembered this room full of gods, the air thick with smoke and noise. He remembered it cold and empty, the poker table thrown to one side, a dark stain on the floor, the stink of blood and shit in the air. He remembered sitting here, getting his cards read by a fortune god. He *remembered*.

Dodge Reynaud sat at the far end of the table, fat and bald and ever smiling, playing a game of Solitaire. He wore his tie loose and his shirt unbuttoned as though proud of the gash across his throat, the slick and gaping second mouth. He dealt the cards in his hand, three at a time, with deft, sharp motions, flick, flick, flick. As Jude watched, stricken by the return of memory, memories of Dodge, memories of himself, Dodge paused to take a drink. The liquor oozed out of his wound as he swallowed, but the fortune god seemed not to mind, returning to his cards. Flick flick flick, flick flick flick. He swore, then scooped the cards together, rapping

them against the felt until they fell into order. Eyes the color of money darted up from the table, quick as the snap of his shuffling cards.

“Bout time you got here,” Dodge said.

Chapter Sixteen

The memory of fear convinced Jude of his own death. Since the moment he had climbed onto the streetcar with Legba and Saturday, Jude had noticed an odd detachment, an emotional distance from the things happening to him, but it wasn't until he saw Dodge and the flood of memories that followed that he could measure his reactions against what he should be feeling. Only then could he remember what it felt like to ride that spike of adrenaline in his bloodstream, to feel his heart racing, the tight fist of his abdomen as his stomach dropped and his balls clenched, the prick of flesh as his hair rose on end. Tongue dry, muscles tense, vision sharper, clearer, than any other time. Until that moment, until he remembered himself, he didn't know what fear was. Once he knew, once he understood that he shared a room with a murdered god and didn't feel the slightest bit afraid, Jude knew the truth.

Only the dead felt no fear.

“Pull up a chair,” Dodge said. “We'll play a few hands.” Jude slid into the seat across from the fortune god, remembering the blank hand of his own fate, the Magician card. Dodge shuffled, spreading the cards into fans in each hand, a chaotic sprawl, bridging them back into order. “What's your pleasure?” he asked. “Five card draw? Atlantis? Crazy Eights?” Jude opened his mouth, strained to speak, but despite the return of his memories, his voice still eluded him. Dodge's smile faltered for a moment then burst again into its florescent glare. “Oh, right,” he said, “the speech thing. Don't worry, it'll come. Not your real voice, 'course. Nothin with any power. Ain't nobody would stay dead, otherwise.” He laughed at his own joke and began to deal the cards, face down, to each of them. “Draw then. No need for talking.”

Jude looked at his cards, kept two and put three back on the table, face down. The power

of voice. He could remember the power his voice had held, a word to open any lock, another to command silence, words of healing or destruction. He remembered his fight with Cornell Dupree, the magics he had called up, the rage that had surged within him. And now this, humbled and gelded, playing a childish, castrated version of a game of true consequence. He was more than this. He was a magician, a demi-god. A trickle, a faint shadow of that rage he had felt smoldered in the center of him. Jude seized it, forced it into shape, into a rumble in the throat, into the sensation of speech. He wanted to ask a question, the question that he had died trying to answer, but managed only two words: "Who? Kill?" They came out as a faint moan, the sound of the wind in the trees.

Dodge let his cards slip from his hand, his smile vanishing. He stared at the table in front of him as though trying to bore a hole through it, an unreadable expression on his face. A hand rose part of the way to his neck, trembled, then dropped to clasp the sweating glass of scotch. He lifted it from the table but didn't drink, seeming to take comfort in merely the weight of it. His silence, his frailty, added fuel to Jude's smoking anger, strength to his tenuous grip on his voice. "Who, kill, you?" Jude asked again, managing a drunken, or dreaming, mutter.

Dodge's hand came down on the poker table with a sharp crack, like a gunshot, punctuated by the falling hail of broken glass. "I don't know!" he yelled. He bounced to his feet, paced the small room with quick, manic strides. He wiped his hand on his shirt, spilled liquor, Jude noticed, not blood. After a moment of thought, it made sense. What body did Dodge have to cut? What blood did he have to spill? The fortune god stopped his pacing and sat back down. He took a silver flask from his pocket, two glasses from thin air. "You want?" he asked. Jude nodded.

After a few swallows of Scotch, he turned back to Jude, smiling once more. “I don't know who did the deed,” he said. “One of the few perks of death is that you don't remember it happening.” He tipped his glass toward Jude, ice clinking against the edges. “Try it yourself. How did you die, little one?”

Jude played along, quickly finding the truth of the fortune god's words. He remembered the fight with Dupree, his rescue of Regal. He remembered the hotel room, the sex and the approaching storm. The memory of passion, of the feel of her skin beneath his fingers, was a cruel reminder of all the loss that death entailed. After that, the next thing he could recall was running through the storm, the streetcar that brought him here. Nothing existed in the space between, a blackout more complete than any alcohol induced loss.

“See?” Dodge asked. “It's a bitch, ain't it? People, gods even, everybody thinks there's gonna be answers on the other side.” He made a disgusted, dismissive noise. “It's the same all over. Just one big fucking joke.” He swept the cards together again, started to shuffle them. “So screw it all, I say. I learned a long time ago, you don't play the game you can't win.”

“Why?” Jude asked, with the muted croak of a man dying of thirst.

“Why what? Why did I get killed?” He paused, his hands frozen in the act of splitting the deck in half. “No clue, really. Everybody in that room had a reason to kill me, if you want the truth.”

“No. Why – ” Jude slapped a hand against his chest, pantomime easier than words.

“Oh. Why you?” His brow creased. “You mean, you don't know?” Dodge's smile widened, like a shark's grin, and then he began to laugh, a deep booming rumble that grew into hysterics. He started to gain control of himself, opened his mouth to speak and then sputtered his

words, off again in teary giggles, waving a hand at Jude's bewildered expression.

When he could breathe, his ample belly still quivering, he let out one last wavering chuckle and sighed. "Sorry, sorry," he said. "I thought you had figured that out already. That you haven't just, just makes this whole thing so pointless, so goddamned *funny*." His shoulders trembled, and he shook his head, stopping himself from surrendering again to his mirth. "You were there because of who you are, Jude. Because of *what* you are." He clasped his hands together and rested his elbows against the table, leaning his face against his bent wrist. "I didn't invite you to the game, little one. Your father did."

The door creaked open behind Jude. A heavy hand grasped his shoulder, carrying with it the scent of mint and tobacco.

"We must go," Legba said.

"Bye-bye!" Dodge yelled at Jude's back, laughing once again. "Tell your old man hello for me!"

Jude followed the *loa* down the hallway and towards the crowded ballroom, leaving Dodge behind, alone with his booze and his cards. He felt nothing. Why should he? He could do nothing for the fortune god. He could do nothing for himself. They were both dead. Even the semblance of anger had fled. Only the numb detachment of death remained.

Coming out of the dark into the light and the noise of the main room, Jude saw the surroundings differently than he had on the way in. Though they retained their beauty, they had also gained a funereal quality. The satin curtains and hardwood floors resembled the lining and the structure of a coffin. The brass containers of the chandelier, once vases, now seemed to be urns. The marble statues and the plaster walls and the exposed brick reflected the above ground

tombs of New Orleans cemeteries. As they slipped through a mob of dancers, Jude recognized faces and voices among the dead. Tommy, the street juggler. The bartender and the blonde that Scarpelli had murdered and made ghouls. His Aunt Sara, years wiped from the face he remembered. Then there were people he had never met, faces he had only seen in visions, the lost his talent had sought out. He knew that their joy was merely a memory, a shade of the life they had once known. He knew, too, that if he stayed, he would join them, would remember laughter as he had remembered anger. Something drew him forward, though, out into the night and onto the gravel path, which he saw now was made of crumbling bone and ash, the remains of anyone buried in a New Orleans tomb, different in function, not form, from brick ovens. The type of tomb where his body likely lay. He thought back to the grinding crush of his every footfall walking towards the house and tried to step more lightly, but to no avail.

He walked down a path of ruin, crunch-crunch-crunch, until he reached the gate between this illusion of life and the streetcar that would take him to the world beyond. He had not seen Cassandra among the spirits, knew that if she had died she would have chosen to stay here. She had loved this city, had loved Mardi Gras more than Christmas. The dead lied to themselves, staying behind here in this half-way place. Who knew what lay beyond this world? Who could say that the lie of this everlasting party was not the better choice? Jude followed Legba through the gates into the hot, wet night and the waiting streetcar. He wanted for nothing, save answers.

And yet the dead drank and laughed, and yet they danced.

The black paint of the streetcar glistened as Jude approached, a flickering, greenish iridescence like the sheen on an oil slick or a beetle's carapace. He heard arguing, raised voices, Saturday's and that of a young woman. When Jude came around the front of the car, Saturday

filled the entrance, arms folded across his chest like a bouncer barring the door. The woman outside the streetcar wore white, puffy lace sleeves and a knee-length skirt, ruffled like the bottom of a cupcake, a young woman just past her teens squeezed into a First Communion dress. She bounced on her toes, straining to reach her pointing finger into the skull-face of the *loa*, her bright red canvas sneakers untied and slipping from her heels each time she pounced forward.

“I’m ready to go!” she shouted. “I changed my mind and I want to move on!”

Something about her felt familiar, but Jude couldn’t place her until he saw the white wires trailing down from her ears, recalled the brief echo of an overheard song. “*I’m mad about you, baby,*” she’d sung, back in Celeste Dorcet’s voodoo shop. Jude didn’t know anything about her, not even her name, but knew that back when he was alive, he’d felt responsible for her death.

Legba made hushing noises as he walked up. “What is all this commotion?” he asked, his musical accent calm and quiet.

The girl dropped to her heels and turned, her eyes wide and shocked. When she saw that it was Legba who had spoken, her entire posture slumped, bent neck, drooped shoulders, a toe dug into the dirt. When she spoke, her voice matched her dress, abashed and kittenish, like that of a child. “He won’t let me on,” she said. “I want to go with you. I’m ready to go, but Baron Cemiterie won’t let me.”

“Nobody rides for free,” Saturday said, his exposed jaw clenched shut.

“But I paid already,” she said, a petulant whine. “You know I paid. How else could I have gotten here?”

Legba made a clucking noise with his tongue, cupped her smooth face in the palm of his

gnarled and knotted hand. “You chose this place, child. You. Not me, not him, not any of the Ghede. You. There is always a cost, no matter the choice. Always a cost, you understand?”

She nodded, her eyes welling up with the memory of tears. With a heaving sigh, she backed away from the streetcar, making room for them to pass. Legba nodded at Saturday, who stepped into the car and sat in the driver’s seat.

“Come, Jude,” Legba said. He gestured toward the stairs. Jude wondered what the girl’s fate would be. If she would be able to re-enter that place of joyous self-deception, carrying as she did the memory of sorrow. Or would she become one of the legends of the city, a haunting presence whose reason for weeping was lost to history?

No. No more lost. Jude shook his head, pointed at the girl and then at the doorway. Legba frowned. “You only paid for one,” he said. “Only one.” He tapped his cane against Jude’s pants pocket. “You have no more coin, remember? You can’t pay. Unless –” He touched his tie, making certain it lay flat within his vest. “You are willing to trade? To give up your seat for her?”

Jude shook his head again. How to explain? He made a circle with his fingers and pointed at Legba. Pantomimed holding a fan of cards, laying them on the table. Repeated the gesture of the circle and pointed once again at Legba.

Laughter came from within the blue-lit confines of the streetcar, Saturday’s manic giggle. “You know what he’s saying, Pops,” Saturday said. “You know you like it.”

Legba’s wrinkles spread into a sly grin, understanding the gamble that Jude was taking. The voodoo god held one of Jude’s doubloons, the sacrifice he had demanded of Jude’s wager. But the game hadn’t ended yet. Even in death, Jude’s destiny had yet to be fully revealed. He

might still win. Legba reached into his vest pocket and took out the doubloon, pressed it to his lips, and then handed it to Jude. Jude flicked it, spinning, towards Saturday's laughter.

As they all entered the streetcar, Jude, Legba, and the girl, Legba repeated his earlier words. "No matter the choice, there is always a cost. Always."

The girl, Nicole, he learned, thanked him over and over again once Saturday resumed their journey. She told him about her afterlife experience, unconcerned with his inability to reply. She had ridden with Celeste, whom she still called Mama Celestine, but despite the voodoo woman's advice, had believed that the party on Elysian Fields had been the New Orleans version of Heaven. Nothing ever changed, though. The longer the celebration went on, the harder she found it to believe in, the less she could deceive herself. And then Jude had arrived and rescued her.

After she thanked him once more she fell , watching their progress through the window. Though the storm had passed, darkness still seemed to shroud the city, as though a great shadow hung over them. Nicole turned to him and, forgetting he couldn't speak, asked him where they were going next.

Jude shrugged. He could see that they were heading back to Canal Street, but beyond that he couldn't even guess. He knew far less about these things, it seemed, than he had believed. Nicole twisted her headphone cord around her finger, winding it into a tight coil. Jude wondered if the music player still worked, or if, like everything else, it was simply a shadow, a memory of what once was. Seeing the expression on her face, recognizing in the tight line of her

lips a nervousness he couldn't feel, Jude couldn't decide if he should be grateful for the lack of fear the newly dead were granted.

Of course, even if he should, he couldn't feel gratitude, either.

The car swerved, pulling a tight turn onto Canal, facing the Mississippi. Beside him, Nicole relaxed. "Oh," she said. "The ferry, get it? We have to go across the river. Just like in Greek myth." There were, Jude knew, no tracks beneath him, not in the world of the living. The squat glass tower of the Aquarium rose out of the night to one side of them, the Riverwalk on the other.

In the driver's seat, Saturday spun a wheel just at the edge of his reach, the blue flames overhead growing brighter, crackling in their iron lanterns. A thrumming energy filled the vehicle, growing more and more intense. Nicole grasped at him, her nails digging into his arm. Her breath came in quick gasps.

Jude looked to Legba and saw that one hand gripped the seat in front of him while the other mashed his hat down onto his head. Without any warning, Saturday threw a lever forward, and the car surged at the river, sparks flying as high as the windows as metal wheels ground against cement. He and Nicole were slammed back into the seats, her arms squeezing tight around him. They slipped through a break in the concrete wall and ripped through a parking lot, bouncing up over grass, not slowing, seeming to *gain* momentum, and then they shot up the rise of the natural levee and flew into empty space, falling towards the black, churning waters of the Mississippi River. Nicole shrieked just before they hit the surface, again when the streetcar, ignoring any potential buoyancy it might have had, sank through the midnight waters of the river like a stone. Jude patted her hand, pretending concern he didn't, couldn't feel, thinking that his

deathly calm might extend to her. It seemed to help. Though she still clung to him, she only let out a slight whimper when the sensation of falling was arrested by the sudden thump the car made when it came to rest on the riverbed. And yet, she shrieked once more when Saturday pulled a handle and swung open the squealing doors, a roar of river water pouring in.

As the torrent rose around them, past their ankles, the benches, the cushioned backs, all the way to the hanging lanterns, the flames hissing out one by one, Jude decided that the absence of fear was, after all, a gift.

Chapter Seventeen

Without lungs, of course, neither Jude nor Nicole had any true need for oxygen, and so when the car filled with water, they did not drown. The dead girl, though, caught for too long in the seam between the world of the living and the world beyond, believed differently. She held her face and nose to the ceiling, trying to get one last sputtering gasp of air, then thrashed and flailed when she had to release that imagined breath. Jude waited, patient and unsympathetic as the grave, for her to realize the illogic of her fear, caged by her panicked grip on his arm. At last she relaxed, her mouth gaping open, her hair floating in medusa-like tendrils around her head.

“Oh,” she said, quiet and flat. “Okay.”

When she released his arm, Jude followed Legba and Saturday out of the streetcar, into the watery valley of the Mississippi bed. The silt-thick waters blocked out any light from above, but Jude’s eyeless spirit saw in spite of that. Catfish slithered among thin grass, their whiskers trailing from wide mouths, like Chinese dragons. The current howled around him, filling his ears and shoving him back, a hurricane wind beneath the waves. Debris littered the soft mud, car tires and planks of wood, battered musical instruments and shoes, pirogues and rowboats with shattered hulls, a child’s rocking horse, its springs so encased with rust it looked like a species of spiral coral. Though he kept his mouth closed, though he knew his senses were mere illusions, he could not avoid the cold, stale coffee taste of the brackish water, the stink of rotting things.

Legba and Saturday made their way toward a squat, hulking shape made indistinct by the wafting seaweed that covered it. Nicole floated beside him, her faith in her body strong enough to make her spirit too buoyant to walk along the murky riverbed as he and the two gods did. Jude took her hand and towed her along with him, following their guides. As they drew closer,

Jude could make out bits of what they approached, the fat box of the main structure, twin pipes, like goalposts, sprouting above. The half circle of a giant wheel bulging out of the mud like a dark sun peeking over a cold horizon. A sunken steamboat lay half submerged in the river's floor.

Jude slipped over the railing of what was once the top deck, heading for the doorway where Legba and Saturday waited. They were in the lee of the wheelhouse, the current-wind ceasing its pull. He let go of Nicole's hand. Saturday had again changed his appearance, his painted skull replaced by a dog's head, something feral in the slant of its ear and its shaggy fur.

"Down you go," Saturday said, his thick tongue lolling between his open jaws. "Down, down, down." He held out a gloved hand when Jude stepped forward. "Whoa there my brotha. Not so fast. Just cause you dead is no call to be rude. Ladies first, you feel me?" He beckoned Nicole forward with a teasing curl of his fingers. "Come on sweetheart. Let's get you settled."

Saturday led the way, descending a spiral staircase into the depths of the sunken wreck. Nicole turned to look back at Jude, a fragile smile, a pitiful attempt at bravery, and then she swam after him, her red sneakers flashing as she kicked her way down.

"It was a noble ting you did for that girl," Legba said. "I wonder if you know how much." He poked the tip of his cane into a knothole as though testing its depth. "I tink no. I tink you do not understand how much you risk." Legba's eyes rose up to meet Jude's, a deep, hungry stare. "You tink because you have died there is no more you can lose."

Beneath them, muffled but still clear, Nicole screamed, not the shrieking burst of her fear,

but a long, throaty moan. In pain. Legba held Jude back as she drew a ragged breath and cried out again. “But there are worse things, Jude,” he said. “Worse even than death.”

The stairs wound down through several levels of the boat, past short landings and closed doors. Jude rushed by without a second glance, certain somehow that Saturday had brought Nicole to the bottom, to the depths. This instinct was rewarded when he reached the final curve of the stairs, his legs splashing, impossibly, out of the water and into empty air. Each step took him further into this oddity, until he broke the surface and stepped free, as though into an air pocket that clung to the floor. He looked up at a fluid ceiling, still rippling from where he had passed through. Part of him wondered at the purpose of this magic, but he ignored his curiosity and followed a pair of wet sneaker prints down a hallway and into a vast room.

Crates of various sizes lay in disarray in what was once the steamboat’s cargo hold. Jude stood on a catwalk that hugged the walls, with two steep staircases descending to the floor, one next to Jude, one on the far side of the hold. That same rippling pool, that same defiance of physics, covered the ceiling in here, flowing toward a thick column of water that fell, roaring, frothing, gushing, whirling, and then vanished into a ragged hole in the center of the floor. Jude’s breath, or the memory of his breath, misted in the frigid air. On the far side of the pillar, their images distorted by the water’s refraction, Saturday crouched over Nicole, who knelt, slumped back onto her heels. Beyond them were two ornate thrones, far too large for any human, carved of a single, massive piece of wood.

Knowing he had no body to fear for, Jude hurled himself off the catwalk, not falling as he

expected, but floating in a smooth glide to the floor, as though the cargo hold were still filled with water, or wings had unfurled that he hadn't known he'd had. Jude hit the ground running, reaching the column of water just as Saturday faced the empty thrones, raising something red and wet above his dog's-head. Gleaming balancing scales stood between him and the massive seats, metal plates hanging from thin, delicate chains. Nicole, still on her knees, had her back to Saturday and whatever absent deity he made sacrifice to, holding up a mirror as though trying to find something in its reflection. A dark stain spread across her chest, down among the folds of her white dress. Jude took a step forward, uncertain. Though tears still lined her cheeks, she smiled. Jude looked back at Saturday, at his hands.

He held a human heart.

Words came from his dog's muzzle, a harsh guttural language that Jude didn't know. The heart steamed in his hands, still warm from the heat of Nicole's imagined body. Saturday placed Nicole's heart on one side of the scale with a reverent, almost fearful tenderness. Then, licking the blood from the fingers of one hand, he pulled the pin that held the balancing mechanism in place. A single feather lay on the other plate. It shimmered with vibrant, shifting colors, glowed as though lit by an inner fire.

The scales dipped and rose, back and forth, finally coming to rest with the feather weighing heavier than Nicole's heart. The dead girl began to laugh, her face shining, literally, a beacon of radiant joy. She stood, almost too bright to look at, handed Saturday the mirror, and moved to the side, her trial complete. Something about the scene tugged at Jude's memory, the heart and the scale and the feather, but he couldn't quite place it. It felt, comfortingly, like a normal forgetting, not the blank absence that had separated the dead from their own identity.

And then Saturday returned his attention to the thrones, his dog's head turned in profile to Jude, and the image clicked into place. Anubis. The Feather of Truth. The funerary rites of Ancient Egypt. Hadn't Saturday said something about Thoth wanting to turn New Orleans into a new Egypt? He had. He'd mocked the desire. What then, was all *this*, what was Saturday's role in the city? If he was Anubis, why did he work with Papa Legba?

Saturday, or whomever he was, turned his dog's, no, his *jackal's* head, unleashing a feral grin in Jude's direction. He crooked a gore-stained finger, beckoning. "Come on, podna," he said. "Your turn."

Jude moved to where the god directed, floating as though in a dream. He turned his back to the thrones, facing the rushing waterfall. A sense of vertigo swept over him, an instinctive recoil from the vast depths that seemed to tease him forward with a hungry gravity. He didn't realize he'd stepped closer to the rushing plunge of water until Saturday stopped him with a hand on his chest.

Jude had time to glance down, curious, and then a claw, bent and dagger-sharp, tore through to the center of him. He heard the rending of cloth, the wet suck of ripping flesh, saw the spurt of dark blood, even smelled the coppery scent of it, which caused a fleeting thought of vampires, but he felt no pain. Jude sank to his knees, believing it was required of him. Saturday handed him a thick slab of stone, obsidian polished to a mirror's shine, then swiped with his claw again and again, making a shredded mess of Jude's chest.

Jude saw one of the god's eyelids flicker, the briefest suggestion of a wink, and then Saturday shouted over Jude's head to the empty thrones. "Hey boss," he yelled, "this one's got no heart!" Jude heard a rumble, like far off thunder, a reply just at the edge of his hearing. He

held up the mirror, as he had seen Nicole doing, and aimed it at the thrones.

Smoke rolled off the obsidian, black and stinking of a pyre. The reflection showed two seated figures, male and female, or one that shifted back and forth, Jude couldn't be sure which. The man wore thick robes and sandals, and held a spear in one hand and a short scepter in the other. A frown glowered beneath a bushy, curled beard, and a withered, puckered hole marked where of one of his eyes should be. A sickly green pallor clung to his skin. The woman wore a long, sleeveless, red dress that hugged her body. Jude couldn't be sure whether she had two arms or four, or whether it was shadows or frostbite that stained her legs black. Despite the cold paleness of her cheeks and the animal skull she wore like a helmet, she smiled, genuine and bright.

At his feet, or hers, or theirs, three dogs lounged, or one dog with three heads. Two ravens perched above them, one on each throne, or just one stood atop a helm of black metal shaped in the likeness of a raven's head. In the instant it took Jude to take all this in, he also saw that he or she or they were speaking, could hear the words once he could see the movement of their lips. They spoke as one, their voices mingled together, the cold scrape of a closing tomb door, a lily petal against a cheek, harmonious opposites.

“ . . . no choice,” they said. “Send him to the Devourer.”

Without ceremony or protest or a word of regret, Saturday plucked Jude from the floor and shoved him into the crush of falling water. Jude gasped, forgetting in that instant that he could neither drown nor fall to his death. Far, far below him, through such black depths that anything should be rendered indistinct, Jude saw something that inspired fear even in the dead. A fear not born of the body, but a piercing dread of the soul. In that abyss, Jude saw something

formless, something of many forms. Something that hungered, that personified hunger.

Something at the bottom of all things. Something with *teeth*.

It is after the storm, weeks, maybe a month, maybe more. Jude can't be sure. Time has gone sticky since the world ended, the monks' holy schedule dividing the hours, creating a sameness that he had to leave the abbey to escape. He is in the back of a stranger's pickup truck with two other men and pallets of water and MRE's, catching a ride from Baton Rouge into, he hopes, New Orleans. He left days ago and has already failed twice to get back to the city. To get back home.

His days since the storm have been spent caring for the evacuees that came to the abbey for shelter, and clearing fallen trees, working himself to exhaustion. He has avoided his mother as much as possible, her calmness the surest indication of her madness Jude has ever known. He has avoided news, or questions, or thoughts of Cassandra.

Jude leans his head back and closes his eyes, letting the sunlight beating down on him turn his vision red through his eyelids. The wind of the truck's passage steals away the sweat, cools him, though he can feel the heat baking the top of his head, and his exposed flesh. Moments of the past weeks return to him, images as untethered as his thoughts have become. The little Volkswagen crushed beneath a fallen pine, the wound left in the earth where its roots where torn free. His cell phone, useless since the storm anyway, finally dying, the charger left at home, no electricity even if he'd had one. His mother, cackling when the power went out in the night, rushing outside while the storm howled and raged, screaming, her voice stolen by the

wind, a single word over and over again, a curse, or a name. The moment he admitted to himself he could feel the loss of the entire city all the way across Lake Pontchartrain, like a dark bonfire on the horizon. The moment when he accepted that the drink in his hand was there to drown that knowledge, to empty himself of it, then finished the drink anyway.

Jude reaches into the ice chest beside him, the cold slush at the bottom soaking into his thick work gloves in the second it takes him to fish out a beer. One of the men sharing the truck bed – Jude can't remember if they've told him their names – sees him and says something Jude can't hear over the wind. Jude reaches past the shrink wrapped jugs of water and hands him the glistening bottle, nearly missing with the truck's jostling over potholes and swerving around debris. As Jude gets himself another beer, the man watches Jude's gloved hand dip back into the water, shrugs and drinks, looking back out over the interstate, empty save for them.

Jude is tired and dirty, an unwashed, stinking dirty, and he doesn't care if the other man thinks him strange. All he cares about is home.

They enter the city, their cargo a limited passport. The city is still cut off, isolated and quarantined so its poisoned waters will not spread, excommunicated for the heresy of its despair. Jude waits for the men in uniform to get distracted by the ice chest of beer, the ice more a prize than the booze, before he slips away. Though he has his satchel with him, he is terrified by the thought of using any magic, as befuddled by drink and emptiness as he feels, as pregnant with darkness as the air is.

It takes him the rest of that day and through the night to reach the home he shares, shared, with Cassandra, trudging along sidewalks where he can, hitching rides in canoes and rowboats where the water blocks his way. He alternates drinking from bottles of water or liquor that he

takes from his satchel, dehydration and sobriety equally dangerous in this apocalyptic landscape, piled high with the detritus of flooded homes, ruined carpets and hacked up furniture, metal and glass and wood, twisted, shattered, broken. Every time he believes the stink has beaten his sense of smell to death, Jude catches another uniquely foul odor, rotting seafood from a burst garbage bag, decay and filth in the swirling wake of a passing boat, its trawling motor burping through the flood waters, a corpse, its legs sticking out from beneath a sheet too small to cover it. The silence created by the absence of traffic and electricity gives his straining ears tinnitus, an insistent whine just at the edge of his hearing, a flatlined heart monitor.

Jude knows from the x and numbers spray painted on the door, like a modern voodoo *veve*, that no one was inside his home when the National Guard searched it, knows as soon as he sets eyes on it that it is empty, abandoned. That wherever Cassandra has gone, she stayed away. He pulls one of the gloves off, wincing at the prickling along the naked flesh, tattoo needles of loss buzzing along his palms and fingertips. As though drawn by a magnet, Jude reaches out and touches the paint, right at the center of the x, at the point where the lines cross.

A multitude of voices whirls around him, sobbing, whispering, screaming, pouting indignation, cynical indifference, suicidal monotone, all of them asking or demanding or begging for the same thing: to be found. He sees faces, in profile, close up, smiling, brooding, half hidden by shadow, in high definition color or charcoal sketch or oil paints or a child's crayon scrawl, knows each and every name for the fleeting instant that their face dominates his vision. Scents drive up through his nostrils and into his brain, perfumes and baking bread and gasoline and fresh clipped grass and deep fryer oil and that ineffable, delicate, individual smell of a person's skin, so many at once that he chokes and gags, but still they come. Invisible hands

touch him, tug at his wrists to hurry him, caress his cheek, slide along his shoulder as if to guide him, shove at his back as if to compel him.

The lost faces spin, he spins, everything spins, faster and faster, spiraling down to a single, dark point, an emptiness, a nothing, its circumference marked by a circle where things cease to be, a vacuum, an even horizon. Jude looks down into that darkness at the center of swirling loss and sees the shape of a hurricane, thinks that they have gotten the name wrong. It is not the eye of the storm. It is its mouth, its gut.

Its hunger.

Jude fell through darkness for a tiny piece of forever. Of course, words like “fall” and “dark” were constructions of a consciousness still rooted in the flesh, still concerned with bodily motion and the perception of light. He began, once he could understand his surroundings past his sublime terror, to experience heat and pressure, as though his soul was being squeezed in a giant, hot fist. Tighter and tighter, hotter and hotter, far past what flesh could endure, his body crushed and burnt to a fine, dry powder, the dust to which he must return. He fell through darkness and pain, oblivion his only remaining hope.

Pieces of him began to crumble, began to burn and flake away. Memories went first, then thoughts. He lost bits of his personality, the passage of time. He lost his desires, first complex ones, like wishing things had turned out differently, that he had gotten answers before the end, then simpler ones, then desire itself. He no longer questioned his fate, no longer had the capacity to hope for his agony to end. Finally his sense of self vanished. Nothing separated him from the

darkness, his pain was not his, because no *him* existed. All that existed was darkness and pressure, heat and pain.

Darkness, pressure. Heat. Pain.

And then, for one eternal instant, nothing.

Chapter Eighteen

Jude returned, to self, to identity, to pain and darkness and heat, to flesh, in an explosive moment of conception. His heart seized in his chest, his lungs stretched and burned, his joints snapped and his muscles tore. He drew in one ragged breath, hot and thin, and a howl burst from his throat, pain and fear and rage and life pouring out of him. Wood splintered, and he fell, sliding from his back onto his side, scraping his cheek against rough stone. He gasped, and struggled, and his first thought was that he was encased. Entombed. He spit out the word Dodge had taught him, the magic that meant “open” and was rewarded with light, with cool, fresh air.

He wriggled headfirst, arms either pinned or numb at his sides, soaked and crying, through the door he had opened, out of heat and darkness and into the light, reborn into the world in the middle of a cemetery, pushed out of a womb of marble and granite. Jude lay on his back in the sunlight, arms spread wide, and wept. He gave thanks, not knowing or caring whom he thanked, only able to repeat the words over and over again. Eventually, his breathing and his heartbeat slowed, and the stiff ache that covered his entire body settled to a slow throb. Jude laughed and wept a little more, and then a deep and abiding calm settled over him.

A shape occluded the sun, too quick and deliberate to be a cloud. Jude squinted against the glare, eyes burning and slow to adjust to the light, and laughed again. He imagined a tourist, or some funeral worker, seeing a tomb door swing open and a man come slithering out.

“I know this looks strange,” Jude said. “I know what you’re thinking. But I’m not a zombie.” He realized even as he said it that he might be lying; he had no memory of how he had escaped oblivion. For all he knew, he might well be the walking dead.

Jude’s vision cleared, revealed the crisp lines of a well-tailored tuxedo, pristine white

gloves, and a floral-painted skull. “Don’t be ashamed of it, sweetheart,” Saturday said, “some of my best friends are zombies.”

Jude groaned and rose, staggering, to his feet. “I should’ve known,” he said. Every movement cracked one or more of his joints and made the simple act of standing sound like breaking twigs for kindling.

“Yeah, you shoulda. Story of your fucked up life, ain’t it?” Saturday chuckled and called over his shoulder. “Hey, Sal! I found him.”

“I’m not, am I?”

Saturday tilted his head to the side, reminding Jude of the dog’s head he’d had beneath the river. “Not what?”

“A zombie.” The words felt foolish leaving his lips, and yet Jude felt the hair on his neck raise as soon as he said it, afraid of the answer.

Saturday tsked. “Now Jude, we talked about this. You supposed to be figurin out who you are, not forgettin what you are. You ain’t got the time to be taking steps back, boy.”

As Jude opened his mouth to reply, a shadow passed over the sun, accompanied by the rustling of wings. He saw, once again, the shape in the night that had killed Tommy and Father Gus and Celeste and Nicole. His stomach tightened and his fists clenched, a word of fire rising in place of his answer to Saturday. Before he could articulate the magic, though, a black bird the size of a cat fluttered down and perched on the skull-headed god’s shoulder.

Jude gagged on the power rising from his belly. He turned and spat the taste of cayenne pepper and bile onto the gravel. A thin curl of smoke rose from his mouth.

“Kinda twitchy, isn’t he?” the bird said.

Saturday sighed and tilted his hand back and forth. “Little bit,” he said. “He all we got, though.” He lifted his jaw in Jude’s direction. “You got any clue what’s going on?”

The bird spoke first. “Fuck no he doesn’t. Look at his face. Smart money says he forgot his thrice-be-damned name down there. If he can walk and talk at the same time without shitting himself I’ll be amazed.”

“I’ll take that bet, little raven,” Saturday said. “He about as smart as a dry turd, but he tougher than he look.”

Despite the crystalline blue sky arcing overhead, despite the simple pleasure of filling his lungs with the familiar, humid air of New Orleans, thick with the scents of growth and bloom, despite the depth and complexity of feeling that churned within him, so unlike the numb sterility of death, despite his inarticulate joy at his return to life, despite all of that, the skeleton and the raven talking about him like he wasn’t there began to piss Jude off. A flush rose across his skin, a heat that had nothing to do with the summer air. “I’m standing right here,” he said. His protest went ignored, even after he repeated it. They hashed out the details of their wager, gambling on whether Jude’s resurrection would grant him anything other than a second death. Jude felt the magic raging within him, the arrested spell still burning at the back of his throat, an explosion building in his stomach. Before, he would have pushed the magic, the rage, down, would have forced himself to be calm and patient. But he stood a stone’s throw away from a tomb with his name on it. What did he really have to lose?

“Hush!” he yelled, the gentle word coming out as a brief roar, harsh in his throat and shaking the air like a thunderclap. Saturday’s teeth and the raven’s beak both clicked as they snapped closed. His pulse still throbbing in his head, Jude closed his eyes and took a deep

breath, enjoying the momentary silence. Even as it occurred to him that he had used magic on a god, it also occurred to him that it had *worked*. He smiled and opened his eyes.

Somehow, Saturday's fleshless skull managed to convey amazement. Jude ignored him, and the raven as well, deciding to see how much he could play out this trick. He brushed the dirt away from his clothes as best he could, patted his pockets to see what he'd been buried with. He found only the envelope Saturday had given him with the strange playing card inside. The image had changed. Now it showed Jude, wearing the same suit he now wore, hanging upside down from a tree, his arms bound behind his back. The print at the bottom, which had read "The Magician," now said "The Traitor." The image ran a cold finger of dread up his spine. Jude slipped it back into the envelope and slapped the thick paper against his leg.

"Yes," Jude said. "That just happened. My name is Jude Duboisson. I might be half-mortal, but I'm half-god, too, and I'm starting to figure out what that means. I was dead, and now I'm not, and when you two can speak again, I'd appreciate some answers. Sound good?"

They both agreed, Saturday with a slow bow of his head, the bird with a bobbing, nervous gesture. Jude was surprised at how easily he read the animal's body language. He snapped his fingers, breaking the spell.

"Not bad," Saturday said. "Not bad." He reached up and poked the raven. "You lose."

The bird hopped from his shoulder, gliding to the outstretched hand of a stone angel. "Yeah, yeah, bite me," he said as he settled his weight on the carved finger. He dug his beak between his feathers, the motion somehow as rude as a middle finger. He aimed his sharp face in Jude's direction. "My name is Salvatore. Go ahead and call me Sal, everybody does."

Jude wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. Somewhere in the

cemetery, a jazz band played, slow and solemn. Jude wondered what they had played at his funeral, wondered if he'd even had one. "And you are?"

"I'm a raven, for now."

"No, I can see that. I mean what are you doing here?"

"I'm here to keep an eye on you."

Not, Jude noticed, to protect him, or to guide him. To watch him. Jude leaned against the hot granite of a tomb and ran a hand across his beard. Hunger rumbled, a loud and shifting thing, in his stomach. Saturday lit a cigar, smoke making a thin haze around his floral-painted skull. Things always had to be difficult, evasions and word games and pissing contests. Since Jude had received the invitation to Dodge's card game, he'd only understood half of what anyone said to him, feeling like everyone was fucking with him, playing games with his mind. Fine, he could play too. Moving on instinct and the simmering remnants of the magic that had silenced a god, Jude launched himself at the bird, moving faster than he would have believed. His hands closed on feathers and fragile bones, a fluttering, delicate heart.

Sal's needle sharp beak darted at him, stabbed his arms and hands three times, four, in the instant it took to snatch him from his perch and throw him into the tomb Jude had crawled from when he awoke. Jude slammed the door shut and held his weight against it, fueled by frustration and a kind of terrible joy.

Sal yelled from within the stone box, curses and flapping wings. Jude looked at the cuts on his hands, stinging but minor. Saturday had dropped his cigar, was bent double, shaking with laughter. Through the granite door, Jude heard shifting, claws scratching, and then something much heavier than a bird threw its weight against the door, nearly pushing it open. Jude shoved

back, then spoke the word that meant “closed”, shutting the lock with a sharp click. Whatever Sal had become howled, hurled itself against the door over and over again, and then, panting, fell silent.

“Hey Saturday,” Jude said, nearly shouting so he could be certain Sal would hear. “You know why we can reuse tombs in New Orleans?” The skull-headed god was nodding, still laughing, holding up a hand for Jude to stop. “Because it’s so hot in there, they’re like a ovens, a slow cooker.” He banged his hand against the tomb, hard enough to bruise. “You hear me in there? You’re in a crematorium, you fuck. You want to come out, you’re going to give me some straight goddamn answers.”

Moments ticked by as Sal tried to call Jude’s bluff then gave one last, half-hearted thump against the door. He whined, low and whistling, like a dog. “Okay,” Sal said. “Okay, just let me out.”

Jude opened the door and a long, lean shape slipped to the ground, sandy-coated, like some wild desert beast. Sal’s tail was tucked between his legs. His ears lay flat against his head. His tongue hung from his muzzle.

“Told you he was tougher than he looked,” Saturday said.

“Go fuck a corpse,” Sal said, settling back on his haunches. “Seriously.”

Jude gave him a minute to recover, remembering exactly how hot the inside of that tomb was, and then he cleared his throat to get Sal’s attention. “Sent by who, to keep an eye on me how?”

“It’s so you don’t run,” he said. “It’s so you keep your side of the bargain.” Sal went on to explain how, when Saturday had held Jude’s soul over the Devourer, Nicole had begged Death

to give him another chance. She had wagered her own heart that Jude would return to face the scales himself. Sal, usually an underworld spirit, had been given this temporary form so he could follow Jude to insure that he returned in the appointed time, that he didn't just take his resurrection and run.

“How long do I have?” Jude asked.

Sal looked up at him with liquid black eyes, then dropped his head to stare at his paws. “You have as long as you were on the other side,” he said. “That’s how these things work, you know? It has to balance. However long you were dead, that’s how long you have to live.”

“How long, Sal?”

“Three days,” he said. “You have until dawn on Sunday.”

“You,” Jude said, pointing at Saturday. “You did this.”

Saturday shrugged, spoke around the cigar clamped between his teeth. “You could say that. No need to thank me.”

“Thank you? *Thank* you? I ought to shove that cigar up your bony ass!”

“Easy there, brah.” He took his cigar from his mouth, tapped some ash from the tip. “You here, right? Instead of bein nothin at all, right? So yeah, I done you a favor.” He shook his head. “That was a neat trick, shuttin me up. Impressive, even. But don’t think for a second it means you talk to me like your podna there. You got no idea what you into, no idea who and what I am.” He leaned in close to Jude, smoke filling the slits of his nose, his cavernous mouth. Something immense lurked in the absences of his eyes. “I play with the boys and I play with the ladies, but gettin laid is a world away from gettin fucked, you understand? I ain’t grab my ankles for nobody. Nobody. We clear?”

Jude swallowed against the constriction of his throat. He nodded. "Yeah. We're clear."

"Good," he said. "Now. Why don't you tell me why you still carryin that letter round with you?"

"What letter?"

Saturday sighed. He leaned down and plucked the thick envelope from the grass where Jude had dropped it, the cryptic message he had given Jude after Dodge's funeral. With one finger, he pried open its bottom seam, its folds curling open like an origami blossom. When it spread flat, a tight scrawl of handwriting covered the inside. He handed it to Jude, who looked immediately to the signature. Dodge Reynaud.

Saturday looked down at Sal, the dog's shape at his feet. "Told you he wasn't real bright," he said.

The letter read:

*Jude,
It's one thing to know that even the gods can die . . . altogether another to be the one whose number's up. If you're reading this, then nothing I tried worked, and I'm dead. I'd say dead and gone, but you know how New Orleans works, and if you don't, you will. It's funny, I'm older than this city, almost twice as old, but even in the state she's in, she dictates how the afterlife works. Ain't that a bitch.
There are some things I'm going to miss, I'm just realizing. Some things that are purely outside the grasp of the life-impaired. Getting drunk, for one. Long, long naps. Walking through the rain, that happens often enough in this city. I'll probably even miss the damn heat, after awhile. Sex. I must be really screwed up if I'm going to miss the rain before I'll miss getting laid.*

I guess what I'm saying is, don't take it for granted. Not one second of it. Because as shitty as life can be, I'm pretty sure it's better than the alternative. There's going to be a hurricane of a shit-storm if what I've seen comes to pass, and you're going to have to toe the line. You'll be at that card game, you'll see the bastards that are looking to take over, and you need to find the one that doesn't belong, the one that killed me. Because that's the one that's going to destroy this city if they get the chance.

Oh, and Jude, when you read this . . . don't trust anyone. Not even me. Death really changes a guy.

Dodge Reynaud

Jude stood outside the door to his hotel room in the Lowe's, hesitant, his hand resting on the doorknob. The room where he had died. He remembered, now, those few dark moments, the figure silhouetted against the window, the raging thunderstorm behind it. The cold, impossibly strong fingers, being forced to vomit up the pearl, the weakness, the fading light. The taste of dirt on his murderer's fingers. Whoever killed him had probably killed Regal, had probably killed Dodge and all the rest.

Sal sat beside him, his canine ears perked forward. "What's the hold up?" he asked. "You know nobody's in there." Calls to his room from the front desk had gone unanswered, even though, the woman had assured him, Jack Crow, Jude's alias, was still checked in. Which forced Jude to ask himself how his body had been discovered, how it had gotten from the hotel room to the cemetery, but those questions weren't what kept him standing in the hallway.

Someone had known where he was, even after he'd hidden. Someone wanted him dead. He doubted that the simple matter of dying would have changed either of those two facts. Sal let out an impatient sigh. "Are you sure you can do this?" Jude asked him.

"This shape ain't just for the pretty face," he said.

"Fair enough." Jude opened the lock with a word of magic and stepped inside, the dog spirit at his heels. The suite had been freshly cleaned, bleach and lemon scents heavy in the air, probably to mask the stench of shit and puke Jude had left behind when he'd died. Jude's duffel bag of clothes sat next to the desk, his few remaining bits of magic strewn across the nightstand, the cross that Regal had insisted he take off. His cell phone lay on the desk, its battery drained. He plugged it into the charger. Sal went immediately to the bed, his nose pressed to the carpet, sniffing audibly. He hopped up onto the mattress, leaving dirty paw-prints on the white comforter.

"The maid is going to kill me," Jude said.

"Somebody sure did. Fucked you, then really fucked you. Least you got your rocks off before you went, hey?"

"What are you talking about?"

Sal thumped down to the carpet, yawned wide. "Way I figure it, the most recent scents in this room are the cleaning lady's, yours, and one other one, something really old and complicated. In that bed I smell screwin and dyin, so unless you were boning the cleaning lady, the one that did you is the one that did you, you get me?"

Regal? No. No way. "Can't be," Jude said. "I don't believe it." He fell into the plush chair in the corner, flooded with an emotion he could not name. It felt a little bit like dying.

“You said the scent is complicated, right?”

It was a little disconcerting, but also amusing, to see a dog roll his eyes. “Yeah.”

“So could it be that you’ve gotten it wrong? Regal’s just a magician, just a mortal with a little magic. Maybe you’re just mixing up her scent with that big, complicated thing. Or maybe somebody messed with her smell to try to hide her from me. That’s possible, right?”

“Look—”

“It’s possible, right?”

Sal flopped onto his side, his head resting on his paws. His stomach inflated, and then he let out a big, pitiful sigh. “It’s possible. You’re lying to yourself like a damn fool, but yeah, it’s possible.”

Jude leaned forward. “Okay. That’s all I’m saying. Okay.” His pulse raced. Could Regal be a part of this? She had brought him the invitation to the game, she had brought him to see Mourning. She had been a part of whatever Dupree and Scarpelli were planning. Against her will, true, but Dupree had wanted her blood for something. He shook his head as though trying to shake his mind silent. *Find the one that doesn’t belong*, Dodge’s letter said. “How long do I have?”

Sal rose to his haunches, his brow furrowed. “You kidding? You’ve got three days. Less, now. Saturday wasn’t kidding. You really are fucking thick.”

“No, I mean until the scent goes, you know, cold, or whatever.”

Sal laughed. “Don’t work that way. Scent as old and powerful as this one, I could track three years from now.”

“Good,” Jude said. “Because I’ve got some people I want to see first.” He stood,

shoving his bits of magic into his suit pockets. The pearl, he noticed, had vanished, probably caught up in the sheets when the maid washed them. Good riddance.

“You uh, going like that?”

Jude looked down at his suit, dirty and rumpled. “Yeah, why?”

“I know you’re on a deadline and all, ‘scuse the pun, but you were in a tomb for three days, Jude.” Sal lifted his nose to the air and gave a couple of delicate, poignant sniffs. “You’re a little ripe.”

After a shower and a change of clothes, as they waited for the elevator, Sal paced back and forth, his tail curled and bobbing with every step. Jude stared into the distance, making lists in his head of questions and people he needed to see. He felt calm and strong, vital and alive in a way he hadn’t felt in a long time. His thinking wasn’t smeared by alcohol or a hangover for the first time since the storm, and its absence gave everything a razor’s clarity. He had to push down his rage, his hunger for revenge and his fear at being thrown back to the Devourer’s oblivion. Just as he decided where to go first, Sal cleared his throat.

“We got a problem,” the death spirit said.

“What’s that?”

“It ain’t here.” Sal started pacing again, his nose to the ground.

“What isn’t?”

“The scent, the one you want me to follow. It ain’t here. Not exactly.”

A soft chime announced the elevator, and its doors slid open. Jude locked eyes with a

man about his own age, clean-shaven, in a business suit. He looked happy, confident, like he had never encountered something beyond his control. The other man looked away, unable to face something he saw in Jude's eyes. The doors slid closed.

"What are you telling me?" Jude asked. "You said you could follow it three years from now, remember?"

"Look, this ain't as easy as it sounds, okay? You think smells got little tags on em that go, 'Oh, me first'? I got no idea what smells happen when. All I know is, this old stink is all over that room, and it's barely here by the elevators. It's much stronger that way." He pointed, with his muzzle, towards the stairs.

Of course. Jude knew which way Sal would follow the scent before they even got to the stairwell. Up, all the way up, to the roof. He saw, once again, that shadow winging overhead in the darkness. Wings.

On the roof, amid the glare and the fierce winds, Sal trotted to the ledge and looked up. "That way," he said. Regal couldn't fly. Jude felt a surge of relief, then of concern. If Regal hadn't killed him, what had happened to her?

"Can you follow it?" he asked.

The dog snorted. "Course I can. Might take a while, though." He opened his mouth, first a yawn, then a gaping stretch, his jaws straining with the effort. His sides heaved, and he coughed and hacked, a dark shape wriggling in the back of his throat. Sal spat it free, and then sank to the tar paper, deflating in a fluid droop, suddenly nothing but fur and teeth. The dark thing shook itself and stood. Revealed itself as the raven shape Sal had worn when Jude first met him. "You gonna be okay?" Sal asked.

Jude nodded, poked the empty skin with the toe of his sneaker. “Does that hurt?”

Sal flapped his wings, drying the dog’s saliva from his feathers. “Nah. Hurts like a bitch getting the dog out of the bird, though.” Jude laughed. Sal bounced up to the ledge and spread his tail feathers in a wide fan. “I’ll find you when I got something,” he said. Before Jude could answer, could ask how Sal would know where he was, the raven leaped into the hot air, his wings snapping taut, and slipped into the wind.

Books covered every surface of the small office. The shelves, of course, but books lay on the desk, stacked with their pages splayed open, piled on the floor and on the two small chairs; they even lined the windowsill, their pages yellowed by the sunlight filtering through the blinds. The aroma of dusty paper and coffee permeated the air, cut by the briny odor of soy sauce. Owls stared from every corner, framed photographs and paintings on the walls, figurines and paperweights on the shelves, bookends on the crowded desk, more decorative than providing any attempt at order, a stuffed owl with a clock embedded in its chest balanced on top of an ancient, stained coffee maker. Classic rock music played from a plastic owl, its eyes glowing blue, an mp3 player’s cord plugged into its neck. The computer on the desk looked a little bit newer than Jude remembered, but otherwise the room hadn’t changed since he’d been here last, almost a year before the storm. He’d been taking courses toward a criminal justice degree, thinking with his gift, he would excel in the world of law enforcement, and found himself in a comparative mythology class. He’d dropped it halfway through the semester, dropped out entirely, actually, when he’d started working full time for Mourning.

Behind him, a familiar voice said, “Office hours were over some time ago. You’d better have a good reason for interrupting my lunch.” Brickey Lequire smiled when he saw Jude’s face, his clipped gray beard splitting to reveal his tight, uneven teeth. “Jude, my boy, what a surprise! Come in, come in.” He motioned Jude into the room, reached past him and shifted a tower of books from one chair to another so he could sit down. “Where did you disappear to?”

Brickey’s voice was deep and echoing, as though it resonated in the cavern of his skull before leaving his lips. For a man so large, taller than Jude and as thick as an oak stump, he maneuvered in his tight office as though on dancer’s feet, settled into his own chair in a smooth glide. He wore a pair of gray slacks and a pressed dress shirt, the sleeves rolled back from hands that looked massive and solid enough to crack stones. Jude was only slightly surprised the professor remembered his name. The man remembered *everything*.

“Financial aid stuff,” Jude said. “Then the storm. You know.” Brickey frowned and nodded. Jude hated lying to him, but he couldn’t exactly tell him the truth. Showing up in his office put him in enough danger.

“I do, unfortunately. You coming back?” He opened a plastic container of sushi and snapped apart a pair of chopsticks. “Forgive the manners, but I wasn’t kidding about lunch.” He doused his meal with soy sauce, plucked a roll from his tray, his gentle, almost dainty, gestures hard to reconcile with his bulk. Chewing quickly, as though he couldn’t spare the time, he spoke between swallowing and popping another into his mouth. “What can I do for you?”

Jude recited the speech he had rehearsed, painted himself as an aspiring screenwriter, working on an idea for a grown-up Harry Potter. He told the professor the circumstances of Dodge’s murder as though they were fiction, the card game among the gods, the murder of a

fortune god and the need to find the killer. He listed the participants in the game: a vampire, a faerie, an angel, a voodoo *loa*, and an Egyptian god. He described himself, in the vaguest of terms, as a kind of supernatural detective who had to solve the case. While he spoke, Brickey finished eating, leaned back in his chair and stroked his beard as he listened. Over the professor's shoulder, the owl's eyes pulsed with a blue light, finished a Bon Jovi song and moved on to The Animals.

“And I came to see you,” Jude said, “because I’m stuck. I had an idea for who the killer should be, but I’m not sure it’ll work anymore. I thought if you had any opinions, or if you saw any connections, it might help me out.”

Brickey stared up at the ceiling, the dying fluorescent bulb, his lips pursed. “It’s an interesting question,” he said at last. “Particularly since, as you’ve said, you’re staying away from the Hollywood conventions with the vampire. And Thoth—” He made a noise, as though something had occurred to him, and spun his chair to his bookshelf. Barely glancing at the titles, he pulled a volume free, something old and bound in simple green hardback and let it fall open to a bookmark. Jude leaned forward, trying to read the chapter heading upside down. Brickey took his glasses from his shirt pocket and slipped them on, peering at the book in his hands briefly before spinning it around for Jude.

“There,” he said. “Have I caught on to your trick?” The words beneath his finger read ‘Hermes Trismegistus’. Brickey flashed a mischievous smile, like a child who knew where the Christmas presents were hidden. “Hermes ‘Thrice-Great,’ right?” When Jude didn’t answer, he continued. “It’s the syncretic link of Thoth and Hermes, the idea that these two deities are just different names for the same being. Pretty clever, Jude.”

“Syncretic?”

Brickey tugged his glasses off and stuck the tip of the earpiece into his mouth. “Some gods, or at least, the idea and the stories behind them, live and they die. We remember them, but we don’t really believe in them anymore. But some of them stay with us. They evolve, become something else. Think of voodoo. That entire system of belief became syncretic in nature when it met up with Roman Catholicism. The saints and martyrs became analogues for their own deities.”

Jude thought of Saturday and the way he shifted forms, sometimes a voodoo *loa*, sometimes something else. He thought of Mourning.

“Now,” the professor continued, “I only thought of it because you said the murder victim was a fortune god. I imagine that must be significant. So if I’m right about that, then Legba’s inclusion makes sense as well, as he too is a god of fortune. Thoth is not commonly associated with either luck or prophecy. The focus is more on his invention of magic and writing. But through Hermes, he too is a god of both prophecy and luck.”

A tingle crept along Jude’s scalp and down the back of his neck. Fortune gods. That made so much sense, seemed almost embarrassingly simple. They’d even been playing a game of fate. What prize had they been playing for, though? And which of them had killed Dodge? *Find the one who doesn’t belong*, Dodge had said. “What about the others?” Jude asked.

“Well, if you follow the etymology of the word fairy, from Middle English to Old French to Late Latin, you get back to the word *fata*, which means, more or less, fate. So the fae, or the wee folk, or whatever you want to call them, are, ultimately, beings of fate, of fortune. So that fits. The other two, though, are a bit trickier.” Brickey turned to his coffee pot, poured

something as dark and viscous as tar into a chipped and stained mug decorated with sun icons. He slurped, eyes squeezed shut. “Stuff could wake the dead,” he said. “Would you care for any?”

Jude laughed, shook his head no. He might need it in three days, though, if he couldn’t find Dodge’s killer, if he couldn’t find his heart. His thoughts spun while Brickey sipped at his coffee and pondered. What had happened to Regal? Why had his father invited him to Dodge’s game? What did a vampire and an angel have to do with gods of fortune? Where did he fit into all of this? Why had he been killed?

“I am tempted,” Brickey said, “to include the angel through his role as messenger.” Jude recalled what Augustus had told him, that in order to find Bartholomew, he needed to ask God a question he would send a messenger to answer. “Legba and Hermes are both intermediary gods, ferrying communication between the worlds of gods and men. Angels are the same, I would say. The implication there could be that the messages this angel carries have to do with fate? I’m not sure. But that’s my temptation.” He glanced at the stuffed owl clock and sighed. “I’m afraid I have no idea how the vampire might be relevant, though. Hunger, perhaps? Trickster gods like Hermes and Anansi and Loki are always hungry, perhaps that’s a link?” He looked at the clock again and shook his head, shuffled through the papers on his desk.

“Am I keeping you from something?”

“Ah, yes. I’m about to be late for class. I am intrigued by this puzzle, though. Let me get your phone number, and I’ll call you if I think of anything. I’d love to have a look at this screenplay you’re writing, if nothing else.” Jude recited his number, which Brickey scribbled on a scrap of paper with similar hasty writings. “Good, good,” he said, “I hope I’ve been of some

help.”

Jude stood and shook his hand. “You’ve been a big help. More than you know, Professor Lequire. Thank you.”

Brickey clasped his hand tight, holding it a little longer than was necessary. Through the thick lenses of his glasses, his brown eyes looked concerned, sad even, as though he suspected the truth, or at least some measure of it. “Take care of yourself, Jude,” he said.

In the hall, Jude watched him walk away, an ordinary man with ordinary concerns, for whom gods were ideas, the dead were memories, and magic was a trick at a child’s birthday party. Jude allowed himself the brief, stinging indulgence of jealousy and then went on his own way. Where the gods lived and died. Where magic sang in his voice and in his blood. Where the dead remained.

Chapter Nineteen

They are the ones who live in the hut on the edge of the village, or in a cave deep in the forest, or at the summit of an isolated tower, or in the deepest basement, or on a street that has no name. They have always been with us, as the tenders of fire, or the keeper of tales, or the healers of the sick. In the hours of daylight, they make medicines and aid in childbirth, they tell us when to reap and when to sow, and they teach us how to make merry and how to mourn. In the night, they interpret our dreams and keep the darkness at bay, or they invite it in. They keep our secrets, whisper misfortune on our enemies. They see that which would blind us, they do what we can not do, they know what we dare not know. We call them shaman or *brujeira*, magus or *bokar*, *kalku*, *onmyōji*. Magician. We revere or revile them; we beg them for help or burn them alive. We fear them, not because of their power, but because of their humanity. They are what we could be, if only we had the courage, or the madness, to pay the price. There is always a price.

Jude stepped out of the cab on the corner of Dauphine and France into the squeezing heat, squinting against the glare. As the cab drove away, he turned in a slow circle, trying to get his bearings. It had been a long time since he had been in the Bywater, and the loss of his gift seemed to have robbed him of his sense of direction. He frowned, realizing just how long it had been since he had been out here, remembering the obligations he had let slip in the storm's wake. Death, or the loss of his gift, or some combination of the two, had given him a new perspective on his actions since the flood, made a mockery of his self-imposed exile. Regal had been right, back in The Clover Leaf. He'd been hiding, from everything.

He recognized the house with the lime green siding on the far corner, and like a

wandering compass finding true north, he knew where he was. As he walked, he saw yards with waist high grass, the homes beyond dark and abandoned. Here and there a spray-painted X on a wall, a date in early September, the number of bodies found. He checked every time, unable to stop himself. Mostly there were zeroes. Occasionally there was not.

The scent of hot pavement seemed to wash out all others, as did the sound of rushing traffic on St. Claude, just a few blocks away. Halfway to Royal Street, Jude stopped next to a white shotgun house, glanced down at the short steps that led up to the front door. He found the pentagram etched into the stone, just as he'd remembered it, its dual points aimed down. Aimed up, he'd been taught, signified evil, the horns of the devil. Like this, it was protective magic. Good magic.

A small gate of wire-link fence separated him from a long walkway into the back yard, bordered by the house on one side and a high wooden fence on the other, overgrown and dark. He could, he knew, walk through the shade and the grass and into the back, where an ancient swing set rusted, empty chains dangling, its rubber seats long since rotted away. Families had lived in this house for generations and never met their neighbor, never even seen his house. Jude reached down to the bottom of the gate and lifted a hidden latch. The gate swung open, taking with it the image of the yard and the grass and the trees overhead. Even at his most jaded, the wonder of this never ceased to amaze him: a doorway that was a hole in the world. Beyond lay cypress trees and a clapboard house, a path raised over the swamp underfoot the width of a single plank of wood and a wisp of smoke rising from the chimney. This had been the edge of New Orleans once, and within this seam of magic it stayed that way. Jude had never quite understood how the ground avoided being drained when the land around it was developed. The

impossibility of it, he'd been told, was what made it work. Things had been much different the last time he'd been here, and they'd been exactly the same.

It is night, and winter, years before the storm. Jude is a young man, before he meets Dodge, before Cassandra. He wears a black leather jacket and jeans that cost 100 dollars a pair, both of which he stole with the help of magic. A cigarette hangs from his lips with the studied nonchalance of someone who smokes only in public. His aunt, whom he lives with, believes that he is studying at a friend's house, believes that he cares about college. He is half-drunk, half-stoned, and all the way late.

Jude pauses for a moment in front of the white shotgun house, waiting for the man who lives there to put his trash in the can and go back inside. Jude is tempted to open the magic door in front of him, just as he was tempted not to come at all tonight, a self-destructive whisper in the back of his mind. He breathes out a plume of smoke and grins, mayhem looking for a place to happen. The metal hinge stings his fingers when he lifts it, when he reveals the shack and the marsh hidden within the fold of time and space. From the sidewalk he can smell the wood burning in his teacher's hearth. The flame that is never allowed to go out, even in summer, is a roaring blaze, now. He tells himself that it doesn't bother him that it gets darker when the door closes behind him, when the streetlights suddenly cease to be. Arms held out like a tightrope walker's, Jude picks his way across the boards to the porch. He takes one last drag and flicks his cigarette into the water, a brief, almost silent hiss.

Jude pulls open the rough-hewn door, grateful for the warmth that enfolds him. He has

come to love this one room house almost as much as he has come to disdain it, able, through the unconscious hypocrisy of youth, to be comforted by its unadorned simplicity at the same time he is embarrassed by its poverty. The bare walls, the small shelf with a few battered books, the small, uncomfortable looking bed, the sense of isolation, all of it reminds him of the monastic cells at the abbey where his mother lives. The only difference is the floor, stone here as well as at the monastery, but this floor is stained with the remains of countless chalk pentagrams and circles, with candle wax and letters written in ash, in blood.

In the corner opposite the bed is a small table, an altar, which holds a chalice and an engraved metal disc, a short rod of hand-carved wood. A sword, its blade gleaming in the firelight, hangs on the wall, its point aimed at the sky. The room is filled with the smoke of burning pine, with the hiss and crackle of logs in the flame, stretching and bursting open. Jude can also taste the hot sulfur of recent magic, like a struck match pressed to his tongue. Jude's teacher sits in the center of the room in a hand-made chair of wood and leather, balding head tonsured like a monk's, his coarse beard thick and streaked with gray, dark eyes glaring beneath a heavy brow. Eli Constant.

Eli wears black, a drape of thick cloth that covers him from neck to ankles, like a mendicant's robes, but with a row of copper buttons from his left breast to his waist, an aristocrat's greatcoat from a previous century. On another man it would look anachronistic, but it suits the magician, suits his nearly 200 years of age.

Eli looks up when Jude enters, closes the book in his lap with a finger between the pages to mark his place. "You will tell me why you have arrived too late to be of any use, prentice, though I suspect the reek of the brothel that hangs about you should speak for you," Eli says, a

whisper of France in his voice.

“Had some things to do,” Jude says, his hands shoved deep into his jacket pockets.

“As did I, *metisang*, as did I.”

Jude does not know what the word means, but Eli only calls him *metisang* when he is angry. Jude contemplates, for a moment, apologizing, but the words stick in his throat. What comes out is bitter, scornful, and instantly regretted. “Yeah,” he asks, “and what was so important?”

“A woman has lost her husband, and the authorities were unable to help. So I conjured a spirit to help locate him.”

Jude looks to the floor, at the chalk designs and sigils that are clearest, despite the attempt to wash them away. Curiosity wars with anger and wins. “What sort of spirit?” he asks.

“A hound, from the Pit. Not the easiest calling, to be certain. Although it is a much easier task with the assistance of an apprentice.”

The hair rises on the back of Jude’s neck. “You summoned a demon? To find a missing person all I had to do was touch that woman’s hand, and you called a demon from hell? Are you insane?”

The accusation hangs in the air, harsh as the lingering brimstone fumes. Eli leans forward, his teeth bared in a mockery of a smile. “Your aptitude has robbed you of your wits. Do not forget your place. I am the master here, and you speak of what you do not know. The angels who fought and lost a war against heaven are as different from the beasts of the Pit as a king stands separate from the ape dressed in jester’s motley to amuse him. As always, your ability exceeds your understanding.”

This has been a recurring argument between the two magicians, Jude the stifled prodigy desperate to spread his wings, Eli the experienced authority, demanding caution. Magic comes as easily to Jude as it always has, and lately he has been able to work spells and conjurations with only the slightest ritual, creating magics in an hour that would take Eli days. Jude knows just enough to know that the difference between what he can do and what he is capable of doing is vast, and he longs to dive headfirst into that ocean of potential.

Eli opens his book, marks his page with a scrap of ribbon, and sets it on the floor next to his bare feet. For a long moment he is quiet. Jude follows his gaze down at to Eli's yellowed toenails and the chalk dust that had seeped into his flesh as much as the floor. When he returns his attention to Jude, he wears again the mask of the patient, avuncular teacher. "You reach too far, too soon," Eli says, quiet and sad. "You know not, fear not, the consequences of what you do. You use magic as if there is no cost, but there must be. There is always a price to be paid."

"How can I understand anything if you refuse to teach me?" Jude asks, his pride wounded by Eli's rebuke. The taste of magic in the air makes him want to spit. "Tonight you summoned something from hell, for fuck's sake. And you talk to me about consequences and fear?" Jude still stands in the doorway, both hoping and dreading that Eli will cast him out. When he says nothing, Jude finds words that he didn't intend to say spilling from his lips. "I've found someone who will teach me," he says.

"Who? Who in this city would dare?"

"He calls himself Mourning."

The old magician sighs and leans back in his chair. He tries to speak and fails, once, twice. Swallowing hard, he squeezes his eyes shut and presses his thumbs into his temples. The

silence drags out. Jude fears he will weep, or curse him, or both. At last, Eli looks up, his face lined and pale. He rests a fingertip against the corner of his mouth, a gesture Jude recognizes as the beginning of a story.

“When I was a boy,” he begins, “everyone in my village lived as I do now, without machines or electric power. For light, and for warmth, we used fire. There was a young man in my village who loved the flame, truly loved it. He watched it dance in the lanterns or within the hearth, used it to drive back the darkness and the winter’s chill. He worshiped it. Through some twist of luck, or fate, which are really two sides of the same coin, through all his dealings with fire, he had never been burned. And so his love turned to lust. He began to look on the flames as a young man looks upon his new bride; he sought to give fire a shape he might lie with. So he crafted a woman out of things that burn longest and brightest, flaxen hair, limbs of supple yew, lips of the most fragrant candle wax, a knot of pine for her sex, still sticky and moist with pine sap. On the coldest night of the year, when the fires of the village would be strongest, he introduced fire to her new wooden breast, and gave her life. She beckoned to him, enticed him from his clothes and into her arms, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. In her embrace he knew true bliss.

“Until his fragile skin began to burn. Her kisses seared his lips shut, her fingers traced scars across his back, she consumed his manhood, leaving behind the shriveled wick of a dead candle. As he ran, screaming, the remnants of her love flickering in his hair, her joy swelled and so did she.” Eli pauses, eyes vacant with remembrance. Jude wonders how much of his story is parable and how much of it is truth, wonders if the fire-wife is only metaphor or an actual spirit called into being. He wonders if Eli is begging him to stay or setting him free. Eli returns his

gaze to Jude, ancient and deep.

“That night,” he says, “my village burned to the ground.”

Jude can not suppress the shiver these words run up his spine, a thrill at the danger Eli is warning him against. But the magician’s message feels too heavy-handed for Jude, his fable too pointed and direct. “I get it,” Jude says. “Magic is like fire. It’s a handy tool, but if I try to fuck it, it’ll screw me right back. I get it.”

“You do not,” Eli says. “I am speaking of magic, yes. Of control and understanding and boundaries. All of this is true. But you are not the boy, and magic is not the fire. I am the young man, seeking to possess that which I can not control.”

“So what does it have to do with me?” Jude asks.

“Everything,” Eli says. “Everything and nothing. You are able to do things you should not be able to do, see things that you should not be able to see. Mourning is not a magician, nor a spirit. I do not even know what he is, exactly, but I know he is not mortal. Understand me now, if you have never understood me before. He is of the gods, Jude. I, Eliphas Alphonse Constant, am, without contest or boast, the most powerful magician in this city, and I have only heard of him through rumor and innuendo, know only his name. And yet you, my gifted apprentice, have spoken to him, have something he wants and wishes to use.” Eli drops his head, stares at his hands. “The parable is about me, not you. I am the foolish young man. This city is the woman I have created, brick and mortar instead of branch and straw. And you, Jude?” He shakes his head, reaches down to pick up the book and opens it, his return to his reading a gesture of dismissal. His last words are spoken to the pages, as though Jude has already left.

“You are the flames.”

* * *

Jude found that his memories of Eli Constant's shack aligned almost exactly, the raised walkway over the duckweed and the cypress knees, the Spanish moss twisting and wispy as a cartoon witch's hair, the towering pines stretching back to a time when this was the edge of New Orleans, the seam between a newborn city and virgin wilderness. It stank with the rich, living rot of a bog in the summer. The song of cicadas threatened to drown out his thoughts, a constant, droning rant-rant-rant like a living car alarm bellowing from every tree.

When he reached the front porch, he noticed the bottles hanging from the cypress nearest the shack, dozens of them, a hundred, glass tinkling softly against glass, a rainbow of colors shimmering amidst the leaves. Jude stared for a moment, puzzled. He couldn't remember it being there before, but it had to be a problem with his memory. In all the years Jude had spent under his tutelage, Eli never changed anything about his home, had insisted that consistency was necessary for his magic. Even the door still fastened with a latch and not a knob, Jude noticed, as he reached out and knocked on the door. Over the cacophony of the insects, through the wood of the door, Jude heard a solid chunk, like a head of lettuce being ripped open. A female voice yelled for him to go away.

"My name is Jude," he said. "I'm looking for Eli."

"I don't care," she said again. "I don't know how you got in here, but just leave, and there won't be trouble."

"I don't want trouble, I just want to talk. Look, it's stupid to shout through the door like this, okay? I'm going to open it, slow, so you can see I'm harmless." He pulled up the latch and

held up his hands, letting the door's own weight pull it open, a long, agonizing creak. The room beyond looked exactly as Jude remembered it, though he only gave the surroundings a cursory look. The young woman in the center of the room dominated his vision, the chalk pentagram and circle inscribed on the stone around her bare feet. Dark eyed and thin-lipped, straight brown hair clinging, sweaty, to her round cheeks, she wore frayed jeans and a thin, sleeveless shirt. And she cradled a single-barreled shotgun in her hands. Jude stared into the dark mouth of the gun, his balls trying to climb into his stomach and his heart punching erratically in his chest, and his death, not his life, flashed before his eyes.

He saw the revelry of the New Orleans dead, Legba and Saturday's shiny black streetcar, the world beneath the Mississippi and the void beneath that, the gun barrel and the hurricane's eye and the Devourer all merging into the same moment. If he died, here, two days early and nothing to show for it, he'd go right back. Jude's mind whirled. Who was this girl? Eli's apprentice? But then where was Eli? And what would a magician, or a witch, need with a shotgun?

"So talk," she said. "I'm all ears."

"My name –"

"Is Jude Duboisson. I know who you are. I know all about you. If I was sure it would kill you, I'd pump a few rounds right into your black fucking heart. Why don't you start getting to the point?"

Jude started to lower his hands, but she made a noise, like correcting a pet, and gestured with the gun for him to keep them up. Her hands trembled. Not good. "I'm here to see Eli Constant," he said.

“You said that. What for?”

“He was my teacher once, like he is with you, I guess. I came to ask for his help.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she bit at her bottom lip, practically chewing it. She sucked in a deep breath and thumbed the shotgun’s safety, let it drop to her side. Jude’s arms fell like weights were attached to his wrists, his arms burning with the return of blood. He stepped inside, but she stayed within the circle, a protective magic meant to bar his way. Jude thought about stepping across the chalk line just to show her he meant her no harm, but he doubted she would understand his intent before she put a hole in his chest. Instead, he sat on the bed and kept his hands on his knees where she could see them.

“Where is he?” Jude asked. “Not to be rude, but I’m on sort of a tight schedule.”

“Dead,” she said. “So, you know, not to be rude, but shove your tight schedule up your tight ass. Where do you get the nerve showing up here?”

Jude felt like the ground dropped out from beneath him. Dead. He couldn’t be. “He can’t be,” he repeated, out loud. “He said he’d live as long as—”

“As long as the city did. Yeah, he told me the same thing. Turns out it works both ways.”

“What are you talking about?”

She shook her head and eased herself to the floor, careful not to scuff the lines or erase any marks with her jeans, sat cross-legged in the center of the five-pointed star. “I can’t believe I have to explain this to you, of all the assholes of all the world.”

Jude’s anger, so close to the surface since his resurrection, swept past his fear. “Enough with the attitude,” he said, his voice harsh and growling. Magic wouldn’t touch her, not if she’d

drawn the spell right, but her mouth shut and her eyes widened just the same. “He was my teacher before he was yours,” Jude said, “and I wish like hell he wasn’t dead. I disappointed him in the end, but that’s nothing to do with you. So either you adjust your tone, or I’ll drag you out of that circle of yours and dunk you in the goddamn swamp.”

She blinked, glared, and chewed her lip, but she nodded. Her eyes wandered around the room as though searching for something out of place, or unable to meet Jude’s gaze, and after a few moments, she looked back at him. When she spoke, she’d changed her choice of words, if not the timbre of her voice. “It’s not nothing to me,” she said. “He wasn’t my teacher. He was my father.”

Her name, she told him, was Alafair Constant, and now that he could tear his attention away from the shotgun’s deadly mouth, Jude could see the resemblance in her eyes and in the shape of her mouth. Alafair had learned more from her father than Jude had, it seemed, and appeared to enjoy flaunting this knowledge.

Most people, she told him, even those who thought they understood the supernatural, really had no idea how complex and how strange things could be. Gods were not limited to one shape, and likewise, no one type of consciousness held an exclusive right to godhood. Just as men had gods that thought and acted like them, no matter the shape they took, so too did animals have gods, and trees, and books, and storms. There were deities of mountain and deep ore, worshiped for measures of geologic time far too long for human consciousness to be aware of, and there were virus gods of minuscule and fearsome aspect, whose entire immortalities passed,

brief and unnoticed, before human eyes.

Cities, too, could become gods.

There were city-gods who had grown old and quiescent, slumbering deities of stone, places like Byblos and Nin, Samarqand and Ilé-Ifè. Other ancient cities retained their awareness and their voice, mad old London and reserved Beijing, and Jerusalem, who spoke in four separate voices that argued with one another, and Mexico City, whose true name was Tenōchtitlān. Some younger cities, Sydney and New York, Tokyo and Brussels and Chicago, made up for what they lacked in age by compounding time with size and population, folding history in on itself over and over again, like a Japanese swordsmith forging a blade.

New Orleans, Alafair told him, though young and small for a city-god, had charm enough and history enough, *magic* enough, to push itself from the very beginning right to the edge of godhood.

“What,” Jude asked, “does this have to do with Eli? Or with me?”

Alafair rolled her eyes. “My father taught me that a city-god has three beings within its boundaries: a magician, to work as its hands; a voice, to speak its will; and a gambler, to bring it luck. They balance and sustain one another: one order, one chance, and one in-between. They cannot live without each other. My father, of course, was the Magician of New Orleans.”

Jude could barely keep his thoughts together, the card game, Dodge’s wager, the fortune gods at the game. It all started to make so much sense. Almost forgetting that Alafair was still in the room, Jude spoke his thoughts out loud, “If they’re all tied together, then Eli died a week ago, when Dodge was murdered.”

“What? Who the hell is Dodge?” The magician’s daughter bolted to her feet, her eyes so

like her father's in her rage that Jude half expected her to call him *metisang*. "No, idiot, my father died almost four years ago, just a couple of months after the storm. He tried, but he couldn't stand being here, in the silence, after she died."

"She?"

"New Orleans. The storm, the flood, all that loss. It killed her."

Like a disjointed bone popping back into place, sharp pain and then relief, Jude understood. "New Orleans died," he said. "And the dead have no voice."

As Jude left, one foot in what had been Eli's home and the other on the porch, the cicadas' thunderous murmur in his ears, Alafair stopped him. Tears glistened in her eyes, her fists clenched at her sides. "Don't ever come back," she said. "If you do, I swear I will do all I can to kill you."

"Why?" Jude asked. "What have I ever done to you?"

"In those months after the storm, as my father got weaker and weaker, I begged him to leave. I told him he didn't have to lay down in his grave and die. But he refused. He refused to turn his back on this place, even though everyone here with enough power to leave had turned their back on him." Her voice cracked as she restrained emotions Jude could only guess at. "My father lived to be almost two hundred years old. He was most powerful, wise, and selfless person I have ever, or will ever know. But when he died, he was nothing but a foolish old man. Because of you."

She clenched her jaw and turned away, unable to look at Jude or not wanting him to see

the tears course down her cheeks. Jude stayed quiet, knowing the best, the only, gift he could give her was to let her speak. He owed Eli Constant that much, at least. Alafair looked back at Jude, spoke in the clipped sentences of someone barely restraining a scream. “He told me ‘Jude will save us.’ Over and over. ‘Jude. Jude Duboisson. He will save us. Jude will save us.’ But you didn’t.” She turned away again, spoke to him from over her shoulder. “You didn’t save him. I will always hate you for that.”

Chapter Twenty

As he rode in the cab across the Causeway, Jude stared towards the setting sun as the clouds caught fire and the surface of Lake Pontchartrain burned into his retinas. He watched brown pelicans as they fished, gliding straight up, turning a slow, graceful arc in midair, then a tuck of the wings and a darting plummet that ended in a tight, comic splash. If only his life could be so simple. He thought about the murders, about that winged shape that had been stalking the city, about the cold fingers in the darkness that forced themselves down his throat just before he died. He thought about Regal, her disappearing-reappearing act, like a sleight-of-hand trick, her second disappearance from the hotel room. He turned it all around in his mind, fortune gods and city-gods and himself, a demi-god, tried to see it from a new perspective. All he kept coming back to was that he had to be missing the piece that would make the whole picture make sense, the identity of that winged shadow in the night. And so he went once more to speak to his mother, unable shake the feeling that his father's identity might be the very piece he was missing. A pelican kept pace with the cab, its long pinion feathers twitching in the wind, then angled up and out of sight. Jude wondered if the fish saw the bird's shadow just as it was too late to do anything about it. He pictured the moment, the realization that the sudden gloom was something more than a cloud passing in front of the sun, the frantic struggle to change direction, and then the snatch into something's gullet and into darkness.

He knew the feeling.

* * *

Already in a melancholy state of mind, Jude got out of the cab and faced the actuality of what he'd known, that Augustus would not be there to meet him. A sharp and profound sadness weighed on him. Coupled with the fleeting dusk and the end of the first of his last three days on Earth, he moved through the abbey like something within him had broken, shuffled footsteps and bowed shoulders, his arms swinging listless at his sides.

In his mother's room, reeking of turpentine and oil paints, Jude found only disturbed bed sheets, a closed bathroom door, and canvas after canvas of swans. Assuming his mother was in the rest room, Jude sat on the bed. He thought about waiting outside until she finished but decided that if his sudden presence disturbed her, so be it. Let her have to deal with him, for once. As he waited, he looked around at the paintings, at the common theme. Some were swans in the abstract, solid colors on a solid background, a thin s-curve to represent a neck, a vaguely wing-like gesture sweeping off the edge of the canvas. Others were recreations of famous works of art, Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, or Davinci's *Vitruvian Man*, with anthropomorphic swans in the place of the main figure. Only his mother's attention to detail and painstaking adherence to the style of the original work kept these images from seeming whimsical. Instead, tension and pain filled these copies, made them acts of self-abuse rather than homage. Her own compositions, too, while obviously the work of an obsessive mind, were too earnest, too desperate, to be easily dismissed. Jude had long believed that his mother, unable to articulate in her madness, tried to communicate through her art, had suspected and hoped that it had something to do with his father's identity.

Now that he knew that his father was an immortal, that belief took on a greater urgency, her paintings a possible literalness he had never considered before. The photograph she had

shown him of his father hadn't helped, the face obscured, even the name, "Luc Duboisson", an alias of some kind. These paintings, though, were honest somehow, true in a way that a photograph couldn't match. Thinking about swans and gods and children, though, Jude kept coming back to Zeus and the myth of the rape of Leda. Leda, Lydia, and the swan. Could it really be that simple?

Growing anxious, Jude crossed the disarray of his mother's room and knocked on her bathroom door. When she didn't answer, he knocked again, then tried the knob. Locked. A sinking feeling crept along Jude's flesh.

He unlocked the door with a word and wrenched it open only to find the bathroom empty as well. A shock of adrenaline jolted through his veins. Stupid, stupid, stupid. The murderer had crossed the Lake, had killed Gus, a Catholic monk, on holy ground. Why hadn't he thought to move his mother? Even in his panic, Jude saw that she had continued to paint scenes from his life, the cards of his destiny, three of them now, the Magician, The Hanged Man, and one Jude didn't recognize, a circle surrounded by strange figures. She had painted over her previous efforts; now the walls showed his night with Regal, which brought a flush of shame to mingle with his fear, showed him lying dead next to a pool of his own vomit, him kneeling in front of the Devourer's pit and staring into the obsidian mirror. Jude spun around to search for his absent mother, running for the door, fear giving his feet wings.

After a frantic half hour of searching, Jude found her in the small cemetery set back in a clearing in the woods. Illuminated by an electric Coleman lantern, she sat in the clipped grass growing on the grave of Walker Percy. The shadows of her emaciated face and the graveyard around them made Jude think of Saturday. His mother rocked back and forth, humming to

herself like a child in thought. Jude called out to her, softly so as not to startle her, first saying “Mom”, then “Lydia”, but she simply continued shifting her weight, recited her discordant notes. Even touching her shoulder did nothing. She didn’t flinch away from him, just kept rocking, brushing her slight frame against his fingertips.

Jude leaned against the rounded edge of a tombstone and looked to the sky, breathed in deep, the night air heavy and thick with the aromas of the surrounding woods. Clouds blocked out the sliver of moon and the stars, their motion only visible when a brief instant of light stole through. Somewhere along the edge of the pond frogs croaked and groaned, creating a massive sound for a creature no bigger than Jude’s thumb. Without the sun, the heat had dissipated enough to be bearable, though Jude kept as still as possible to avoid breaking a sweat.

He started talking, not sure if he spoke to his mother or to the resting dead or to the night itself, just let the words come as they would. He talked about his desire to find out what she knew, his need to find Dodge’s killer, about the things he had done wrong and hoped to have the time and ability to make right, or to at least try to amend. He found himself talking about Cassandra and the many, many ways he had failed her. As he spoke, rambling on so long that his mouth dried out and he had to clear his throat more and more, his heart felt lighter and lighter.

Wings flapped above him, faint, but enough to still his tongue and freeze his blood. Jude held his breath, his ears straining for the slightest noise, one part of his mind sorting through the spells he might use if Dodge’s killer attacked him here. He scanned the treetops, unable to see anything beyond the small nimbus of light cast by his mother’s lantern, remembering from his visions that the murderer liked to strike from above. A twig snapped, just at the edge of the

darkness, and Jude smelled cigarette smoke.

A voice spoke from the night, thick with gravel and amusement. “Don’t stop now,” the voice said. “You were just getting to the good part.” Just as Jude prepared to defend himself, Augustus Coyle, with a smile Jude wouldn’t have expected on a dead man, stepped into the light.

Tension rushed out of Jude in a gust of breath. “You scared the hell out of me,” he said.

“Did I now? Well, that’s what holy men are supposed to do, isn’t it?” It took a moment for Jude, his heart still clenching with unspent adrenaline, to understand Augustus’ joke. When he did, he laughed, a brief snort of amusement, but a laugh nonetheless. “There you go,” Augustus said, tracing a lazy circle in the air with his cigarette. “Take a few breaths, ease up a little. It’s gonna be okay.” He wore shorts and a t-shirt with a cartoon raven that read ‘St. Joseph’s Seminary College’, not the monk’s habit, the thick black cloth and the rope belt Jude had always seen him in. As smoke poured in thin tendrils from each of the monk’s nostrils it wreathed above his head, taking on a shifting, dancing shine in the glow from Lydia’s lantern. Augustus copied Jude’s posture, leaned against a gravestone and tucked one leg over the other. “Now what’s going on, son? Sounds like you’re in some trouble.”

“You heard all that?”

“I’m dead, Jude, not deaf.” He swept a thin hand in a wide arc, a gesture that took in the entire graveyard. “I think every priest in here just heard your confession.”

Jude felt a needle sharp pain when Augustus said the word ‘dead’, realized he had nurtured a tiny, secret hope that somehow Augustus might somehow still be alive. If the dead man had appeared as a ghost, partly transparent and an echoing voice, it would have been less painful than this, an apparition that smelled like smoke and left footprints in the grass. The

monk flicked ash off the tip of his cigarette and continued.

“I’m only kidding,” he said. “The dead don’t stick around here like they do in the city. Not unless they want to, of course.”

“Right,” Jude said, the only thing he could say. Words kept bubbling to the surface, apologies for getting Augustus killed that would just sound pathetic, questions about the monk’s death that he wouldn’t remember well enough to answer. Jude’s mother had quieted, had ceased rocking, leaned towards the conversation as if trying to follow it. He wondered if she could hear the dead man, or if she heard only his end, if, after all these years, his mother thought he was the crazy one.

Augustus cocked an eyebrow at him, as if expecting a better response. He bit at a thumbnail. “So now what?” he asked. He pointed at Lydia with the two fingers that held his cigarette. “You come all this way to find your mother, and now you’re here, and she’s like this, so what do you do now?”

“I really don’t know,” Jude said. “There’s so much that I don’t know that I can’t seem to make any plan. I’m not sure what Sal will find when he tracks down the scent from my hotel room, or how I’m going to face whoever or whatever killed me. I don’t know how my mother is seeing what happens to me, or what those cards mean. I just feel . . .” He trailed off, unable to find the words.

“Lost?” Augustus asked.

Jude nodded. He stared up at the darkness, watched as the thin slice of moon peeked out from behind the cloud, more ghostly and melancholy than the dead man in front of him. All around him he heard life in the night, insects and amphibians and the wind rustling through the

trees. Why hadn't he just stayed here after the storm? They'd offered him a place to stay. Away from the city, he might have stayed away from the magic, might have started a new life entirely. Jude thought about the break in the seams he'd lived in in the years since, his gift becoming more and more of a curse with every passing day. Who was he kidding? He couldn't have walked away from the magic, not ever. It was in his blood. His father's blood.

Augustus sighed. As if he'd read Jude's thoughts, he asked, "What exactly did you come here to find out, Jude? What does she know that you do not?" Augustus seemed to be leading him toward some question or realization, like a teacher hoping his student will find the answer himself. Everything Jude didn't know seemed to hinge on the true identity of 'Luc Duboisson'. His invitation to the card game, his abilities, his fate, all of it lay within his mother's paintings, within her madness-clouded mind.

"I need to know who my father is," Jude said.

Augustus smiled, uneven teeth and thick, pink gums. A tingle ran up Jude's neck and raised the hair on his arms. The monk snuffed his cigarette out against the tombstone beneath him. "Do you know," he asked, in that same leading tone, "what vows one takes to become a Benedictine monk?"

"No," Jude said, a sudden headache throbbing along with his pulse. Did Augustus know? If he did, why was he being coy?

"Stability," the dead man said, "which means staying at the same monastery for life. Conversion, which is about changing your life to the ways of the religious order, celibacy, daily worship, and that sort of thing." He folded his hands around one of his bony knees, clutching his leg to his chest, his sandal dangling from his toes. "The third vow is one of obedience. We

dedicate ourselves not only to Christ but to the Order. So if the Abbot says we are to care for a pregnant woman who is obviously suffering from mental illness, concerning ourselves only with the welfare of her body and the child she carries, not her insanity, we obey. Or if he says we are to allow her to live here and procure paints for her and keep her safe, despite the added temptation of her occasional nudity in our midst, we must do so.”

Jude's mind spun, leaping from one conclusion to another as Augustus spoke. The Abbot? But Jude had met him. He was a man, a mortal man. Was Jude just a mortal after all? Or did the Abbot know who Jude's father was?

“And if Lydia tells you her secret, and your Abbot tells you that you must keep silent about it, even to her only son, whom the secret most directly concerns?” He frowned, sadness touching his worn face for the first time since his death. “Then, Jude, I am truly sorry, but I had to keep silent. In my entire life devoted to faith, my only regret was keeping that knowledge from you. I know that I sinned, somehow, in lying to you, or in questioning my vow, and I will have to answer for that, but what it comes down to is that I made a vow, to God, for life.”

Jude tasted a bitter heat on the back of his tongue, magic and rage pushing up from within him, struggling to break free and be unleashed on the dead monk. Jude could not speak, nor could he ask Augustus how long he had known for fear of articulating some painful, burning curse that he could not take back.

Augustus, perhaps seeing the anger in Jude's eyes, held up his hands and showed Jude his palms, placating. “I had to apologize first,” he said, “I had to explain. So you would know why I couldn't tell you when I was alive. But I can tell you now. My vow was for life, Jude. My life is over.”

Wordless, Jude crossed his arms across his chest, tamping down his anger, the power that seemed to be harder and harder to control since his death and resurrection. The cross Augustus had given him, around his neck now, pressed into his breastbone, the iron nail scraping against his skin. The bitter thought occurred to him that Augustus might regret more of his religious devotion if he knew that Jude, too, had died and returned to life.

“Honestly,” Augustus said, “I thought you'd figured it out the last time I saw you. The questions you were asking. The clues were all there. It's so obvious looking at it from the other side. A monastery devoted to protecting your mother, all the swan images, with their white, white wings.” The dead man took a deep breath, as though even now he was breaking his vow to speak it aloud. “As I'm sure you've realized by now, you are not merely human. You are what the Bible refers to as a nephilim, the child of a daughter of Man and a son of God. Your father, Jude, is one of the Heavenly Host, the messengers of God. He is an angel.”

Beside him, Jude's mother gasped, surprised, but a joyous surprise, like a child opening a present. She bounded up from her kneeling position, looking not at Jude and Augustus but towards the trees. “Puppy!” she said, in a cooing, infantile voice. “Here puppy puppy! C'mere boy!” She slapped her paint stained hands against her thighs. Jude followed the line of her gaze, half-blinded by the lamplight, and saw, in the darkness, a pair of eyes glowing with a green, reflective light. The hungry, deadly eyes of an inhuman predator.

Jude reacted on instinct, pushing what Augustus had told him and the sudden image of Bartholomew that that knowledge inspired to the back of his mind, even as he stepped in front of his mother and called out, gave voice to the power he'd been holding back since Augustus had surprised him. He pointed, and a lash of green fire leaped from his outstretched hand, blazing

through the darkness. Though the sudden light blinded him, Jude heard it strike, an animal's yelp of pain, followed by a throaty, almost human, howl of rage. Jude made a fist, tightened the noose of flame around whatever was in the darkness.

“Fuck!” the thing in the darkness yelled. “Goddammit, let me go! It's me you bastard, let go! This fucking *hurts!*”

Jude released the spell an instant after he recognized the voice, a flush of shame driving back the spike of adrenaline. Lydia looked into the darkness with wide eyes and an innocent smile, as though she hadn't seen her son create fire from thin air, as though she couldn't see her son at all. She clicked with her tongue, still calling to what she thought was a stray dog.

Augustus stared at Jude, his eyes bulging, mouth hanging agape. Even though he believed in angels, even though he had died and knew for a fact that there was a world beyond this one, Augustus had needed to see magic in order to believe.

Thrashing through the grass and releasing a constant stream of obscenities, with smoke rising from the fur of his dog's shape, Sal hobbled into the light, his ears flat against his head and tongue stretched out, snarling between spitting vulgarities. “Whoreson, shit-eating, cock-biting, ass-faced motherfuck,” he said at last, before flopping onto his side in the grass. Lydia scooted forward and scratched him between the ears, seemingly unaware of his language or of the still smoldering wound that Sal began to lick. Augustus covered his mouth with his palm, an abashed grin visible at the edges of his bony hands and in the wrinkles around his eyes. Sal whined, a low, mournful sound, then turned a liquid glare at Jude. “What the hell, man?” he asked, his voice full of that same dog-like whine. “I mean what the *hell?*”

“I thought you were someone else,” Jude said. “I'm sorry, really. Are you okay?” He

crouched down, getting a closer look at the blackened scab on Sal's ribs. "I don't know what to do. All my healing magic is in that damned bag."

Sal grunted and lifted his front half off of the ground, then dropped back down. "I'll be fine," he said. "This skin is just a shape. It'll fix itself up pretty quick. I'm stuck like this until it does, though." He licked Lydia's fingertips and made a noise of disgust. "Does this chick know she's covered in paint?"

Augustus laughed at that and shook his head. "Being dead is going to take some getting used to," he said. "I've never heard an animal speak before. Do you always understand the speech of dogs, Jude, or is this one special?"

"I'm a spirit of the underworld, priest, not some dog," Sal said. He managed to make the words 'dog' and 'priest' sound like curses as he rose, haltingly, to his feet. "Spook like you oughta show a little more respect." Lydia threw her arms around Sal's neck, hugging him, but she also held back his attempt to lunge in the dead monk's direction. "You want," he said, his words a half-snarl, "I can show you the difference."

Before Jude could speak, Augustus held up his hands. "I meant no insult," he said. "I apologize. The afterlife is just more," he paused, wiggling his fingers as he sought the word. "More complicated than I expected."

Sal let out a sarcastic huff and mumbled something, but his posture changed, no longer straining against Lydia's grip. "Come on, Puppy, let's get you inside," she said, still eerily unaware of her surroundings. She stood and tugged at the scruff of Sal's neck, dragging him along with her out of the lantern light and towards the abbey. The spirit protested but allowed her to lead him, cursing at Jude to get the crazy woman off of him.

Jude looked from Augustus leaning against the grave to the pair stumbling through the night. The monk bowed his head and gestured for Jude to follow them. A soft, wistful smile bloomed on his face.

“Wait,” Jude said. “That can't be all. An angel? How? What's his name? Is it Bartholomew?”

A light bathed Augustus' features that had nothing to do with the electric lamp in the grass. “I've told you all I know,” he said. He remained smiling, even as the light dimmed and darkness swallowed him up.

“No!” Jude yelled. “No! God *damn* it!” He balled his fists and struck out at the first thing he saw, kicking the lantern. It flew through the air, flickering, and shattered against a tombstone. Half-blind and enraged and as confused as ever, Jude stood in the night, waiting until his eyes adjusted and he could see the lights of the abbey off in the distance.

Chapter Twenty One

Back in Lydia's room, surrounded by paintings of angel-winged swans, Jude felt like an idiot. The answers had been in front of him the entire time. Now that he knew, his mother's message couldn't be any clearer. Why hadn't he ever questioned, seriously questioned, Lydia's presence here at the abbey? He told himself that people almost never questioned what they grew up with, like his affinity for lost things. It had always been there, and so required no explanation. Jude nudged a canvas with the toe of his sneaker, one that depicted a swan with a man's head at the end of its sinuous neck. Bullshit. He'd questioned just about everything he'd known as a child. That was part of growing up. He hadn't asked about his mother, or about his gift, because he'd been afraid of knowing the answers. His cowardice, his lack of self-awareness, had probably cost innocent people their lives.

Jude's thoughts kept slipping away from him as though he were drugged, coming back to what he knew of angels, and his father, and the image of Bartholomew's face. Jude's father had invited him to the card game, and his father was an angel. Could Bartholomew possibly be his father? He had shown no recognition the few times they had met, but he had shown almost no emotion at any point Jude could remember. There were any number of reasons Bartholomew, if he was Jude's father, might feign ignorance of that fact. Jude pictured the winged shape that had followed him home that night in the Warehouse District, the night Tommy had been murdered. What if he'd been wrong? What if it hadn't been a murderer stalking him but his father protecting him? Jude kept placing Bartholomew in different roles: as his father, as Dodge's murderer, as both. This led to a thought that, once it occurred to him, slipped into Jude's mind and froze him to the core. What if his father, an angel, hadn't murdered Dodge but had slain him,

righteously?

For the first time in his life, Jude asked himself whose side he was really on.

A scuffle – the sounds of claws fighting for purchase on a wooden floor and canvases thumping against one another as they toppled over – broke Jude out of his introspection, brought him back to the issue at hand. He had to see what he could learn from the scenes his mother had painted in her bathroom then find out what Sal had learned by following the scent of his killer. He had to get back to the city and get back to work. He could brood when he was dead, which would be in two days, if he didn't get his head on straight.

Sal turned his long-suffering gaze on Jude, struggling to get away from Lydia's clinging hands. “Can you do what we need to so we can get out of here?” he asked. “She's showing me paintings for crying out loud. Doesn't she know dogs are color blind?”

Jude chuckled and took his mother's bony shoulders in his hands. She struggled, but weakly, more a protest than an attempt to escape, like a petulant child. Jude waited until she looked into his eyes. He spoke her name, quiet and stern, over and over again, until she stilled. She stank of paint, as she always did, but also of sour sweat and bad breath, as though she'd hadn't bathed in days. He sighed. What was it about sex with an angel that had unhinged her mind this way?

“Lydia,” he said again, and at last she looked into his face. When their eyes met, she went through one of her mercurial changes, her expression slackened, her muscles went limp. Jude caught her as she slumped over and lifted her into his arms, an ache settling into his chest at how little she weighed. He placed his mother in her bed on her back where she stared, vacant, at the ceiling. When Jude brushed a strand of hair out of her face, he found the skin of her forehead

chilly and damp to the touch.

“What did you do to her?” Sal asked from behind him.

“Nothing,” Jude said. “This is just who she is.” He straightened from her bedside and crossed the room, squeezing past the underworld spirit sitting up on his haunches and into the small bathroom where she seemed to spend most of her time. Based on his mother's hygiene, Jude expected her bathroom to reek, but to his surprise, only paint fumes greeted him in the small room. He understood when he saw that her toilet and shower were pristine, as though they hadn't been used since the last time they were cleaned. She hadn't been bathing, had probably been crapping in the woods.

The images covering the walls of her bathroom explained her distraction: scenes of Jude's life painted in great detail, things that she could only know through some form of magic. The compass remained on the far wall, a paint doubloon in the center now instead of the coin that held his ability to find lost things. A gift, his mother had said, from his father. Could he be the source of her unexplainable knowledge? How had he gotten the coin in the first place? Pried from Dodge's cold, dead hand?

Jude shook the questions from his head, forced himself to turn his attention back to the walls. Legba and Saturday's streetcar had more passengers, faces he didn't recognize. The killer had been busy, it seemed, while Jude was six feet under. He didn't see himself in the streetcar either, wondered if she'd painted over him after he'd returned from the dead.

On the opposite wall from the streetcar and the compass, she'd all but finished her rendition of Dodge's card game. Jude felt a twinge of vertigo looking at it, since the mural was crafted as though from his perspective. Of Jude, only his hands and cards were represented,

while the scale and arrangement of the other players had been warped, so that the gods seemed to all be facing him, their cards hidden from view. Thoth's scythe-like beak stretched all the way down to the table, beneath which he wore the winged sandals of the Greek god Hermes. Legba sat astride Celeste Dorcet's shoulders, the stem of a clay pipe in his mouth, a pile of coins in his cupped hands. Scarpelli was nothing but shadow and teeth, with a center so dark that Jude had to reach out to touch it to be sure his mother hadn't bored a hole in the bathroom wall.

Bartholomew's pure white eyes were turned up to heaven, his mouth opened wide, a tongue of flame above his head, like depictions of the Apostles at Pentecost. Dodge smiled his fortune god smile, only Lydia had painted it surrealistically detached from his face, a block shifted three inches out of synch with the rest of him. Jude only recognized Lillian by process of elimination, her face so blurred he could only isolate pieces of it, a nose here, a pointed ear there. Jude thought, at first, that his mother hadn't finished painting her yet, but on closer inspection, saw that this shifting un-face was a deliberate act.

Only three of Jude's cards were visible: the Magician, the Wheel of Fortune, and the Hanged Man. The first was as much as he remembered it, a picture of him pointing at the sky and at the ground, the four tools of the occult on the table next to him. Unlike the tarot card Opal had shown him, though, Jude's sword was a spike of metal, his wand a knobby twig, his chalice a bowl engraved with a spiral, his coin a Mardi Gras doubloon.

The second Jude hadn't seen before. The card Dodge had enclosed with his letter must have changed without his notice. It depicted a giant wheel with arcane symbols, surrounded by stylized figures: a serpent with wings, a dog-faced man, a bat with a human face, a man holding an X across his shoulders, not the cruciform of Christ, but two intersecting, perpendicular lines.

Jude recognized some of the symbols from his studies with Eli: Greek letters, Cuneiform, basic Egyptian Hieroglyphs, Hebrew. They spelled out a number of 'magic' words, so called because they formed clever patterns when arranged in certain ways. Abracadabra, for instance, when arranged in a triangle, repeated itself on all three sides, or Tarot, when written along a circle, spelled out 'Rota', the Latin for wheel. These were magics of human creation, mysteries and secret knowledge and rituals.

The Hanged Man card showed Jude dangling from a tree limb by one foot, a leafy vine wrapped around his ankle. His free leg bent behind the other. His hands were hidden behind his back, as though bound. He did not appear to be in pain, though. In fact, the Jude on the Hanged Man card looked serene, at peace with himself. A nimbus of light circled his head.

While Jude went back and forth over the images, searching for some detail that might give him insight, Sal lounged in the doorway, his muzzle resting on his paws. After what felt to Jude like only a few moments, the underworld spirit yawned and stood up. His long tongue flicked out over his nose, making a clop-clop noise that caught Jude's attention. "You know," Sal said, "most folks would have wanted to know right away if I had found the person that shuffled 'em off the mortal coil."

Jude blinked. In the confusion, the revelation about his father and the attempt to piece together the puzzle of Dodge's murder, Jude had all but forgotten about his own. He waited for Sal to continue, but the thing in the dog's skin merely watched him, tail flopping listlessly against the floor. "Well," he asked when it became clear Sal had no intention of speaking first, "did you find anything?"

"Sure did. And whenever you're done dicking around playing art critic, I'll show you."

* * *

Salvatore led Jude out of the sleeping abbey and into the night woods, his footsteps soundless beside Jude's crashing through the brush. When the darkness enveloped them completely, Sal had him grab onto his fur so that he could guide him. After a few minutes of walking, the sweat beginning to creep down Jude's neck and back, the spirit halted in mid-step, making Jude stumble.

“This next part,” he said, “is a bit tricky. It helps if you shut your eyes.”

Jude realized, then, that Sal was guiding him through more than merely the woods north of Lake Pontchartrain. “Why? I'm practically blind as it is.”

The muscles beneath Jude's hand bunched and relaxed, a rippling shrug. “Dunno,” Sal said. “Just the way it is. Helps to talk, too.”

“Whatever you say,” Jude said. “My eyes are closed.” The dog surged forward, yanking Jude along with him. “So what should we talk about?”

Again that odd shrug. “Whatever's on your mind. What're you thinking about?”

“My father,” Jude said. As he walked, there were gentle tugs at his clothes, branches and shrubs he assumed, and awkward stumbles, the ground uneven beneath him, his guide making abrupt changes of direction.

“Yeah,” Sal said. “I heard the priest telling you. So your old man's a fallen angel, huh? Raw deal.”

“Augustus is a monk, not a priest.” Something brushed across Jude's face, a wisp of Spanish moss, a remnant of an abandoned spider's web, and he almost opened his eyes to wipe it

away. He squeezed them shut, familiar enough with the ways of magic to know that if Sal said to close them, he meant keep them closed. “There's a difference.”

“Is there?”

“And anyway, Augustus never said my father was a fallen angel.”

The hot flesh beneath Jude's hand jumped, a sharp bark of a laugh. “You know any other kind?” Sal asked. Light burned on the other side of Jude's eyelids. His footsteps suddenly became even and smooth. “Go ahead and open 'em,” Sal said. “We're here.”

Jude opened his eyes to streetlamps and oak trees above him, pavement beneath his feet. The hiss of tires on concrete, steady traffic even at this time of night, invaded his ears, and he smelled gasoline and stagnant water over the oddly pleasant odor of sweating dog coming from his feet. It took him only a moment to recognize the clipped lawn of Loyola University across St. Charles from where he stood, the broad, dark abyss of Audubon Park in front of him. Sal had walked him, somehow, through the clouds or beneath the earth, from one side of Lake Pontchartrain to the other in a matter of minutes.

“Neat trick,” Jude said, when the awe had settled enough for him to speak.

“Yeah,” Sal said. “Here's another one.” He opened his mouth and hacked and coughed, just as he had done when he changed into a raven on the rooftop of the Lowes. In the uncertain light from the streetlamps, though, Jude couldn't see anything come out of the dog's throat, just watched as Sal's dog skin crumpled and emptied. He heard one last wet slurp, and then nothing. Jude waited for the raven to come wriggling from the dog's fur or for a third form to reveal itself, the moment dragging out as cars passed by on St. Charles, as a streetcar groaned its passage along the tracks. Nothing. He bent to one knee and tried to pick up the skin, but it crumbled in

his hands, dry and fragile as rotting paper mache, letting out a faint odor of something long ago decomposed. Jude stood and brushed the dust from his hands, wondering what he was supposed to do now that Salvatore had vanished.

From the street, Audubon Park seemed filled with ink, the oak canopy overhead blocking out any of the weak moonlight that managed to penetrate the clouds above them, the air sticky and cloying, even at night. By day, the park spread itself open, a bright and verdant garden. Once twilight fell, though, it became a pool of shadow in the bend of the river, a dark place for doing dark things. Jude thought of his mother's depiction of Scarpelli, the shadow with teeth, and shivered. He reminded himself that he had followed Scarpelli's ghouls to a mansion just a short distance away. The Park was practically the vampire's backyard. Behind him, as though designed for contrast, Loyala's front lawn shone like the dawn, floodlights burning away the night, illuminating a statue of Christ, his arms thrown wide, comforting.

Of course Jude's killer would be in the darkness, waiting, wondering if Jude would be foolish enough to walk right into his grasp, weaponless and unprepared. And of course Jude was just that stupid. He felt a faint tug pulling him towards the concrete path that wound through the Park, reminiscent of his gift, the way it had guided him before the storm. The sensation was so weak, though, that it could just be his imagination. He heard wings clapping against the heavy air in the same direction. Jude swallowed, balled his fists, and walked out of the light.

Though his vision eventually adjusted to the darkness, only the sidewalk under his feet kept him from wandering in a blind circle. As he walked, following that hesitant, probably imaginary compass needle in his head, Jude could make out the shapes of large structures, some brick, some fitted stone, restrooms and rain shelters, pretty in the daylight but little more than

ruins in the night. He saw the squat clumps of shrubs, large oak trees with their limbs sagging to the ground under their own weight, but to him they were merely shapes, lines and clots of black-on-black where the ink had run thicker and heavier. If only he still had his magician's bag, he could conjure up some light. His heart leaped against his chest, his every footstep a restraint, his limbs straining to move, to run as fast as he could carry himself out of this place and back into the light. Water gurgled somewhere out of sight, an artificial fountain in one of the ponds that doubled as water traps for the golf course that pockmarked the greenery. The darkness, the heat, the liquid slurp, the racing blood in his veins, all of it brought back the memory of why Jude feared the darkness in this city.

It is summer, and night, nearly a year to the day before the storm, a month before Hurricane Ivan will rattle its saber at the city only to break east at the last moment, as storms always, or almost always, seem to do. Jude is somewhere in City Park, crouched down in waist high weeds that rise over his head, along with Cornell Dupree and a voodoo priest, a *bokar* who calls himself Long Snake Albert, with the French pronunciation, Al-bear. Albert's last name is Dorcet, a fact he will have forgotten when he meets Celeste. Earlier, when Jude had asked Albert why he called himself Long Snake, the tall, broad man had smiled for the first and only time Jude would ever see him smile and grabbed his own crotch.

Jude itches from mosquito bites and the pinpricks of sticker bushes, sweat drenches his clothing, and the time he promised Cass he'd be home has passed hours ago. The urge to piss is just about to turn the corner from annoying to painful, and his frustration is starting to make him

nervous. He can feel the lost man they have come to find, can point to him with his eyes closed, but Mourning has sent him along 'for the experience', and Dupree has made it clear that he is running the show.

So they wait, Albert chanting under his breath and rolling a leather pouch between his massive hands, Dupree hunkered down within that trench coat that must be hot as hell, eyes squeezed shut, his tongue poked out, tasting the air like some kind of reptile. Jude thinks of Eli Constant and how things haven't seemed to change. He is once again looking for a lost husband, once again held back by lesser magicians. Jude could lead them right to where they want to go, but instead, his job is to carry the duffel bag of Dupree's tools along with his own satchel.

Just as Jude decides he is going to pee against the nearest tree, to hell with Dupree's orders, the other magician's pale blue eyes open, and he points, right in the direction Jude's gift is straining towards. "There," he says.

No shit, Jude wants to say as he stands, the beginnings of cramps easing from his legs. He lifts the heavy, clunking duffel bag, curious as to what Dupree has given him to carry, why they need such stealth and preparation for a missing person. "Yo," Dupree says, snapping his fingers at him and then pointing at the bag. "Fetch me that lantern, on the hush." Jude unzips the bag and takes out the hand-held lantern, oil burning, judging by the liquid slosh that he hears when he lifts it. He hands it to Dupree who lights the wick with the sudden, harsh flare of a struck match. Before the other magician can drop the shade on the lantern, plunging them back into darkness, Jude sees what he is carrying: another oil lamp; a mallet with a short handle; a long knife in a leather scabbard, one edge curved, like a machete; small plastic flasks, white with black crosses on them; and lengths of round wood, sharpened to a point.

Shit. Holy water, fire, and wooden stakes. Vampires.

The light goes out, and they are moving at a jog, out of the grass and the trees and into an unlit parking lot, empty save for a van on the far side. Jude can taste the blood in the air, a tinge of liquid rust in his mouth that makes him want to spit. As they draw closer, Jude can see the van rocking back and forth, can hear the old shocks protesting, the grunts from within. Some horny couple in the worst place at the worst time, he thinks, until broken glass crunches beneath his feet, until he realizes that the taste of blood grows stronger the closer he gets to the van. Lampposts stretch over the lot, their bulbs dead and shattered.

Jude reaches into the leather satchel hanging from his shoulder, takes out a slim glass rod, and is ashamed at the way his hand shakes. The three of them circle around to the side of the van, its door panel slid open, blackness within. The grunting and the rocking motion have ceased. An eerie stillness accompanies the overpowering stink of blood. Long Snake Albert shakes a handful of stones into the cup of his hand and draws a short knife from his belt. Dupree holds the lantern, poised to open its shade and reveal what is hiding in the van. Jude tries, very hard, not to wet his pants.

“Abomination!” Albert calls out, voice thunderous as a bass drum in the still night. “Reveal yourself and be cleansed!” There is a hiss and a shifting of weight from inside the van. In the same instant that Jude draws a breath, intending to create the spark that will ignite the quiescent flame in the glass he holds, in the same instant that Albert says “now” and casts his stones in an arc in front of him, in the same instant that Dupree raises the lantern and curses at the light that doesn't come from the wick that has burnt out, a slick and lean shape darts from the van and tackles Albert to the ground.

They become a grunting, snarling mass, punctuated by the rise and fall of Albert's knife hand, by the wet squelching noises of someone chewing with his mouth open. Jude speaks his magic and the glass in his hand blazes white, as Dupree snatches the duffel bag from him. The vampire, smoke rising from the wounds Albert's knife has inflicted, his body coated with blood that is far too bright and red to be his own, has his face buried in the join of Albert's legs, his mouth clamped onto the *bokar's* femoral artery.

There are other magics Jude can speak, but fear robs him of his voice, of any rational thought. He rushes forward and kicks the vampire in the ribs, in the ass, in the neck. Jude feels flesh yield and bone crack beneath his toes, but it ignores him, continues feeding as though Jude is not there. Behind him, Jude hears Dupree mutter, "Where the fuck is it?" and then Albert's hand falls to the concrete, his grip loose, the knife slipping from his fingers.

The vampire looks up at Jude, rage and hunger twisting a face that is still, impossibly, a human one, a face that had once brightened when it saw an old friend, had once spoken tender words, had relaxed in sleep and had creased and spread into a wide smile, had once cried into its pillow for fear of the dark, but now only knew a deep and monstrous need, a fathomless hunger it could never fill. The vampire stands, nude, his cock grotesque and bulging from his groin, the wounds on his shoulders and neck closing in front of Jude's eyes. Jude recoils, feels the warmth of his bladder releasing, and then, moving like oil in water, the vampire lunges for him.

Jude raises his arm, a defensive flinch, and the vampire's head snaps forward, sinks his teeth into the meat of Jude's hand. Weakness and confusion, like being drunk, like a fever, rolls over him, and Jude slumps with his back against the van, nearly falling. There is a peculiar sound, as gray begins to tinge the edges of Jude's vision, and he realizes it's the noise of liquid

being gulped. The vampire is killing him, is *drinking* him.

Anger rises from deep in his belly and straightens his spine, clears his vision. Jude spins, getting the vampire in between him and the van, ignoring the pain lancing up through his arm and shoulder as fangs tear at him, and he cries out when the vampire's head hits the van, grating teeth against the bone of his hand. Jude pulls back and slams forward, again and again, straining and shouting with the effort. The vampire's grip loosens, and then vanishes. He pulls away, growling, his dark eyes flashing with hunger and hate, blood, *Jude's* blood, staining his chin.

Jude smashes the burning glass rod in his hand against the vampire's face, and there is a woosh, a gust of wind, and then the scent of grilling steak as flames engulf his head. The vampire shrieks, an unearthly howl that shatters the van's windows and drives Jude to his knees.

Dupree, who Jude had all but forgotten, shoves Jude out of the way and stabs a chunk of wood into the vampire's chest, lifts the mallet and hammers it home, bashing it deeper and deeper, until there is a squeal of punctured metal as the point of the stake is driven into the side of the van. He reaches into his trench coat pocket for another stake and repeats the process, the vampire still screaming, his hands clutched to his burning face. Dupree, his every movement methodical, almost clinically precise, tugs on the vampire's shoulder, assuring himself that the undead monster is pinned. He unscrews the oil reservoir from the lantern and sloshes the pale, viscous fluid onto the pinned vampire. The flames follow the oil, drooling along the vampire's flesh, consuming him.

Curled on the pavement, blood oozing from the bite on his hand, Jude squeezes his eyes shut and plugs his ears with his fingers, but he still hears the vampire's death knell, a howl as keen as a razor, still smells the stink of gasoline and roasting flesh and melting tar. The vampire

screams, and burns, for a long, long time.

When it ends, and Jude can think again, he staggers over to Albert, or what was once Albert, when blood pumped through his veins, air through his lungs, when light filled his eyes. Jude presses his eyelids closed, his fingertips leaving behind spots of blood. He feels he should say something, should honor the man somehow, but the most they have shared is an uncouth joke. The ring of sharp metal against thick leather fills the air, the sound of Dupree taking the machete from its scabbard. Flames dance in a pool of oil beneath the vampire's blackened corpse, shining against the blade, strangely bright.

“Silver,” Dupree says, without looking at Jude. “Always works. Nice job with the fire.” The affected street dialect has left his voice, carrying with it all trace of emotion. Dupree's words are as cold as the blade in his hand. He sets to work like a hunter butchering a kill, hacking and sawing at the vampire's neck, working to separate the head from the body. The blade hisses as it cuts into the vampire's skin. “How's Albert?” he asks.

“He's dead,” Jude says, hoping that Dupree will argue, will insist on checking, will find some hope of rescuing him where Jude has none.

“Put him with the others,” Dupree says.

“The others?”

The head comes free with a wet crunch, the snap of gristle, the grind of bone against bone. There is no blood. “In there,” Dupree says, pointing towards the still darkened interior of the van with the machete's pristine blade. “Put him in there with the others.”

After a few moments of fumbling with the second lantern, his hands slick and sticky and throbbing with pain, Jude manages to shine light into the van to see what Dupree is talking

about. He does not understand, at first, the image that greets him. It is a problem of scale. He expected bodies, has seen corpses before, even those who have died violent deaths. But it takes him longer than he would have believed to understand why two of the bodies are so small. Children.

His throat tightens and stings with bile and Jude turns away, gagging. Even looking up into the night sky, even with his eyes squeezed shut, he sees the inside of that van, the glass stares, the raw, gaping wounds, the bruised and mottled flesh. He wants to vomit, to expel, to scrub everything about this night from his memory, but it has taken hold of him. No matter how he coughs and retches, the evil the vampire has done stays inside.

Once the vampire has been cut and stacked like firewood, Jude and Dupree throw him and Big Snake Albert into the van, douse it inside and out with gasoline and holy water and turn the whole hellish scene into a funeral pyre. While they work, he tells Jude that vampires are unable to enter a home without invitation, with one notable exception. Their own. So the new vampire is instinctively driven to the life it once had, still lusts for its spouse, still remembers its way home.

“That was *his* family?” Jude asks.

“That was his family,” Dupree says as the flames rise higher.

Jude stopped and tried to calm his breathing. Reliving that night in City Park served only to increase his fear. He thought he heard flapping wings somewhere in the darkness, but it could be an owl or his imagination as easily as it could be the shadow's he'd seen the night Tommy died.

Whatever waited for him in Audubon Park, in the night, had killed him once already, true, but like a coward, while Jude slept. Things would go differently this time. As he forced his fear under control, his anger bubbled up to the surface to replace it. Killed in his sleep, like a sick dog. He tasted fire.

Jude rounded a curve in the path and saw light up ahead, the tug of magic in his head growing stronger. As he neared the source of the strange light, it occurred to him that he didn't taste blood as he usually did in the presence of a vampire. Not Scarpelli, then. Someone else. *Something* else. He stepped off the path and into the thick, damp grass, walking towards the light. Stillness draped over him, chirping insects all around him quieting as one, an abrupt silence that strained against his ears. They knew, as he did, that something lurked here, something dangerous.

He scanned the trees, every muscle tensed for the drop from above that Dodge's murderer preferred. There, along the tree line, his magician's bag hung from a branch, twisting and swaying with the slight breeze, recognizable by the whorls and letters cut into the leather. Inside, caged within a doubloon, his gift called to him. Just beyond the satchel, Jude saw the source of the light, cradled in the limb of a huge and ancient oak tree. She wore a loose, flowing gown that left her arms bare, wore her hair in thick, long plaits on either side of her face. She glowed with a soft, unearthly shine.

Cassandra.

Chapter Twenty Two

With one thin eyebrow arched over an eye, full lips crinkled into a disappointed pout, and her bare foot twitching from side to side, Cassandra looked just as Jude remembered, beautiful to him even in her anger. For a moment, he didn't care that her presence here, shining with magic, went against everything he knew about her, didn't care that she might have killed him in his sleep, didn't care that she appeared furious enough to send him to the underworld a second time. All he knew was that the sight of her broke open a half-healed wound within him that he had thought toughened into scar tissue long ago. It hurt to see her face in more than his memory, hurt more than he would have believed, but even the pain felt good, felt better than feeling nothing at all.

Occasionally, in his more maudlin drunken moments, Jude had formulated and debated the perfect line for this meeting, a group of words that would be funny, perhaps self-deprecating, so she knew he'd survived without her, but also romantic and endearing, enough of an apology that she would fall into his arms. Not in forgiveness – she'd been gone too long for that – but maybe a willingness to be persuaded to forgive. Now that he stood here, beneath her like a supplicant before the throne, all those preparations fled from him. “Hey Cass,” he said, wondering as soon as the words left his lips if he'd spoken loud enough for her to hear him up there, if he could bring himself to repeat such a lame moment at a higher volume.

Cassandra folded her arms, nodded once, and resumed her scowl. Jude waited for some response, but the silence stretched out as she held her tongue. Strange. She had never been the silent one, especially when she was angry. He wanted to ask her where she had gone, why she had left, why she hadn't come back. He wanted to know about the aura of magic surrounding

her, if she had been the one to kill him and how she had hidden this amount of power from him. He wanted, more than anything else, to know if she still loved him. But in his shock and confusion, he could not decide which question to ask.

Jude tore his gaze away from her face and saw that in the hollow of her throat, she wore a pearl on a thin silver chain. “Is that the same pearl?” he asked, giving voice to his thoughts in his confusion. “Is that what this is about?”

She lifted a delicate hand, stroked the pearl, said nothing. “Why won't you answer me?” he asked, nearly shouting. Suspicion gnawed at the edge of his thoughts, and it occurred to him that the sort of murderer who would kill someone in their sleep wouldn't be above the use of illusion. “Say something.” His words oozed from his lips in a low, cold growl. Cassandra shook her head and held a fingertip to her lips.

To Hell with this. Jude dug in his pocket for one of the few odds and ends of magic that remained after the theft of the leather satchel hanging far out of reach above him. He pulled out the tin of rose oil and beeswax he'd used to find Thoth's library door. “See this? It lets me look deep. Deep and true.” He felt like a fool yelling up at what might very well be an empty branch but couldn't seem to stop himself. “Thing is, it's a pain in the ass. It stinks, for one, and it's hard to control, for another. I just want to know what's going on, but this stuff will show me everything. Your secrets, your true name.” Jude twisted the top off, pressed his thumb into the balm. “Last chance,” he said, thinking that he'd look like a real jackass if it really was Cass up there. “Show yourself.”

She brushed a strand of hair from her eyes and sighed. A twitch of her fingers across her face and Cassandra's features swept away like smoke, a faint ghost of her eyes and lips floating

in mid-air for a moment before vanishing. A blur remained, a face viewed through the mist on a mirror, which coalesced into the short, spiky hair and the round, grinning face of Regal Sloan. “Is this more pleasing?” she asked, her voice still as husky and slurred as it had been in the hotel room. Thinking of his mother's painting, the blurred face, Jude was able place the accent she tried to hide and all the pieces fell into place. Regal's odd, earthy scent that night in his arms and the old stink that Sal had followed here were one and the same. The pearl that hung around her neck was the one that he'd vomited up. He knew at last who had killed him.

“If we're going to talk,” he said, “I'd rather it were face to face, Lillian.”

A hand grabbed the back of Jude's neck and bent him forward at the waist, so fast that he was pinned before he could react. Jude fought, arms flailing wildly, muscles straining in his abdomen as he tried to stand, but his captor held him with an implacable strength. A second hand squeezed his jaw shut, tight enough to grind his teeth together. A third and a fourth clasped his wrists and wrenched them behind his back, his shoulders groaning in their sockets. In a collection of instants, Jude was restrained and gagged, his assailant unseen and unheard, leaving only the feel of rough, dry fingers on his skin.

A second voice cut though the night, male and heavy with a cockney accent. “I'll have that Lady, then,” he said, from somewhere over Jude's back. “I told you he'd stroll right in, ham'n'cheesy.” Jude recognized the voice from Thoth's library, the partner of the creature of bark and leaves Jude had run from. Though he could see only the grass at his feet, he imagined the scene around him, the hulking presence of Lillian's walking tree bodyguard behind him, the blond-haired faerie off to the side, Lillian, radiant and haughty, far above them. Jude squirmed in his bonds, trying to loosen the tree man's grip, only rubbing his wrists and neck raw against

bark in the process. Two sharp-toed boots stepped into his field of vision, accompanied by the oddly pleasant stink of dark beer and cooking grease. The blond faerie squatted down so he could look into Jude's face, his golden eyes scattered with green flecks, his features as beautiful and perfect and cold as marble.

“At's me china Root's got you 'eld fast,” he said, pointing to the massive presence behind and above Jude, “and Dandy's me fortune.” He smacked Jude's cheek as though he were patting him but hard enough to sting. The faerie's hand was cool and unyielding, like stone that had never felt the sun's warmth. “Gave us the slip in 'at ol' bird's place, innit he, Root? Took us bloody *ages* to get 'im outta 'at pile of books you dumped on 'im.”

Above Jude's head came a creaking groan, a massive pine swaying in a strong wind. Dandy glanced up into what Jude assumed was Root's face.

“Right you are, me lad, right you are,” Dandy said. He brought his attention back to Jude. “Took 'is bleedin' finger off, too, you did. 'E says if he had 'is way, he'd do you the same, see how you like it.”

If Jude could move, he'd show them what finger they could have. Though he knew that his struggles were fruitless, he continued to strain against Root's grip, sweat, maybe blood, running down his back, pooling in his palms. He grunted into his closed mouth, told Dandy to go fuck himself.

Dandy laughed and tweaked Jude's nose. “I do believe he's angry wiv us,” he said to Root. “That's some cheek, innit? The minerals on this thief, takin the piss on them as he's blagged.” He wagged a finger back and forth as though scolding a naughty child. Jude responded to the only word of Dandy's odd wordplay he understood, shouting through clenched

teeth that he was not a thief, managing only a muffled, two syllable moan. The blond faerie cupped a hand behind his pointed ear and leaned close to Jude. “Say again, ol' son? Not a thief, was it?” He shook his head, feigning disappointment. “Root, show this barking bastard wha' he's half-inched, yeah?”

The pressure on Jude's neck and jaw relaxed a fraction, just enough for him to tilt his head back and look at the satchel. An inventory of its contents ran unbidden through his mind, the doubloon that held his gift, the gun case and revolver he'd gotten from Camporesi and Sons, the doppelganger mask, the thunderbolt. He allowed himself the brief, luxurious fantasy of calling the bag to him, of snatching the bolt free and smiting Dandy from his boots.

“Now,” Dandy said, “me and you are gonna have a little natter. Find out how a tosser like you had the knack to take somfin like 'at.” He pointed at the satchel. “But pick your dicky bird's careful like, see? We get so much as a whiff of magic?” He snapped his fingers, a sharp crack that echoed in the small clearing. “Then Root squeezes 'till the fat lady sings. We got an understandin'?” Jude nodded within the small confines of motion his head was allowed. If he strained, he could just barely see Lillian, her chin resting on a dainty fist as though bored. “Right,” Dandy said. “Let's 'ave it, then.”

As soon as Root released Jude's mouth, he shouted Lillian's name, demanded that she release him. Before he could say more, Dandy struck him in the face, hard, a slap across his cheekbone. Dazed, spots flickering in his vision, Jude offered no resistance when the faerie yanked a fistful of his hair and yanked his head back in a torturer's stretch that popped the vertebrae of his spine, pressing their faces close together. The gold of Dandy's eyes grew darker, became smoldering embers, burnished copper.

“You don't 'ave the right to use that name,” he said, breath stinking of stale beer, cold spit flicking onto Jude's face. “To you she is Oberon's Voice, or Your Dread Majesty.” Muscles in Jude's back and shoulders, already aching, started to burn. “And if you turn them mince meats on her once more, you'll wish you 'adn't, ol' son, I promise you that.”

Above them, Lillian called out in a deep, sonorous voice, speaking in a guttural language Jude didn't understand, though it sounded very familiar. When she finished, Dandy laughed, and the tree thing holding him shivered, his leaves whispering despite the absence of a breeze.

Though Jude's eyes were clenched to thin slits, he saw Dandy nod at Root as he released him. His hands and mouth were still restrained, but he was allowed to slump forward, dropping to his knees. Sucking in what air he could through his nose, he tried to blink away the slow moving fog that filled his thoughts. Lillian had killed him once already, had pretended to be Regal and fucked him, and then murdered him in his sleep. Why was she toying with him now? Rage surged through him, a wave that rose from his stomach, crested in his beating heart, and broke against his clenched teeth, made pitiful by how easily his strength and his magic were stymied.

Vines cinched around his wrists and coiled around one of his ankles. He heard a dry snap, a breaking limb, and then Root took his place beside Dandy, his bark covered face bent into a grimace, his stump-feet hammering the grass, his elongated, branch-like arms creaking as they swung. One of his four limbs ended in an abrupt, jagged edge. Root's hand still clamped across Jude's mouth, apparently sacrificed by the wooden man to ensure Jude's silence. The vines twitched and pulled at Jude's hands and foot, sent him flopping to the dirt and then snatched him off the ground, leaving him dangling upside down in mid-air. Inch by inch, he rose higher and higher. It occurred to him that to the three faeries in the clearing, he looked exactly

as he did on the tarot card, hanging by one foot, his arms clasped behind him.

When Jude's head drew level with Dandy's, the faerie grinned with malice and folded his arms across his chest. "You're in for it now, you Aristotle," he said. "Friar Tucked good'n'proper. I'd 'ave done you quick and clean, but Oberon's Voice . . ." He elbowed the man-shaped tree next to him and chuckled, shaking his head. "She'll make it last, she will."

The power within Jude pounded through his veins, churned in his gut, strained to be called forth into wrath and ruin, expanding against his skin until Jude feared he would burst. He longed to scream defiance, to vent his anger and let curses of terrible potency spill from his lips. If he was to die, let it be on his feet, with power in his grip and menace in his eye, like a man, like a magician. Like the son of a god. The burning thunder inside him became painful, a cramp in his gut and shards of glass in his throat, a fever across his skin. One way or another, he would die; if Lillian didn't kill him, his stifled magic would. The thought was oddly pleasant, a lack of options that was somehow freeing.

He closed his eyes and took a long breath, trying to calm his thoughts and the fire raging in his blood. Just at the moment of crisis, when the slightest touch would have split Jude open like an over-ripe plum, he took control of himself and quieted his magic, becoming a deep, still pool at the center of him. He relaxed in his bonds, tension easing out of him like spilled water. Rather than an intense, scorching rush of an explosion, his magic radiated across his skin like sunlight, a comforting and sacred heat. This was the opposite of the chilly underworld, the dark emptiness of the Devourer's maw. He thought of saints and martyrs, Buddhist monks self-immolating, hunger strikes and bravery in the face of the torturer's knife. They had taken his capacity for violence, not his will. So what if they killed him? He'd been dead before. If these

were to be his last moments, he would not spend them in fear and pain. If the Devourer was his fate, he'd carry this hot, inner light with him to the depths and would burn the bastard's throat on the way down.

Jude smiled at the thought.

He swung in gentle, erratic arcs like the pendulum of a clock that no longer kept time, the vine creaking with every change in motion. A pungent, sticky liquid oozed onto his cheek from Root's severed wrist, sap or blood, Jude didn't know what flowed through the tree man's veins. He heard a flutter of wings, so faint it might be his imagination and wondered if Dodge's murderer had come to watch him die. As the blood rushed to his head, his feet tingled and his lips felt swollen, and idle, random thoughts kept springing to his mind, like how his corpse had gotten from the hotel room to the cemetery and what had happened to Salvatore. The cross that Augustus gave him slipped from his shirt and fell against the wooden hand clasped across his mouth. It hissed, like frying bacon, and below him, Root howled with a voice like a hurricane's wind.

Hope blossomed in Jude's chest, and with it, an idea as the hand that silenced him fell away. He spoke the word Dodge had taught him, the word that meant 'open', once for the bonds around his wrists and once for the loop around his ankle, grabbing the cross in a tight fist as soon as his hands were free, as he dropped to the earth. Jude managed to twist just enough in his brief plummet to avoid landing on his head, struck the loose dirt and thick grass with a bone-jarring thud, the leather cord snapping from around his neck, the nail bound to the cross gouging his palm. It knocked the breath from him, a gasp of red-hot vapor forced from his lips. A spasm shook his chest as he fought to draw in more air. He sprawled in the dirt, arms splayed wide,

desperate but unable to stand. Dandy appeared above him and lifted him by the front of his shirt with an effortless strength.

The faerie's perfect lips twisted in a sneer. The whites of his eyes seemed filled with blood. The faerie opened his mouth to say something vulgar and threatening, no doubt, but Jude had had enough. He drew back a fist, the one that held the cross and nail, and punched Dandy in the face as hard as he could. There was a crack, like a gunshot, and a rift opened in the faerie's porcelain cheek, a sickly green light spilling out. He dropped Jude, who landed on his feet and backed away, skin flushed and heart thumping. Dandy touched the crack in his face, the wound that bled a glowing mist, his breath coming in shudders.

Jude risked a glance at Root to be sure he fought only the blond faerie and turned back in time to see Dandy launch at him, hands outstretched and a low keening coming from his throat. Jude hit him again, with the same fist, and the faerie went limp, his legs crumpling beneath him and his hate-filled eyes rolling back in his head.

Stepping over the blond faerie, towards the tree man but with his eyes focused on Lillian, Jude suppressed a grin, amazed that it had actually worked. He hoped to look intimidating, but Oberon's Voice laughed, shouted something in her strange language. Root made a hesitant move towards Jude, his long multiple limbs held up in what, moments before, would have been menacing. Jude didn't know if the tree man had the same weakness as the faeries, but it was worth a try. He raised a fist and spat fire into the open palm of his other hand, gave the wooden creature his best, 'don't fuck with me' stare. Points for showmanship, at least.

Root blinked first, his rough face shifting down and away. He looked up at Lillian, speaking like the wind through the leaves, and turned away, becoming still, just another tree.

Above him, the faerie sighed and pushed herself from her seat and floated to the ground, her dress billowing around her like clouds driven by a harsh wind, spitting a constant stream of her odd, thick language. Cursing, by the sound of it. As she drew closer, Jude breathed in the fresh loam and approaching thunderstorm scent of her. She stalked right up to him, calm confidence written on her face, maybe even a little amusement in her lavender eyes. With a negligent flick of her fingers, as though absentmindedly shooing away a fly, she brushed the crackling flames from Jude's hand and jabbed him in the stomach with her slim hand.

Though she stood no higher than Jude's chest, her blow knocked him back a couple of steps, made him struggle for balance. Jude knew her strength, knew her murderous intent, but still, she looked so delicate that he cringed from the thought of hitting her. He remembered, with a roil of nausea in his gut, the fear in Celeste's eyes, the threat he had made to Leon Carter. Suddenly, though he had come here for revenge, he wanted nothing more to do with violence if he could avoid it. "I will hit you if I have to," Jude said. "It'll hurt, I promise." He held open his fist, showed her the cross in his palm.

She smirked. "That sort of power requires faith," Lillian said, "and I know you are not a true believer. You told me as much, remember? Right before I fucked you?" She leaned forward, biting her lower lip, a provocative gesture Jude had last seen when she wore Regal's face. "Even if you were a believer, I am of the Fae, you foolish boy. My kind were ancient when your god's people were sleeping in caves." She laughed, a deep sound, like rolling thunder.

Jude shook his head. "It's not the cross you should fear, Lillian. It's the iron." As Lillian's eyes narrowed, she hissed, cat-like, and flew at him, almost too quick for him to react.

Jude threw his arms up, meaning only to defend himself, but the back of his hand struck the side of her head. With the iron, cupped in his palm, she dropped to the ground as though he'd hit her with a brick. She lay there, prone and still, a black stain, so dark it looked purple, spreading through her silver hair. The light cast from her skin dimmed, hiding the tree man and the other faerie in shadow. She rolled onto her back, groaning. Jude let the cross, the cold iron that was poison to the fae, dangle above her face on its leather cord.

She glared up at him with lavender eyes streaked with black, lifted her chin and bared her throat. "I am bested," she said. "All I ask is that you send me to the Summer Fields quickly. Do not let me linger."

Jude believed the defeat he heard in her voice, just as he believed that she would lie there and let him make an end of her. The thought nauseated him. "I don't want to kill you," he said. "Even though that would make us even. All I want are answers. Swear that you will answer my questions truthfully and cause me no harm, and I'll let you live."

She hissed and spat and cursed, glared at him with naked malice, swore that he would regret the day he was born, but eventually, beneath the kryptonite influence of the iron nail, she wilted, and in a quiet, broken voice, swore that she would answer him true and do him no harm, the blackness leaching out of her eyes as she spoke. Jude asked her what she was doing here, why she had stolen his satchel, and why she had killed him.

Her answers were crisp and measured, like a politician giving canned responses. Nature god though she was, she told him, she was also a servant, the Voice From Afar, of Oberon, Lord of the Fae. The satchel was far more than just a pouch with a magic clasp. It was itself a thing of power, one of her people's treasures, and she had come to New Orleans to retrieve it. It could

hold great weights without becoming heavier, could be sealed and appear empty, and things kept within would be hidden from magics that would otherwise spy them out. She swore she did not kill Dodge, nor did she know who did, or why he had been murdered. Jude's death, which she admitted she carried out with her own hands, had been his punishment for stealing it.

When Jude explained that he hadn't stolen it, that he had earned it in trade from Dodge Reynaud, crystalline tears welled in her eyes. "Then I have committed a grave trespass," she said. "And my life is forfeit."

Jude's hand throbbed. His knuckles were swollen and split and a hot gash spanned his palm. He lowered the iron nail and stepped away from her. "I'm not going to kill you," he said. "Just let me have the bag back, and we'll go our separate ways."

As soon as the iron was far enough from her, Lillian bounced to her feet, the black threads lancing again through her eyes, a cold, cruel smile slicing across her face. "Six questions you asked, and answered truly I have, three times full, though three times I did not speak the truth entire. I will not harm you, nor will I cause you harm through word or deed, but I will not work to keep you safe, either. I have abided by what I swore, but I will do no more than that." She rose into the air as she spoke, her silver hair floating above her head, as though tousled by an unseen wind or borne on ocean's currents. "The pouch I concede to you as recompense for your death, but when you next you die, and it will come soon, I shall reclaim what is mine." She laughed, and it was devoid of warmth, the inhuman mirth of a raging storm, of the quaking earth, of a crashing wave. Lillian glowed brighter for just an instant, long enough for Jude to see that while they talked Root and Dandy had vanished, and then her light grew too intense to look at, a cold star hanging amidst the trees. She disappeared, leaving Jude behind, alone and blinded and

in the darkness, his satchel far out of reach.

In the night, unmistakable now, Jude heard the sound of wings.

Chapter Twenty Three

While Jude's eyes tried to recover from Lillian's incandescence, he listened as the wings snapping against the air grew closer. He heard grunts and muttered curses, a scraping sound, and then felt the breeze of something heavy rushing by his face, the thump of it landing at his feet. Two small claws grabbed his shoulder and Jude jumped, crying out, tripping over whatever lay on the ground. He yelled again when he broke his fall with his injured hand, its throbbing ache flaring up.

“Shit! Sorry, sorry, it's me!” Sal said, the weight of his raven's shape dropping onto Jude's knee.

Jude threw his head back and laughed despite the hurt and the fear and the darkness. He'd been close, so very close, to dying again, and everything, the hot night around him, the knot of pain at the end of his wrist, the stink of his own sweat, even the damp grass he sat in, soaking into the seat of his pants, filled him with a breathless, ineffable joy. Some of it, he knew, came from the quiet power that still lurked with him, the unreleased magic his rage had called up. Some of it had to do with piecing together the scratching sound overhead and the thump at his feet, the realization that Sal had flown up to the satchel and dragged it from its branch. Mostly, though, his amusement came from simply still being alive.

Jude's vision cleared enough for him to see the shapes of trees in the night, the satchel at his feet, but he couldn't see Sal, though he could still feel the bird's weight on his leg. “Where did you go?” he asked, brushing dirt away from the gash on his palm. “I thought you split on me.”

“I was here the whole time,” Sal said, the weight of his body moving from Jude's knee up

to his shoulder. "I was just, you know, invisible."

Jude chuckled and stood, the raven shifting with him as he moved to pick up his satchel. He was surprised at how comforting it felt to slide its leather strap over his arm. Like he'd been naked without his bag of tricks. "I didn't know you could do that," he said.

"Yeah, well, I can't always, so I didn't want to tell you and then screw it up. Plus, if you thought I was gone, you wouldn't be looking all over for me and give me away. I didn't know what the hell we would be up against in there, but I knew it smelled old and nasty. So I figured we could use a, whatcha callit, an element of surprise."

"Plus," Jude said, "if Lillian couldn't see you, she couldn't catch you and eat you." Jude felt the bird's weight shift from claw to claw.

"Yeah, something like that," he said, having the good grace to sound embarrassed.

Sal fell silent as Jude picked his way through thick grass and the coils of oak roots that arched out of the earth and then back within, headed toward the path that would lead them out of Audubon Park. The magician's bag slapped against his thigh as he walked, its presence filling Jude with potential, with ideas for what to do with the days and nights that remained to him. He felt good, no, *great*, his muscles relaxed and his stride confident and all but humming with energy. He tried to pick apart what Lillian had told him, tried to decipher which had been truths and which had been half-truths. She'd said she was in New Orleans for the satchel, but what, then, had she been doing disguised as Regal Sloan, bound by iron and in the clutches of Cornell Dupree?

Jude walked out of the darkness and into the yellowed, flickering light of a streetlamp, St. Charles all but deserted this time of night, the only other sign of life a streetcar, way down the

tracks, ambling in his direction.

“So, uh, what now?” Sal asked, still perched on his shoulder.

“Now we go pay a visit to Cornell Dupree,” Jude said. “And we ask him what he was doing with the faerie and how, exactly, he's involved with Scarpelli.”

“Scarpelli. That's the vampire, right?”

“That's right,” Jude said. The streetcar rumbled and squealed to a stop in front of them, its doors folding open.

The raven on his shoulder cursed, quietly. “So I'll just stay invisible, then?” he asked.

Jude smiled. “That's right,” he said again.

Inside, the car was almost empty: a couple of college kids in the front, arms around one another and each staring at their cell phones, an older man slumped against the window, awareness stolen away by either alcohol or exhaustion. A chill of *deja vu* skipped up Jude's neck, and he glanced at the driver, a thin young man with his shoes off, one leg curled underneath him, half-expecting to see the skull-faced god there.

Jude sat in the back where the breeze from the open windows hit him cool and strong, where he could talk to the invisible bird on his shoulder without looking like a madman. He rummaged through the satchel, reassuring himself that Lillian hadn't emptied it out, but looking for one thing in particular. When he found it, when he touched the smooth, curved edge of it, he felt that familiar tingle in his fingertips, like a shock of static electricity that pulsed over and over again, the city's lost reaching out to him. Remembering what Saturday had done in the afterlife, the impulse he himself had felt when his mother had handed him the coin, and before he could talk himself out of it, Jude pulled the doubloon that held his gift out of the satchel, placed it on

his tongue like some metallic, stinging Communion wafer, and swallowed it whole.

His throat stretched around the coin, and for one heart-stopping moment Jude thought it would stick there, would choke him, but it slipped down inside of him and opened, like a blossom of sunlight, like a shot of strong liquor into an empty stomach. That electric charge spread throughout his body, a crackle of energy that stretched and wound its way through him. His vision dimmed, color and light leaching out of the world, and he slumped in the wooden bench, his ass easing towards the edge as his body went slack. He saw all the city's lost all at once, their distant eyes, their weak smiles, heard their voices, thick with regret or despair, could taste the salt of their tears, the stink of their self-neglect. They grew and grew within him, congealing into one unified, hollow place within the city, its terrible, anguished silence, like the choked scream of a nightmare, the city's longing for its lost voice.

Then, with a deep, indrawn breath of cold air, sweet with the flavor of the trees lining the tracks, Jude returned to himself, his heart beating once again, whole in a way he hadn't felt since the storm. His gift rode his pulse, seeped into his bones like the throaty growl of a jazz trombone, its return a balm to a part of his soul that had been hurting for so long he hadn't believed it could ever be healed. He could still feel New Orleans' loss within him, but it was a presence and not an absence, a stone lodged in his heart, something calling to be found. The magic he'd known his entire life settled back into him, a sense of rightness, of direction, swinging back and forth in his mind like a compass needle searching for North. He thought of Scarpelli, of Cornell Dupree and the half-formed plan that had been building since he'd left Audubon Park, and the needle caught, held itself in unwavering agreement.

Jude took another deep breath and opened his eyes, wiped tears he hadn't realized he'd

shed from his cheeks. For the first time in years, he knew, with the certainty he'd relied on since he was a child, that he was going in the right direction.

“The fuck was that?” Sal asked, shaking Jude from his thoughts. His voice came from somewhere in front of Jude, perched on the back of the seat in front of him, probably. The streetcar shuddered beneath them, slowing as it approached the bend in the tracks between St. Charles and Carrollton.

“It was my heart,” Jude said. “That's what Dodge was trying to tell me. Not the heart of the city. He was telling me to find my own heart.”

“Not to be a dick or anything,” Sal said, “but why ain't it in your chest like everybody else?”

Jude grinned. “Not the chunk of meat that moves my blood,” he said. “I'm talking about my heart, the thing at the core of me. The part of me, the part of all of us, that makes us who we are.”

“Oh,” the raven said. Jude searched the space where Sal's voice was coming from but saw nothing, not even a glimmer of magic, to indicate where he might be. “That's a hell of a thing to lose.”

Jude thought back to Saturday ripping open his chest beneath the river, to the card game where Scarpelli claimed that his wager had been a “broken little thing.” He remembered Leon Carter telling him that his darkness didn't come from the blackness of his magic, but from his heart, remembered the despair that had torn through him when he'd returned to his empty home, his broken city, after the storm, the hole inside of him that had grown larger and larger since Dodge had given him the satchel, since he'd pushed Cass further and further away. He pulled the

cord hanging above the window, its jittery clacking signaling the driver. Scarpelli's huge house came into view. "Yeah," Jude said. "A hell of a thing."

Outside, back in the thick heat of the night, his view of the mansion blocked by the tall hedges growing above and through the bars of the wrought iron fence, the raven perched on one shoulder, the satchel's strap on the other, the lingering metal aftertaste of the doubloon strengthening into the fresh blood flavor of a nearby vampire, Jude dug through his magician's bag of tricks, looking for the tools he'd need, explaining his semblance of a plan to Salvatore. When he finished, he held the gun case he'd found in Camporesi and Sons, the stub of a candle, and a piece of chalk.

"That's pretty ballsy," Sal said. "Big brass ones. You really think it'll work?"

Jude checked the time on his phone, long after midnight. Plenty of time. "It'll work," Jude said. "I know it will." But as he spoke those words, the compass needle in his head began to swing as the path in front of him suddenly became uncertain.

Interlude

You watch, from above, as the Adversary struggles against the plant creature and the foul-mouthed one and the shape changer. You know that the Master would have you intervene, but you have come to find some measure of enjoyment in your defiance, in what was, not long ago, agony. You see now that this pain, like your hunger, is something you can ignore, if you choose. You wait on the wind, unsure if you want the Adversary to perish at the hands of the nature beings or to prevail so that you can look into His eyes as He dies this time. You watch as He escapes their bonds, as He fights, as He humbles the shape changer.

There is something below that entices you, that calls to your hunger, and so you ignore the Master's will burning within and descend, following the plant thing and the wounded one. You perch among the tree limbs, looking down. The one with the cut on its face is cursing again in its strange accent. The accent is an illusion, a product of a time and a place when the being that speaks is tied to neither. Just the same, there is something beautiful about it, coarse and refined all at once, like a faceted diamond pulled impossible and perfect from living rock.

The wooden one says something in its rustling-leaves language, something you do not understand, and that, too, entices you. There is much you do not understand, but you did not know that there were entire tongues you did not know. Curious. Perhaps it is within the tongue itself that the power you seek resides.

You drop from the tree, falling one crystal clear moment through space, and plant one of your feet on the broken faced one's knee, splintering it. The sensation is delightful, as is the sound. As is the sound that comes from its throat. It falls to the ground, gasping, clawing through the soil, trying to crawl away, urgent in its terror. You leave it, for now. It will not get

far.

The wooden one tries to hide, pressed against the huge oak behind it. It fools your eyes but not your hunger. Through your hunger, it calls to you. You scrape your nails across its bark-skin, reveling in the sensation as it parts beneath your hands, as it moans, a sound like the wind in the trees, a sound you do understand.

It reaches toward your face with its many arms, stick fingers bent into claws. You break the hands into kindling, blood racing in your veins. A thought occurs to you, terrible and pure. The tree thing is an abomination, neither plant nor animal, and must be cleansed. Though it struggles in your grip, breaking more of itself in your hands, you push it against the oak and then into it, forcing the tree to open itself, to take the abomination into its embrace. First the body, then the shoulders, then you bend and twist its long, thin legs back on themselves. It occurs to you that you might be killing the tree as well, that you have driven a spike into its heart. You shiver.

All that remains of the wood thing is its head, but something is missing. You trace a line down its cheek, cutting deep, matching it to its partner. Like the other one, its wound seeps a sickly green light and a viscous sap. Its cry is delicious, like nothing you have ever heard, nothing a mere human is capable of hearing. Gently, wanting it to last, you ease the wood thing's head into the tree, covering the wound, the cheek, only one eye and the mouth remaining, a silent howl disguised as knots in the wood. It will take a long time to die, you think, as you lick the sap from your fingers. Perhaps it will have time to understand, as you do now, the source of its pain.

Behind you, you are surprised to find that the foul-mouthed one has gotten farther than

you anticipated, has managed to rise to one leg and is moving in a shambling hop. Interesting. Perhaps this one will last, will allow you to savor as you eat. You cast it back down to the earth where it belongs. You tear its clothes away and, with an outstretched finger, run a line of fire down its glittering chest from the hollow of its throat, between its nipples, down to where a human would have a navel. The skin splits open like a ripe tomato, green blood and twisting entrails spilling out onto the earth. Golden eyes widen, bulging from their sockets. A thin, strained gasp escapes it.

“Shh,” you say, bringing your finger to one side of its throat, to cut, to feed. “Shh.”

Chapter Twenty Four

Jude looked up from the chalk lines on the concrete, the runes and the circles within circles, felt it straining towards completion. Just another line, a short, curved stroke right there, and the magic would snap into place. The short candle sat off to the side, a wisp of flame dancing above it. In the center of the occult markings on the pavement, at its heart, the gun case waited, closed, a thick rectangle of pale wood. Jude's heartbeat quickened now that the moment was at hand. He shifted the weight of the satchel at his back, comforting himself with its presence. He had to do this, needed to find out what Dupree knew about Lillian and Scarpelli and the whole mess. The other magician's words, from their standoff in the antique shop, kept echoing in Jude's ears. *You're like me*, Dupree had said. *I can smell it*. Jude could taste blood, thick and strong.

“You remember what to do?” Jude asked.

“Yeah,” Sal said. “It ain't complicated. Quit stalling. This shit is starting to make me nervous.”

Jude brushed the chalk dust from his hands and nodded. “You're right,” he said. “I've already died once, right?”

“Yeah,” Sal said. As Jude walked toward the side door, using the same entrance he'd used the last time he'd been here, one of the last things he'd done before he died, what they both knew went unspoken, a chilly truth hanging in the night: there were things worse, much worse, than death.

* * *

Inside, the huge, cold house remained just as Jude remembered it, lavish surroundings that seemed only for show, kept neat and tidy to the point of sterility. Jude couldn't imagine the vampire's bloated corpse reclining in an armchair, reading one of the books that lined the shelves, or perched on the plush, expensive sofa, watching a Saints game on the huge television. The entire home, like the vampire himself, was a disguise, a shell that held no life within.

Jude left a trail behind him, smudges of dirt from his shoes, the heat of his breath, the subtle stink of his body. His very presence was an intrusion, an invasion of the living into the tomb of the dead. He grinned, thinking of using Scarpelli's toilet, of leaving his piss behind, an animal marking his territory. The thought, foolish and distracting, also took some of the bite out of his fear.

He crept up the stairs towards that strange room where he had fought Dupree. With every step the taste of blood grew stronger, much stronger than before, until his saliva felt thick and warm, viscous as it ran down his throat. He reached the door, the blue light once again spilling from the room within, trying to decide what had changed, why the sensation was so much more intense. Was it his renewed gift, his own magic warning him that he was in a vampire's den? Or had his own return from the grave made him more in-tune with the ways of the dead and the undead?

He opened the door to gray stone walls and frigid air, to torches lit with blue flames, to the window he had crashed through the last time he was here, repaired since his death, to Cornell Dupree and a naked, tattooed woman on the raised dais, and the understanding of why the blood taste in his mouth seemed so strong. The vampire named Umberto Scarpelli, not asleep in the earth of his grave as Jude had thought but hovering, bloated and bruised and huge and powerful,

over the supine woman, his fangs bared. They both turned at Jude's entrance, vampire and magician, the whites of Dupree's eyes tinged with red, Scarpelli's twin pools of crimson. In that instant, with the man and the god standing next to one another, their movements and their eyes and the shape of their faces mirroring one another, Jude realized the connection between them. Scarpelli and Dupree. Vampire and magician.

Father and son.

“Take care of this,” Scarpelli said glancing at Dupree before returning to his meal, sinking his fangs deep into the unconscious woman in front of him with a soft, meaty slurp. A horrid slurping, gulping sound filled the room. Dupree stepped forward, his face blank and his lips moving in the silent articulation of some magic.

Jude ran, crashing through the hallway, knocking a painting from the wall, nearly stumbling on his way down the stairs. He gathered his legs underneath him and sprinted for the door, certain that Dupree followed only a step behind, summoning dread magics and preparing to strike him down. Time seemed to slow, like something from a nightmare. The open doorway and the night and the marks he'd prepared stretched further and further away from him, his legs churning through wet sand, hardening cement. Light flickered at the edges of his vision. A sharp and cold blast pressed against his back, the effects of an unleashed spell Jude hadn't heard over the crash of his breath in his own ears. A bright shape plunged into the doorjamb in front of him, another stabbed the floor at his feet, and a third traced a cold line across his shoulder and went slicing into the curtains.

Jude punched through the doorway and into the hot night air, certain that if he hadn't left the door open when he entered he'd be dead already. He tiptoed, as fast as he dared, through the

lines written on the concrete, like a fatal game of hopscotch, reached the center and dropped to his knees, tearing his jeans and scraping his skin. A word wheezed from gasping lungs, a scratch of chalk with a hand numb with pain and clumsy around swollen knuckles, and the circle tightened around him, pressing against his skin, the protective magic that Eli Constant had taught him so long ago.

Sparks flashed in the air around him as whatever magic Dupree had hurled at him crashed against the barrier of magic Jude had called up. Still kneeling on the hot concrete, his knee throbbing in counterpoint to his wounded hand, Jude opened the gun case, kept his eyes down, hoping Dupree would recognize it and fall for his bluff. He understood, now, why the other magician had been so confident in the antique shop. Dupree was not, as Jude was not, merely a magician. Like Jude, Cornell Dupree had the blood of something inhuman in his veins and could, like Jude, call up magics that most could not. But unlike Jude, who was a nephilim, the half-breed of an angel and a human, Dupree was something Jude had only heard about before. Half-human, half-vampire. Dhampir.

Dupree let out that high-pitched giggle that he shared with his father as he walked out of the shadow of the house and into the glare of the floodlights. He held a pearl-handled razor in a loose grip, its blade glittering above his hand, a sliver of moonlight. Beneath his coat, absurd in the heat, he wore a pinstripe suit, no tie and dark loafers. He took in the markings on the pavement and shook his head, ran slender fingers through his lank, greasy hair.

Jude took the gun from its case, that strange pain lancing into his palm once more, although this time his gift read the aura of loss that surrounded it and whispered to him the revolver's history. A vengeful spirit inhabited its metal curves and long, grooved barrel, a cursed

and lost soul that shared a small measure of its constant agony with anyone who dared touch the gun. There was more, much more, but Jude pushed it to the side to focus on who, and what, he faced. He lifted the revolver and tried to aim it at Dupree, but the bite of it proved too much. The revolver landed on the concrete with a crack, as though he had dropped a far heavier weight.

Again the dhampir giggled, a mad, maddening, sound. “Jude, Jude, Jude,” he said, a mockery of disappointed sadness in his voice, “we've been through this with that gun once before, remember?”

Jude let his head droop to his chest as though he had gambled and lost. He just had to string Dupree on a little more and hope the vampire took his time with his meal, as sick as that thought was. “I didn't think you recognized me,” Jude said, his words echoing against the wall of his protective circle, odd in his ears, like listening to a recording of his own voice.

“I didn't,” the dhampir said, “not in the antique shop anyway.” Dupree studied the edge of his blade, tilting it back and forth in the light before flipping it up into its handle, a smooth, practiced gesture. Jude noticed that the dialect had slipped out of his speech, all the 'bros' and slang inflection vanishing, the same as it had that night in City Park. “I'd never smelled the power in your blood,” Dupree said, “not before that night. With that mask of yours, I thought you were a new player in town.” He licked his lips. “But now? Now I think I'd recognize you anywhere.” Drawing in a deep breath through his nostrils, eyes closed and a smile creasing his face, Dupree let out a sigh of contentment. “I'm really going to enjoy this, you know. Not just feeding off the power in your veins, although that will be nice, too. I'm going to really enjoy watching you bleed.”

The dhampir looked down at the lines written in chalk, the small circle where Jude

crouched within a larger one, the pentagram that joined them, the lit candle that sat on the pavement, an inch from where the points intersected. A needle of anxiety slipped into Jude's heart when Dupree's line of sight passed over the candle. Dupree clicked his tongue, turned his red-stained eyes back to Jude. "This," he said, pointing with one long, dirty fingernail at the chunk of wax and its meager flame, "belongs here." He twitched his finger to show the crucial juncture, the fulcrum of the design where It should be. "Without it, only that little circle has any power, not the whole working." Clicking his tongue again, he lifted the thumb with the brass ring, teasing Jude with the djinn imprisoned inside. "See, if you had done this right, you might have kept him out. But like this?" He frowned with mock gravity. "Ten minutes? Maybe? Too bad that gun of yours won't work, cursed like it is. You could have saved yourself the pain and me the time."

Jude waited, muscles tensed, jaw clenched. He'd planned for this, for all of this, but he hadn't thought waiting out Dupree would be so hard. He knew the magician would fuck with him, would toy with him like a cat playing with its food. He hadn't known the metaphor would be literal, that Dupree hungered for his blood. He kept thinking of the flaws in his plan. What if Dupree messed with the outer circle? What if he could sense Salvatore's presence, could smell him somehow? What if Dupree was only waiting for his father?

The dhampir did none of these things. The magic on the ground had been written for a very specific purpose, and that purpose was a challenge to Dupree's power, a goad, a dare to hit with all his strength. It worked.

"See," Dupree said, "this is how this goes down. I let my dog off his chain." He toyed with the ring on his thumb, the parody of street tough creeping back into his voice. "And he

cracks open that weak play of yours like a oyster. Then I cut you open.” He gestured with the razor. “I cut you open and I eat you. You cool with that?”

Jude said nothing, did everything he could to seem as though he'd lost, as though despair had hollowed him out instead of the desire for Dupree to strike filling him, the coiled tension of a trap ready to spring. He kept his eyes forward, on the brass ring, afraid that if he looked anywhere else he would search for Sal and give the plan away. The ring glistened as Dupree lifted it to his lips then vanished as he cupped his other hand around it and his mouth, whispering to the being, the living storm of pure magic imprisoned within. Something rose from the ring that defied the mind's attempts to rationalize it. It seemed a burning fog, or lightning-streaked clouds, or thick smoke glowing orange with the flames that created it. The djinn flowed through the air, a shapeless mass of power with glaring, white-hot eyes. Despite the jolt of fear that rose up his spine, Jude allowed himself a smile. Checkmate.

The djinn threw itself at Jude, striking the barrier with a crash that jostled his bones and shook his teeth. It hammered, again and again, concussions battering the air around Jude like constant thunder, like the bass drums of a Mardi Gras parade turned malevolent. The fog of it swirled around and around, enveloped him in thick smoke, all but obscuring Dupree and the house and the night sky, until Jude stood alone in a world of howling wind and lashing storm clouds, untouched in the eye of the hurricane. “Now!” he yelled, hoping Sal could hear him over the noise of the djinn's onslaught.

A heartbeat passed, and then another, an agonizing stretch where doubt slid into the cracks in Jude's heart, just as the djinn searched for a seam in his magic. Then he felt the tightness along his skin, much stronger than before, of the outer circle taking hold. Sal, silent

and invisible, had nudged the candle where it belonged, at the apex of the pentagram, completing the spell, completing the second circle. One wall of magic within another, trapping the djinn within the boundaries of Jude's will.

The djinn felt it too. It bashed against the inner circle to get at Jude, harder and harder. A jagged crack splintered the air between them. Pain spiked through Jude's temples at the force of the djinn's wrath against Jude's strength. "Hush," he said, a simple spell that would have been pitiful had it not been for the power of the runes surrounding them giving it strength, the written magic that drew on the rules that bound the chaos of the djinn into a physical presence. Instantly the winds ceased, the fog around him vanished, leaving behind only a face made of fire, chubby and indistinct save for its rage, floating at the seam in the air it had created. Now that Jude could see, he saw Sal, in his dog's skin, holding Dupree at bay with bared teeth. He wished he could have seen Dupree's expression when Sal leaped from his invisible raven's shape, a growling beast with slavering fangs appearing, seemingly, from nowhere. Amusing as the scene was, Jude knew the spirit wouldn't hold Dupree captive for long.

"Release me," the djinn said, his breath forcing its way into Jude's circle, hot and dry and heavy with power.

"Tell me your name," Jude said.

"Release me," it repeated, louder now, an undertone of barely restrained threat in its low, burning growl.

"First, you tell me your name."

Despite the magics Jude had etched onto the pavement, despite the command he had given it to be still, the djinn rose above him, its flaming face shifting to that of a giant fist,

slamming down against the thin wall of rules and willpower that separated them. Jude could hear it, could *feel* it howling to be set free, its hatred of being caged digging into Jude's bones, thrashing around in his mind. Jude shouted into the cacophony, swore that he would undo his spell if it would abide by the rules that bound it. Jude had but one request, and that was its name.

Again, it fell silent with an abruptness that was as striking as its rage. It pressed its lips close to the seam it had torn in the air to try to reach him and whispered its name, so softly that Jude barely heard it over Sal's barking and Dupree's cries. Jude reached down to the gun case and picked up the small brass flask, once used to hold powder to hand-make bullets for the antique revolver, now empty. He ran a fingernail along the spiraled groove on its surface, whispered a silent plea for luck, and then he called out the nearly unpronounceable collection of syllables that was the djinn's name.

The living storm raged around him, writhing in frustration. "You swore!" it screamed. "You swore!"

"I swore to undo my spell," Jude said. "And I will. But first, I bind you. I bind you by stone and by sky, I bind you with my words and with my will." He held the flask overhead, hoping he had remembered this correctly, knowing that one misstep would be the end of him. "I bind you with brass shining bright and with the circle unending. I bind you with the dust of my bones and the divine blood in my veins." Jude scuffed away the chalk at his feet, the protective circle falling away, the djinn surging forward to make an end of him. "I bind you with your name!" he yelled, repeating the djinn's garbled epithet. "I bind you with your name!"

A great wind tore at Jude's clothes, whipped at his hair; terrible heat scorched against his skin. He could smell the char of it as his clothes, his beard, even the air around him, threatened

to burst into flame. Pressure squeezed at him, his ears popping, the breath pushed from his lungs, and though his eyes were clenched tight, the djinn's white hot glare burned his vision. With a loud clap, brief and without echo, it vanished, its absence leaving the night dark and almost chilly save for the flare of heat in his palms. Jude dropped the flask before it burned him, its surface glowing like a coal. The air above it wavered, the heat intense and growing hotter as he stood there.

Jude looked up and saw that Dupree had cast Sal aside. Dupree came towards the larger circle, his razor blade out, shouting something Jude couldn't hear through the whine in his deafened ears. Jude kicked the flask and sent it sailing over the concrete and into the swimming pool where it sent up a great gout of steam, churning the water into a bubbling froth. Jude gasped for breath, hurting in every part of him, elated and weary and dreading what came next all at once. Dupree swiped his blade forward, and it cast off copies of itself, a half-dozen sparks flashing against the outer circle. Neat trick.

“Cornell Dupree,” Jude said, stern but quiet. Commanding but not threatening. Not yet. He walked closer to the boundary of the chalk lines, calm, his hands held open, weaponless. The other magician froze, confused, expecting a fight. “I know what you are, Dupree. I've always known. Dhampir. Child of the vampire. That's how you knew so much about them, back in City Park. That's how you knew how to kill them.” He slipped a hand into the satchel at his hip and broke the protective circle with the toe of his shoe. “I know everything about you.”

Dupree's eyes narrowed and flicked from the chalk on the ground to Jude's hand in the bag, up to Jude's eyes. “Bullshit,” he said. “Bullshit. You don't know nothin. And you can take your hand out of that bag. You can't bluff for shit.”

“I captured your djinn,” Jude said. “I kept you from drinking the faerie's blood.” The dhampir's eyes widened at that. Saying it had been a guess, another gamble, but it paid off. “I know what you and your father are planning. I know the changes you're going to make. And I know how to stop it. So why would I be bluffing about this?” The words poured out of him, half-truths and hints of connections that he barely understood. He felt like someone else, someone confident and tricky, always with an ace up his sleeve. Jude closed his aching fist around the slender, jagged shape of the thunderbolt in his bag, smooth and cool as a piece of glass. He felt, he realized, like Dodge.

Dupree swallowed and glanced over at the pool where clouds of steam wafted, the water line falling rapidly as the djinn's latent heat boiled it away. He licked his lips. He looked behind him, where Sal rose slowly, limping, to his feet. Dupree's fingers tensed on the pearl handle of his blade. Jude's breath caught in his chest. He hadn't planned on that odd knife. He hadn't planned on Scarpelli being awake. He'd thought that having the djinn taken from him would break Dupree's spirit.

The dhampir let his razor fall, clattering, to the concrete and ran back into the house.

Jude scooped it up on his way check on Sal, who seemed banged up and couldn't put his weight on one paw but was otherwise unharmed. Telling the death spirit to guard his back, Jude slid into the pool's lukewarm water, which now only came up to his knees. Though it took only a few minutes of sloshing around to retrieve the metal flask that now held the djinn, Jude spent those moments certain that any second the vampire would burst from the mansion in a flurry of teeth and shadow and make an end of him. Again, he disgusted himself by hoping that Scarpelli would savor his meal. Once he had the djinn safely tucked in his satchel, the metal suddenly

cool to the touch, Jude had no other choice. He left Salvatore guarding the door and ventured once more into the cold tomb of a house, up the stairs and into the vampire's feeding chamber.

There, Scarpelli still bent over his victim, though no longer feeding. He lay on top of the tattooed woman, his bruised corpse's buttocks clenching and flexing in an unmistakable rhythm. For an instant, Jude returned to that night in City Park, the grunting and the rocking van, the burning flesh and the inhuman strength and those two small bundles of meat that had once held innocent life. All his pain and his weariness fled from him as ice ran through his veins. Scarpelli looked up from the naked woman's neck, the lower half of his face a black stain. And then he did the most terrible thing of all.

He smiled.

As the vampire rolled to his feet and slipped into a pair of loose trousers, Jude's attention was drawn to the woman, to his victim. She was thick, her flesh bulging at her hips and stomach, that particular New Orleans weight fed by rich foods day and night that made women sexier rather than seeming obese. Tattoos covered her body, strange and vibrant. At first these images seemed to be abstractions, evenly spaced rectangles of gray on her belly and thighs, large swathes of green and brown, curving and undulating from her large breasts down the length of her body, a web of lines spreading up her neck and across her shaved head. Then Jude saw the egg-shell swoop of white on her stomach, the unmistakable shape of the Superdome, and the rest of the images fell into play. She was tattooed with the city, partly a map, partly an image of the skyline, partly something else. In the handful of instants that pooled as Jude took this in, the cocky, Dodge-like feeling he'd had facing Dupree slipped away, replaced by the dawning panic that he was in way over his head.

Scarpelli, still smiling, pulled a white cloth from the sleeve of his shirt and shook it in the air like a celebrant at a second line. He giggled, that sound like scratching glass, and wiped the dark red stain from his mouth. “Jude, what a surprise. I won't say pleasant, you understand.”

“Father,” Dupree said from where he cowered against the far wall, “he – ” But he was unable to complete his plea, his voice becoming a grunt as the vampire made a clutching gesture in his direction, snatching him up onto his toes.

“You are a failure,” Scarpelli said. “I will deal with you in time.” With an almost bored expression on his face, the vampire waved him away, the gesture hurling the dhampir against the stone wall. Jude heard a crack, like a baseball connecting with a wooden bat, and Dupree slumped, boneless, to the floor. Jude couldn't move, his legs frozen in place, his pulse tight in his throat. “As for you,” the vampire said, turning his dead eyes on Jude, “that belongs to me.” He made the snatching motion again, and the razor flew from Jude's hand to Scarpelli's, who glanced at it before tucking it into his sleeve. The vampire smiled once more, humorless and cold. “Now that we've taken care of that,” he said. “Come. Come and let me introduce you to the city of New Orleans.”

Chapter Twenty Five

Jude, unable to stop himself, walked closer to the stone pedestal where Scarpelli's victim lay, the painted woman the vampire said was the city of New Orleans. Alafair Constant's words echoed in his mind, that the city had died after the storm, that she had lost her voice. But if she was dead, why did her breath plume in the frigid air? As he approached, Jude saw scabs at the woman's neck, on her thighs, in the crook of her elbow, in a line down her belly, just off center, and in her groin, just above her sex. They were not the dainty puncture marks of a Hollywood vampire but wicked tears in her flesh, the ravaging bites of a savage, hungry beast. Images flashed in Jude's mind of Tommy's death, of Celeste Dorcet and Nicole, of Augustus and something new, another death or deaths flickering just at the edge of his understanding. That winged shadow in the darkness killed just like this, tearing open the throat and feeding, but somehow this seemed different, more ritualistic than the murders from his visions.

“Beautiful, isn't she?” Scarpelli said, running one finger, monstrously elongated, across the woman's cheek, a horrific parody of a tender gesture. “She will be my favorite child, my true progeny, unlike that waste over there.”

“But you're killing her.”

Scarpelli tittered, sending a shiver down Jude's spine. “No no,” he said. “I am giving her life. Two more nights and she will be drained completely, ready to begin her new life. Her true life.” He was, Jude realized, drunk on the woman's blood, his eyes heavy, his speech sluggish. Like a tick, he had fed and now needed to curl up and sleep. And then the vampire's words broke through Jude's fear, and he understood what Scarpelli was doing, spoke the words as soon as he thought them.

“You're turning her, aren't you?” he asked. “You're trying to make the city a vampire.”

“Not trying, sweet meats. I'm nearly done. It's going to be glorious.” Scarpelli dipped a finger into the woman's still gaping wound, licked the blood from the tip. “And the best part is, no one will notice. This city already lures people in, with sex and drink and the promise of freedom, and it grants them those things, even as it drains the life from them.” He turned a burning red eye in Jude's direction. “Brilliant, isn't it?”

Jude could see the dark poetry of it, knew, as everyone in the city did, of at least one person who had fallen into the very trap Scarpelli described. Especially since the storm, people here let the drinking or the drugs or the sex, once an escape, a celebration of life, become the purpose of life. The night took over, and they grew thin and wasted, as though something ate them from the inside out. Most didn't last long. The simple, predatory beauty of Scarpelli's plan was that he wasn't changing anything. He was just making it literal.

The words that came to Jude's mind all sounded hollow, like something out of an action movie. *I'll stop you*, or, *You won't get away with this*. He shook his head. His fear and his anger twined together, braiding and mingling and becoming something new, something potent. Something like hate. A righteous, burning hatred for what was, at heart, simply evil.

Scarpelli looked up from the tattooed woman, surprise written on his face, as though he could hear Jude's thoughts and feel the emotions seething within him. “Well, well,” he said. “What have we here?” He sniffed the air. “Oh, Jude. Something has changed about you. Something . . . delicious. I had intended to take your blood for Cornell. He thinks that if he drinks in enough power he will become a full vampire.” Scarpelli shook his head, showing what he thought of that idea. “But now I think I shall have it for myself.” The vampire twitched,

stepping from one side of the stone pedestal to the other without bothering to move through the space in between. He could, Jude knew, cross the distance between them faster than Jude could blink, could tear him open so quickly he'd be dead before he felt the sting.

The magic, the rage, rose within him, burning at the back of his throat. He remembered the night in City Park, remembered the way the newly risen vampire had burned. "If you try," Jude said, more bravado in his voice than he felt, "I will kill you."

Scarpelli laughed, head thrown back and clutching his stomach, red tears running down his cheeks. "How will you do that? Cornell told me about that fledgling you two killed, but do not think we are all such easy prey. I am old, and you are but half a god. Stronger beings than you have tried to make an end of me, and I can still remember how each one of them tasted."

Jude forced a smile onto his face. "Vampires rise at noon and sleep at midnight, or you used to, back when people woke at dawn and slept at dusk. You cannot cross running water, or abide the scent of garlic. In the hands of a true believer a symbol of faith will weaken you. Stakes carved from the heartwood of an Ash tree will bind you, silver will cut you, and fire will destroy you."

Scarpelli rolled his eyes, made a masturbatory gesture. "Thank you for the recital, but what has that to do with anything? You have none of those things, and even if you did, I am faster, and stronger, and more powerful than you will ever be."

"It's not about the objects themselves. It's what they represent. It's what they say about your nature. Silver, garlic, running water, fire, these are symbols of purity. That's what hurts you. That's what will unmake you. Something pure. Because you are nothing, vampire, but a corruption of life."

Scarpelli was silent, his grin sliding from his face. He drew in a deep breath and sighed, a breath, Jude noticed, that didn't steam as his and the tattooed woman's did, a breath that was as cold as the air around them. "Perhaps you are right," Scarpelli said. "Perhaps. But that doesn't answer my question. What weapon of purity do you bring to challenge me?"

Jude lifted his arms, the flames within him rising higher and higher. "Right here," he said.

Scarpelli laughed again, though this time it seemed forced, defensive. "You? What purity do you possess? Your blood is a mixture of mortal and god, you believe in nothing and question everything, and I can smell the taint of sin on your soul. Purity. Oh Jude. You nearly had me going."

"Not me," Jude said. "As you say, I'm not pure. But my hate? My desire to watch you burn?" He let some of his magic slip from him, the bite of cayenne on his tongue as the flames belched from his lips. "That's pure." Again, the words that came to his tongue surprised him, as though someone more confident, more powerful, spoke through him. Jude met the vampire's red stare, prepared for the leap he knew would come, readied himself to unleash the magic surging within him though he knew it would be too late. He met the vampire's stare and waited to die.

"You amuse me, little godling," Scarpelli said. "I don't know if it is your arrogance, or your naivete, or the pleasure I get waiting for you to stumble. Whichever it is, I think I'll let you live, for tonight. You will forfeit your blood to me soon enough." Then, with a languorous, dismissive wave of his hand, the vampire pushed Jude gently out of the stone room and into the hallway.

With every step Jude took towards the door, following the same path he'd taken in a

panicked run less than an hour before, he expected a trick, an attack to come bursting from the shadows. But nothing did. He'd faced a djinn and a vampire and walked away stronger than before. He felt full, brimming with power, as if nothing could stand against him.

Sal waited for him outside, licking the wound on his paw where Dupree's blade had cut him. He looked up at Jude, his ears flicking forward. "That was fast," he said. "You lose your nerve?"

"No," Jude said, a slow smile easing onto his face. "I got what I came for." As he said it, he realized it was true. He'd come to find out what Dupree wanted with Lillian, how he was connected with Scarpelli. He'd discovered far more than he expected. As for what he would do with that knowledge, that was a problem for another day. His second-to-last day on earth. "Let's go home, Sal," he said. "Let's go home."

The next morning, though he woke to stiff joints and aching muscles, his swollen knuckles cracking like gun shots and his skinned knee burning with every stretch, Jude felt better than he had in months, maybe years. His head was clear, his vision sharp, and he knew, with utter certainty, what he had to do next. He tried to explain it to Sal as he dressed, pulling on jeans and a dark green collared shirt, the one Cassandra always liked him to wear. When he rescued Lillian from Dupree, she'd been wearing Regal's face. That meant one of two things: either the faerie knew Regal, or the faerie had been Regal all along. Either way, his old partner's disappearance had to be related to Dodge's murder somehow. Dupree, the dhampir, though he had allied himself with his father, claimed he worked for Jude and Regal's old boss, the one who

had handled the invitation to Dodge's card game, the invitation Dodge said came from Jude's father. Regal, and Dupree, and his father, and in the center of them lurked the one who had drawn Jude away from Eli Constant and into the deep waters of magic the gods swam in, into their mysterious and potent games. The one who sat in that office of his and sent his agents out into the world, gathering information and parceling it out as he chose.

Mourning.

“So you think this Mourning guy killed the fortune god?” Sal asked as Jude paced back and forth, trying to find his shoes and his keys and his cell phone and talk all at the same time.

“No,” Jude said. “I don't think he killed Dodge.”

“But you think he knows who did?”

“Maybe. I don't know what he knows. But I know it's more than me.”

Jude glanced down at his phone and saw that he had a voice mail he hadn't noticed before. His heart began to pound. Regal? Cassandra? He typed in his password and waited for the message to play. It was Brickey, his voice full of scholarly distraction. “I've turned this around and around in my mind, Jude, and I believe it's one of two conclusions. One, these gods are all Tricksters. The angel is a fallen angel, a demon, as hungry as the rest of the card players are hungry. And so they all kill the fortune god, kind of a Murder on The Orient Express resolution. My other thought is that the angel is the one who stands out, as you said. If he is not a demon, he is not a Trickster. He is an agent of retribution. Please call me back and let me know if I've figured it out. It's an intriguing problem.” Then the professor rattled off his information, a phone number and an email address, and hung up.

Jude slid the phone back into his pocket, more certain than ever that he needed to see

Mourning. There were simply too many unanswered questions and not enough time. Mourning had hinted at knowing his father's identity, so he was the logical choice to ask about Bartholomew, as well as everything else that seemed to point to him. There was also that other more disturbing possibility that Jude did his best to ignore.

He needed answers, and he knew he would find them at Mourning's office. He knew it with a certainty that went beyond a simple gut feeling. This was his magic working within him again, he realized, his gift unburdened by all the loss that had invaded him in the wake of the storm. Jude looked down at his hands, one swollen with a lacerated palm, the other scratched by Sal's raven beak. He considered, just for a moment, putting on his gloves, those shields of black leather that had walled away his magic just as the booze had numbed him to his city's loss. He'd been so caught up in his own pain he'd ignored the despair around him. Eli had died waiting for him to be a magician. Cassandra had given up on waiting for him to become a man. So many disappointments, so much loss, all because of him. Jude set the gloves down and searched through his satchel, ignoring the tingle of lost things at his fingertips, until he found his hip flask, the liquor inside giving a quiet, wet ping when he shook it. He put it down next to the strips of black leather, turned out the lights, and went out in search of his answers.

After using the little gold coin to withdraw a wad of cash from an ATM, Jude took a cab, unwilling to waste any of his remaining hours waiting for the streetcar. When the driver, a huge man with blackened gums and missing teeth, complained about Sal's presence in the backseat, a couple of crisp new twenties quieted his concerns. Jude could feel the compass in his head

shifting with every turn the cab made, fixed on a point right at the edge of the Quarter. The sensation filled him with a warmth that had nothing to do with the heat, oppressive even this early in the morning. He'd forgotten, truly and completely, what it had actually felt like to be outside and not dread every touch, to see the world through clear and focused eyes and not shy away from the visions that sometimes came. In the short drive through the Warehouse District, Jude picked up bits and pieces of the lives they passed, names and faces and snatches of memory. With the brush of his magic against each soul, he saw glimpses of the losses that accrued over a lifetime. Sometimes they were insignificant things like misplaced keys or forgotten phone numbers. Other times the losses were more intangible, missed opportunities, dreams that vanished on waking, the kinds of things people never knew they had lost. Occasionally, he felt bitter regret, despair, or the sorrow that came from a loved one absent, abandoned, dead. These losses, though they called out to him, slipped through him and past him, leaving nothing behind in their wake but a fading memory and a sense of slight discomfort.

Only one remained with him, the tiny round shape, its weight out of proportion to its size. It pressed against his heart, the physical sense of loss he'd felt the moment his gift had returned to him. It was the lodestone that aimed his internal compass: the lost voice of New Orleans. It led him, unerringly, to the end of Canal Street, to the building that housed Mourning's office. When the driver told Jude the fare, he paused, remembering the reception he'd gotten the last time he'd been here and asked how much it would cost for the cab to wait.

The driver wrinkled one side of his face in thought. "Dog too?" he asked, shouting to be heard over WWOZ blaring on the radio.

"Yes," Jude said. "The dog, too."

“For fifty buck, I'll wait twenty. So long as he don't piss my seat. That's extra.”

Sal rolled his eyes but thankfully kept his mouth shut. The last thing Jude needed was a cab driver shouting about a talking dog. “No pissing, I promise,” Jude said, extending his hand. When the driver reached his nail-bitten hand over the seat and shook, Jude's gift rushed over him like a sudden wind. He knew, as completely as he knew the feel of his own skin, that the driver's name was Charles Perault, that he'd been adopted, that his nickname in school had been Charlie Peru until he'd hit puberty, when it became Big Charlie Peru. He knew as well that Big Charlie had been left on the steps of an orphanage as an infant, his mother just a day away from deportation, that his mother had never stopped thinking of him, and that she still lived with his father and the two sisters he had never met in a little mountain town in central Mexico. Jude knew their address. He knew all of this, and much more, in the brief instant their hands touched, because Big Charlie was a foundling; a living, breathing, lost thing.

Shaken, Jude gave him three twenties and stepped into the heat and the noise of Canal Street, wondering at the sudden weight that had descended on his shoulders. Nothing unmanageable, merely a constant pressure, as though his satchel had grown slightly, almost imperceptibly, heavier. It had been so long since Jude's magic had worked without the constant miasma of the city's loss weighing down him that he couldn't tell if these sensations were strange or not. True to his word, Big Charlie turned on his hazard lights as Jude closed the door.

He headed for the Canal Place entrance, his eyes traveling up and up, as though his vision could penetrate the floors that separated Mourning's office from the street. Jude was so focused on his goal, that he had walked into the air conditioning before he realized that the compass in his head had become unhinged. It wavered, with the regularity of a pendulum, between the

mirror-enclosed elevators and something off to his left. He paused as he searched his magician's bag for the sunburst engraved medallion that would grant him entrance. Jude scrubbed at the beard on his face, trying to recall which moment his path had become divided. It had been constant in the ride over here, even up to the point that the cab rolled to a stop at the curb.

Curious, Jude followed the second path back outside where it dragged his attention down to a bundle of rags and flesh huddled in the corner where the topmost step met the wall, a homeless man that Jude had walked right past. Heat ran up the back of his neck at his callousness, at the immediate working of his brain to try to justify his lack of concern. Jude had plenty of money, stolen money, if he was honest with himself. He should fill every outstretched hand.

As Jude reached into his pocket, intending to do just that, the homeless man turned his face, revealing gray-streaked dreadlocks and the thin-wired spectacles of a scholar, dark mournful eyes that looked on Jude without recognition. The musician, the zombie, Leon Carter.

Without thinking, the other man obviously in the grip of something, Jude knelt beside him and reached out to grasp his shoulder. The contact sent a shock between them, different from what he'd felt with Big Charlie. This was a moment of connection where they shared a breath and their hearts beat in tune, vision doubling from two sets of eyes. Jude and Leon shared a joined mind that echoed with the same pleading words. *My heart my soul my voice* they thought, over and over again, a skipped record's constant repetition, a madman's gibbering plea.

When Jude pulled away and returned to himself, his pulse still raced with the cadence of those words, ba-bam, ba-bam, ba-bam, not slowing until he took more than one deep breath. He saw that Leon jerked his head back and forth, a fraction of an inch at a time, to that same beat,

too regular to be shivering. His lips twitched with those words, no sound coming from him. Jude felt another tiny stone lodge itself within him, this time at the base of his throat. Something had changed with his gift, something profound. Jude told Leon that he would be right back, hoping he would find comfort in his words if not the meaning, and went back inside to the elevators, adding his affinity of lost things to the mental list of questions he had for Mourning.

As the sunburst medallion slid into place, the floor dropping and rising beneath him in its crazed dance, Jude tried to decide what to ask about first, Regal or Dupree or his father, but Carter's voiceless chant kept snarling his thoughts, *my heart my soul my voice* breaking into his attempts to focus, to prepare. He was further confused when he stepped into the waiting room, when Mourning's ram-horned secretary, Mr. Scowl, looked up from the papers on his desk and greeted Jude, not with his namesake facial expression, but with a smile.

“Come in, Mr. Duboisson, come in. Have a seat, and I'll see if Mr. Mourning is ready for you.”

Jude perched on the uncomfortable wooden bench Scowl gestured to, his movements hesitant, expecting some form of retribution for the last time they'd met. Was the secretary messing with him, trying to unsettle him? Or had Mourning gotten another, identical, creature to take Scowl's place? The surroundings were the same, the tidiness of the desk, the archaic rotary phone that he spoke into, even the fussy part of his hair, but the change in attitude baffled him.

Scowl replaced the receiver with a soft click and turned that unusual smile back to Jude, who noticed, for the first time, since Scowl's lips had always been pressed together in a thin line before, that his teeth were filed down to sharp points. “He will see you now,” he said, waving a small hand towards the door.

Jude shook his head but stood, trying to put the diminutive being out of his mind. He was nearly to the door when Scowl spoke again, saying Jude's last name, all civility gone from his voice. Jude turned. Scowl stood on top of his desk, his hairy legs bent underneath him, a fist gripping his cock.

“When he's done with you,” Scowl said, thrusting his goat's hips, “I'm going to shit on or fuck whatever he leaves behind. Whichever is more unpleasant.” Braying laughter followed Jude into the radiance of Mourning's office.

Chapter Twenty Six

As always, Jude's first step into Mourning's office blinded him, the inhabitant's presence like the white-hot center of a cutting torch flame. Within the bright emptiness that followed, he heard the pistol shot crack of a billiards rack being broken, the tumble and roll of balls sliding home. He flinched at the noise, his nerves already strained by Scowl's display, his heart still pounding with the cadence of the words that echoed in Leon's mind. When his vision cleared, he saw that Mourning's office had changed since he'd last seen it. The desk made entirely of glass remained, though Mourning no longer sat behind it.

The color scheme hadn't changed from its stark blacks and whites with the exception of a splash of green that drew Jude's attention to one side, to the verdant felt of the table from Dodge's card room, preserved like a museum display in the moment Jude left the game, the cards, the drinks, even the stump of Dodge's cigar resting in the same positions. The scents of that night infiltrated the hot sterility of Mourning's office, the smoke and the spilled booze and the stale air staining the cleanliness of the room, the way Jude's mouth tasted of alcohol and ash during a hangover no matter how hard he scrubbed his teeth.

On the other side of the room, framed by the huge window that looked out over the Quarter, Mourning leaned against a cue stick of some dark, supple material, watching as his opponent leaned over a pool table, its wooden frame carved from pale wood, its surface covered with a rich black velvet. Mourning wore a pair of crisp white linen pants and an oxford shirt, black and glossy as oil, cuffs rolled up to reveal the smooth flesh of his arms, stained that same odd burnt umber as his face. He turned to Jude as if just noticing his entrance, those eyes of emerald piercing, weighing, even as a Cheshire Cat grin curled across Mourning's face. He

spoke not to Jude but to the person bent over the table, the slim figure in tight jeans. “Look who has joined us, my dear,” he said, his voice purring, lispng, hypnotic. “Just as I said he would.”

Just when Jude thought he had everything figured out, Mourning's opponent stood up and raked a hand through her short spiky hair, her expression too full of conflicting emotions for Jude to read anything at all from her. Regal Sloan. Now that she stood in front of him, Jude could see all the things Lillian had missed when she tried to mimic his old partner, the slant of her grin, the shade of her eyes, her confident, almost insolent posture. The faerie hadn't fooled him. He'd fooled himself. “Hey, Doobie,” she said, quietly, as though unsure how he'd react to her return.

Jude was unsure himself. He felt glad, so very glad, that she hadn't been killed, but he knew also, somehow, that her presence here meant he'd been betrayed. He'd been played maybe from the very beginning. She'd tried to tell him, way back in the Clover Leaf. What felt like years ago. *You have no idea what I've dealt with*, she'd told him. Jude nearly laughed. He'd told her that it was a game, that everything the gods did was a game. How foolish he must have looked, like a child mimicking the gestures of a game but knowing none of the rules. *You have no idea*, she'd said, and she'd been right. But he was starting, at long last, to catch on.

“You have the grim visage of one who could use a strong drink,” Mourning said. To Regal, he said, “My dear? I will have my usual.” Mourning held out his hand, gesturing for Jude to take a seat in one of the leather armchairs. Regal put down her cue and moved to a fully stocked bar that hadn't been there a moment before, glass ringing against glass as she pulled down bottles of cognac and bitters.

Jude sat, the leather groaning around him, his magician's bag clenched between his knees.

“Coffee for me,” he said, not surprised to find a steaming cup of black chicory already waiting at his elbow. He sipped at it, and this time, for the first time, his hands didn't shake. He thought back to the progression of events that brought him here, the invitation, the card game, Regal's disappearance. “Regal was never in any danger, was she?” he asked, impressed with how even he kept his voice despite his anger.

Mourning leaned against the pool table, accepting the glass of neat liquor from Regal and then drawing her to him, an arm draped casually across her shoulders. “None what so ever, I must admit. You must forgive us our small charade, Mr. Duboisson. Our infinitesimal lie led to a greater truth. You were needed, as your peculiar set of gifts were needed – not locked away, but out in the world.”

What was that look that passed between them? Lust? Adoration? Jude's hands shook now, but not from fear. How many had died for Mourning's games? Could Jude have saved Augustus, or Nicole and Celeste, or even Tommy if this bastard had played him straight from the beginning? Fuck him. “Will you forgive Cornell Dupree his charade?” Jude asked.

Mourning blinked, a slow flicker of his eyelids the only change in his expression. “I must beg your pardon once more,” he said, the hissing of his sibilants becoming more pronounced. “Your reference has caught me unawares.”

As Jude explained what he knew of Scarpelli and Dupree, that they were father and son, that Dupree was aiding his father in his attempts to turn New Orleans into a vampiric version of itself, the smile wilted from Mourning's face, replaced by nothing. No sign of anger or confusion or amusement marred his features. It was as though his body had gone vacant. Except for the stink of hot metal and the wavering distortion of the air above him, nothing betrayed his rage.

Regal cursed, under her breath, and moved away from Mourning. She paced behind the desk and stared out the window. Jude caught the hint of another scent beneath the charred steel and the rich chicory odor of his coffee. A hint of spice, and a thought, tiny but intriguing, flashed through his mind. Before he could pursue it, Mourning spoke, having composed himself.

“Allow me to express my gratitude, Mr. Duboisson, for this information. I assure you I shall be looking into the matter directly. In turn, I will share with you a fact that I believe will similarly impress you with its pertinence. You have observed the card table?” He pointed, with his chin towards the other side of the room. Jude nodded. “And may I presume further that you know that the contest remains undecided?”

“Yes,” Jude said. He remembered the reflection in Thoth's glasses, his own bank cards, his own unwritten fate.

“Then it should, no doubt, be of the gravest interest to you that the game is scheduled to conclude whether all parties are in attendance or not, a mere one night hence.”

Shit. It made a kind of perfect, scary sense. The same night that Scarpelli intended to finish turning the city into a dark, hungry replica of New Orleans was the same night that the other gods' plans would, no doubt, come to fruition. The same night that Jude would be dragged screaming into the void was the same night this whole mess would come to an end. Jude stared into the dark fluid that filled his cup, reminded of the blood that oozed from Lillian. “What are they playing for?” he asked, only half-aware that he'd spoken the words out loud.

Mourning laughed. “Well, now,” he said. “We have reached the terminus of our free exchange of information, have we not? You enlightened me, I returned the favor. As you are now an independent agent, no longer in my employ, any further explication must come at a

certain quid pro quo, yes?"

Jude thought about what he knew of Mourning, of who, and what, he suspected Mourning might be, and grinned. "What if I play you for it?" he asked. He stood, not waiting for an answer, and crossed over to the pool table and picked up the cue Regal had left behind. "An answer for every ball I sink." He held his breath. Where did this courage come from? Had death and resurrection taken all fear from him? No, he was still capable of fear, according to his tight flesh, the toes curling within his running shoes. Regal looked back and forth between the two of them, her mouth open, as though she wanted to say something but had no voice.

Mourning laughed, a sharp bark of amusement. "A marvelous suggestion," he said. "But ultimately without merit, I fear, as we remain at our previous impasse. In short, what reward is there for me?"

"What is it you want?" Jude asked.

"You, Mr. Duboisson." Regal snapped her attention to Mourning at that, her eyes bright and sharp. "I desire you, engaged in my service once again. Shall we say a year for every ball I retire?"

"Done," Jude said. His heart sank as soon as the word left his lips, but what did he have to lose, really? If he lost the game he'd started in Dodge's card room, he would forfeit everything. He would owe Scarpelli his blood, Legba a sacrifice, Thoth a key, and Lillian his passion. If he failed, he'd have to face Death at the bottom of the river, would have to meet the debt of the heart he'd just now found. Mourning wouldn't be able to collect his years of service, not unless he descended into Hell and dragged Jude's soul back from the Abyss. Jude couldn't, so far as he knew, lose. So why, then, did the green-eyed god smile so wide?

Mourning gestured, and the numbered balls, all black, arranged themselves into a triangle of nine, striking together with solid clacks. The cue ball swirled into place. Jude stepped to the table, leaned down, and leveled a stroke at the white cue. The balls broke with a snap, spreading across the table, one falling into the corner pocket.

As soon as it fell, Mourning spoke. “They are playing,” he said, “for the position left vacant by Mr. Reynaud. The victor will have the authority to name the fortune god of New Orleans.”

Jude looked back to the table, eight balls left. Eight questions, if he ran the table. “Who killed Dodge Reynaud?” he asked before drawing back in a smooth stroke, sinking another ball.

“As I have said,” Mourning said, “I believe someone at the card game is responsible for his death.”

Jude started to protest but realized immediately that it was pointless. This is what you got when you gambled with the gods. Seven questions. Make them count. “Why does the faerie Lillian want to be the fortune god of New Orleans?” Stroke, drop, side pocket.

“She does not.”

Jude ground his teeth and took a deep breath. “What does she want, then?” Crack, thump, corner pocket.

“She desires the return of the satchel you currently possess.”

“Why?” Jude approached his shot, interrupted by Mourning clearing his throat. He stood up and turned to him.

“Apologies, but that question has two answers, which, by our accord, is worth two balls for a full answer. I thought you might consider that before you proceed.” Regal stood next to

him again, one arm snaked through his. Jude wondered how much she really knew about Mourning, if she knew what Jude merely suspected. He shook the thought from his head and studied the table again. He lined up a different shot, and with one hit, sank a ball in each corner. Regal made a surprised noise. “Well done,” Mourning said. “She wants the satchel because it belonged to her once, stolen by her brother when he fled their home. It is special to her because of its unique properties.”

Three balls left on the table. He'd gotten sidetracked and had let Mourning goad him. He should have asked about Thoth and Legba, about Bartholomew and his father, but now, he felt like he had to know what Mourning knew about the leather bag that Jude had died for. “What does the satchel do?” he asked and sank another ball.

“The bag attracts things to it,” Mourning said. “Lost things, in particular.” He made a noise, as though something had just occurred to him and said in a low voice, “I suppose that explains the issue with your magic.”

Jude knew that the off-hand comment had been a calculated move. There was a question, or questions, that Mourning did not want to answer, and so he had led Jude down this path, wasting his chances to demand the answers Mourning did not want to give. But Jude's magic, the only legacy his father had left to him aside from his mother's insanity, had always eluded his understanding. If Mourning knew something about it, Jude had to know. It was worth losing everything. “What issue with my magic?” he asked. The second-to-last ball dropped into a side pocket, rolled, growling, in the corridors inside the table, an ominous sound.

“Your gift,” Mourning said, “is an affinity with lost things. You feel them around you and understand them. But the price for this gift is the burden of their loss. You carry it with you,

unless . . . well, I have said too much.”

Jude opened his mouth, felt the words 'unless what?' form in his throat, but he stopped himself. That would be it. The one ball left on the table would drop, easily, given the line he had on it, and Jude would get another half-answer. No. “Who is my father?” he asked, and took his shot. The cue stick splintered in his hands, as though he'd struck it against solid rock. Jude staggered back, the force and the shock of it shoving him away from the table.

“Most unusual,” Mourning said. “I suppose we must count that as a forfeit.” The being who called himself Mourning took up his stick, and without looking, dropped the ball neatly into the corner. “There we are. One year. I would have you start immediately, if that would be agreeable.” He held out his hand, his silver watch flashing in the sunlight, a handshake to seal the contract. Jude shoved his hands into his pockets. Duped, yet again. Like always. “Oh yes, of course,” Mourning said, cheerful, ignoring Jude's rudeness. “You are as yet under obligation to others. I understand completely. Shall we say in two days time, then? When you have concluded your dealings?” Mourning nodded, not waiting for Jude's response. “Excellent.” He sipped at his cocktail, a brown stain of liquor, a bright twist of lemon.

Jude looked past him and caught Regal's eyes. “I've seen your fate,” he told her. “It's not pretty.” Not waiting for and not wanting a response, unsure whether he had won or lost against Mourning, Jude collected his satchel and stepped through the door which opened into a bathroom, all bleach and urine and harsh florescent lights, in the Aquarium of the Americas. He passed through the entryway where a two story fountain murmured, a trickle of water spilling over huge, overlapping bronze scales, a section of some metal leviathan. He passed through the lobby and out into the heat and the view of the Mississippi.

In the short walk back to where the cab had dropped him off, Jude thought about what he'd learned, about Regal, about the card game and about his gift. He recalled that tantalizing whiff of spice and tried to puzzle out what that might mean. Lost in thought, he didn't notice anything wrong until he was just a few steps from the cab, Big Charlie leaning against it smoking a cigarette, the back windshield shattered, glass littering the car's trunk and the street.

The cab driver flicked his butt into the gutter, jabbing a finger in Jude's direction. "You into some bad shit, *'mano*," he said. "Yeah, some bad *brujo* shit, that's what we got here." He spoke in that familiar New Orleans drawl except for the words that were in Spanish, those he accented as though he had grown up in Mexico.

Jude knew, from the flood of memory that had filled him at the touch of Big Charlie Peru's hand, that despite being adopted by an old money Uptown family, Big Charlie had done his best to learn about his heritage from Esperanza, his neighbor's old Mexican housekeeper, who had peppered stories of her young life in Mérida with tales of *brujos* and *chupacabra*, *nahuatl* and the *Huay Chivo*. Jude wondered if Sal had spoken, if Big Charlie believed him to be a sorcerer in a dog's skin, or if he had guessed his true nature, a spirit of the underworld. After assuring the cab driver that he would pay for the window, Jude asked him what had happened.

"Can't say for sure," Big Charlie said. "That dog of yours got real excited, thrashin around back there like it wanted out. 'Fore I could get around the car to let him out, *pandejo* threw himself through my damn window." He pointed to the steps where Jude had left Leon. "That homeless guy jumps up at the same time, and both of them take off in the same direction, like they hair was on fire and they *culo* was catchin, you know?"

"Which direction was that?" Jude asked. The cab driver pointed, confirming what Jude

suspected, the same direction the compass in his head aimed, off towards the center of the city. He couldn't be sure if it was the city's voice or Leon's violin pulling him there, or both. He sighed. "Big Charlie, how much would it cost for me to get one more ride?"

If he was surprised to hear his nickname come out of a stranger's mouth, he didn't show it. He just laughed. "Shit you into? Five hundred, cash. That's on top of the busted window, too."

Jude took out the money he'd magic-ed out of the ATM, about a thousand dollars. Easy come, easy go. "This cover it?" he asked, as he handed it over. Big Charlie's eyes lit up at the handful of bills, which he rifled through, counting under his breath. He drove the cab, Jude knew, as a side-job to earn enough money to hire a private investigator to find his mother.

"Where to, Mr. *Brujo*-man?"

"I'll tell you when we get there," Jude said, sliding into the backseat. As he guided Big Charlie, telling him to turn when the arrow in his head shifted position, zig-zagging his way across downtown, Jude let his mind wander again, trying to untangle the mess of theft and murder and secret plans and Machiavellian schemes his life had become. He tried to guess who might have stolen Leon's violin, who would have known that it was the secret, the key, to his existence.

It is late February, just a week before Mardi Gras, just months before the storm. He sits at Cafe Du Monde, a plate of powdered sugar in front of him that had held beignets moments before, wishing the cafe-au-lait came in bigger mugs. It is cold, a gray, drizzling rain shrouding the city,

and Jude wants this woman to show up so he can get home and change, so he can meet Cassandra for the parade that afternoon. They have been fighting more and more lately, about money, about his job, about a lot of things, and he promised her he wouldn't be late this time, a promise he is about to break. The thought of Cass gives him something, finally, to say to the man who shares his table. "My girlfriend loves your music," he says to Leon Carter whose short twists are crushed beneath the knit wool of a bright teal Hornets cap.

Leon raises an eyebrow and grins. In a dry tone he says, after a beat, "Not you?"

Jude laughs, glad the silence has been broken at last. "No no, I like your music too, but she's, you know, a big fan."

"Glad to hear it," Leon says. "Ya'll come down to the Maple Leaf one night I'm playin, I'll shout out to her for you."

"Thanks," Jude says. "That would be great." He digs in his satchel until he finds his flask, pours a few swallows into his coffee. After taking a sip, the bite of the alcohol nearly hidden by the sugary, rich cafe-au-lait, he tilts the flask towards Leon.

"No thanks," the musician says.

"You sure? It takes the edge off the chill."

"I don't mind it much," he says, a strangely wistful tone in his voice. They lapse, once again, into silence. Jude is here to back up his partner, Regal, who is about to confront a hoodoo woman who has worked a *gris-gris* against their client. Though Leon has not used any names, Jude knows that some *loa* has involved him this. Who else would have such a vested interest in the way voodoo is practiced in the city?

"Is it true you've met Legba?" Jude asks, his need to fill the silence forcing him into

dangerously personal territory.

Leon turns to him, presses his glasses higher up on his nose. “Why on'tcha ask what you really wanna ask?”

“What?”

“You wanna know if I'm a zombie, right?”

Jude says nothing. The way Leon has seen through him sends a hot flush of shame across his cheeks.

The musician shrugs. “S'aight. Everybody does. Ain't everyday you meet the walkin dead.”

Jude follows Leon's gaze as he looks away, watching the crowd that, even this early, in this weather, fills Jackson Square: tourists out shopping before the single parade tonight, which they will think is the entirety of Carnival; artists setting out their wares, at least those who can afford the sheaths of plastic that will protect their work from the rain; college kids and cooks and waitstaff and bartenders and everyone else without a set schedule, those who can let yesterday's party roll into tomorrow's if they don't have a shift that night or an essay due the next day; street performers and musicians and tarot readers, those odd souls who are the true priests and priestesses of the Cathedral's massive presence, who minister to those who come to worship the building and not the deity that resides within. Leon Carter looks out on all that life and sadness creases the corners of his eyes.

“Yeah,” he says at last. “It's true. My body's alive but I got no soul. That's a zombie no matter how you cut it.”

There is such pain in these words, such an absence of hope, that Jude feels he must say

something, anything, to apologize for bringing up the subject. "I can't believe anybody who plays like that has no soul," he says.

Leon is silent for a moment, long enough that Jude's stomach falls with the sudden belief that he has only made the situation worse, and then Leon laughs. He stretches a lean arm across the table and offers his hand to Jude. "Call me Sweets," Leon says. "All my friends do."

Jude takes his hand and feels a spark of recognition, his gift sensing Leon's lost soul, whispering to him that it is trapped inside the violin at Leon's feet, that he controls his own mind only so long as he holds the instrument. Jude says nothing about this sudden knowledge, wanting to preserve the tenuous connection he has made with this man, this creature.

Fortunately for him, he does not need to fill any more silence, as another woman joins Regal at her table, and Regal gives the signal, brushing a curl of her long, auburn hair behind her ear.

Later, after a brief struggle, the hoodoo woman slumps in one of the benches atop the levee. Her body is bound by Regal's magic, her voice hushed by Jude's, and they are listing her options. She can either stop working curses and hateful spells, or she can stop doing anything at all. When Leon opens his violin case and runs his hands tenderly across the strings, the *bokar's* eyes widen, and she struggles against her restraints. Jude can smell, can almost taste her fear, and so he takes a deep swallow from his flask, surprised to find it nearly empty. Leon lifts his instrument and begins to play. It is a simple melody, hauntingly evocative. His music trembles with power, deep and primal, though it has no effect on the woman that Jude can see, save that tears stream from her eyes. Not fear or pain, but something else, something more profound. It goes on for a long while, and then, abruptly, the music ceases. At Leon's suggestion, Jude and Regal release their magics, letting the woman slip forward to press her face into her hands.

“What have I done?” she whispers, over and over again. “What have I done?”

“The fuck you do to her?” Regal asks.

Leon, replacing his violin, shrugs. “I did what I do. I opened a door.”

“I don't understand,” Jude says. “What door?”

Leon snaps closed the locks on his case. “Here,” he says, tapping two fingers against his chest, above his heart. “I opened her up and let her have a look inside.”

Jude shook himself free of his memories and told Big Charlie to stop. “We're here,” he said.

The cab pulled up to the curb, at the seemingly abandoned building that housed Perdido Books, Thoth's strange library. Jude opened the door but hesitated, turning back to the driver. He had learned to keep the things he knew to himself, learned what people did when you revealed their secret losses to them. “Do you have anything to write on?” he asked. Big Charlie handed him a ballpoint pen and a business card. Jude wrote a name and an address on the back. “Here,” he said. “This is where your mother lives. She misses you, Charles. She's never stopped looking for you.” He eased out of the cab and threw the satchel around his shoulder. He wanted to play it cool and mysterious, to vanish without turning back, but as he so often did, Jude failed. He saw tears rolling down the huge man's face, the card clasped in his hands, like a prayer. Jude felt a slight weight ease from his shoulders, the burden of Big Charlie's loss being lifted from him. Smiling, Jude understood, at long last, a part of himself that had long eluded him, the 'unless' that Mourning had hinted at. The burden of his gift was not the knowledge itself, but the responsibility, the duty, to make it right.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Jude crept through the bottom two floors of Thoth's hideaway, first the abandoned storefront and then the glowing library, climbing the stairs made of books onto the third floor with one hand gripping the smooth glass shard in his satchel. When he poked his head through the trap door, though, he found it empty. Water gurgled in the odd indoor pond, filled with groaning frogs and wriggling fish, but Thoth's wading bird form was nowhere to be found. The room stank of river mud and duckweed, a swampy, rotting smell. Jude searched the room but found only a monk-like austerity, bare walls and empty space. He wondered if he should wait for the Egyptian god to return, or if he should try searching the maze of books, when he heard music, faintly, from above.

The soft, mournful tones of a violin.

Jude hurried up the stairs, bursting into bright sunlight and a gust of wind. The roof was a junk heap of random possessions, a piano leaning awkwardly on three legs, a writing desk collapsed beneath its own weight, candelabras and wall sconces in a jumbled heap, a giant paper mache face left over from a Mardi Gras parade, computer monitors and dozens of musical instruments and what looked, at first glance, like several truckloads of scrap metal, but after a moment revealed itself to be hundreds and hundreds of antique locks, their long, slender keys protruding from their innards. A squat brick chimney rose from this hoard, and atop it perched the bird-headed god, wearing jeans and a 'krewe of Thoth' t-shirt, a pair of sandals with tiny wings at the ankles. He balanced Leon's violin upright on his knee as though it were a tiny cello, repeating the same two notes over and over again as he sawed back and forth.

He performed for an audience of two, Salvatore, in his raven's shape, and Leon Carter,

whose fingertips bled. Jude had an image of the zombie dragging himself up the sheer face of the brick wall by his nails, entranced by the siren call of his own violin, of his own soul's voice. Thoth jerked his ibis head around and, spotting Jude, honked, though Jude couldn't tell whether it was warning or greeting. The Egyptian god shook his head, thrashing back and forth, shifting to his human face, that unsettling array of teeth.

Jude reached into his satchel and closed his fingers against the cool, jagged piece of glass, hoping he wouldn't have to use it. Thoth stared at him from behind the half moons of his spectacles, continuing his simple, hypnotic chord. After a few agonizing moments of this, perhaps waiting to see if Jude would fall under his spell like Leon and Sal, he spoke. "I hope you do not mind," he said. "I grew tired of waiting for the game to end and seized the prize myself."

The statement made no sense. Did he think he had won already? Had he? Then it occurred to Jude that the prize Thoth referred to was the violin he had taken. "Our agreement was for a key," Jude said. "Not a fiddle. Besides, that wasn't mine to wager," Jude said, pointing at the instrument in Thoth's hands. "You stole it."

Thoth wiggled his head in a peculiar dance, stretching his long neck. "That is true, but are you surprised? I am a god of thieves, after all." Though his words were hesitant, his voice was thick and cloying, like honey. Jude found himself wanting to agree, wanting to smile at Thoth's theft as though it were a boyish prank.

Until he heard, in that two note song, the echo of Leon's pain, *my heart my soul my voice* reminding him of the crime, of the rape of identity, that Thoth had committed. He remembered what Saturday had said, that Thoth suffered from dementia after his thousands of years on Earth.

This was madness, wagering for what wasn't Jude's to bet, stealing it out of impatience. "Give it back," Jude said.

Thoth's grin spread further, impossibly wide. "Or what?" he asked, his honeyed voice mocking now. "What will you do to me, little child of the fallen? You cannot even find your wings. Shall I lend you my shoes so that you can reach me?" He shook his feet, the tiny wings of his sandals fluttering like a butterfly struggling to be free.

Jude pulled the glass shard free of his satchel, its power unfurling as it touched the open air. Though still cool to the touch, it blazed with a bluish-white light, a flash of lightning in the palm of his hand. "I can reach you just fine, Thoth. Or should I call you Hermes?" He felt a smile stretch across his face, cold and threatening as the weapon in his fist. "You remember this, don't you? You've seen what a Thunderbolt can do."

Thoth clicked his tongue and turned his back, the notes he played suddenly complex and frenzied. As one, Sal and Leon moved their gaze towards Jude, stepped forward. Leon's bloody hands came up, curved into claws, Sal's beak stretched wide and split at the seams, his dog's shape wriggling free. Thoth leaned into his bow, his arm sawing back and forth so fast the strings began to smoke, and Leon staggered into a run. Sal bunched his legs beneath him.

Jude took a deep breath and drew back his arm, like he was throwing a football, pure wrath crackling in his fist, and cast the thunderbolt. Sal leaped forward, sailing between Jude and Thoth, his jaws wide. Thunder boomed across the roof, shattering glass and rattling heaps of metal. Salvatore burst in a hot spray of fur and red mist, destroyed in a flash by Jude's weapon.

Leon, as deafened by the peal of thunder as Jude, ceased, his steps faltering, his face going slack. Jude, though stricken by the sudden loss of Sal, reached into his satchel and took

out the bottle of salt, pouring it into his hand as he had outside the Maple Leaf when he'd pretended it was zombie powder. Thoth continued playing, his arm laboring in a futile effort, ordering Leon to strike, to kill.

Forcing the zombie's jaws open, Jude blew through his clenched fist, forcing salt into Leon's mouth. When it touched his tongue, the strength went out of his limbs, casting him to the tar paper floor. Jude brushed the salt away on the seat of his jeans, calling up the fire, the magic of his rage. Sal had died for this foolish old god's delusions of grandeur and Leon had been wounded, far worse than when Jude threatened him. Was Thoth also the murderer, the winged shape in the night? Thoth sprang from the brick, convulsing, shifting into his bird's shape with Leon's violin gripped in his claws.

Jude shouted, a wordless howl that blossomed into fire, scorching through the air and lashing across Thoth's back. Squawking, the bird pinwheeled through the sky, the instrument slipping from his grasp. It hung in midair for what seemed an impossible length of time, as did Jude, vaulting to try to catch it. He had time to wonder what would happen to Leon if he missed, if the fragile wooden frame with its slender neck and strings pulled taut, were to smash against the roof, or worse, drop three stories to the unforgiving concrete below, the cohesion of its existence vanishing in a cloud of fragments and unrecognizable chunks, as Sal had. Would it free Leon's soul from bondage or destroy him?

Jude's hands closed around it, and the world caught up with him, the rough surface of the roof bludgeoning the air from his lungs, scratching the skin along his forearms, bashing his ribs and hips. He rolled to a stop, the violin safe in his hands. Jude looked up in time to see Thoth circle once and then glide off towards the river. He dropped his head onto the gritty tar paper

and gasped for breath, a sense of victory and defeat warring within him. He hurt everywhere, it seemed, knuckles sore from punching Dandy, body still battered and tired from wrestling the djinn. Even his mind ached, straining in every idle moment to decipher the mystery surrounding him. And now, even though he'd done a good thing for Leon, felt the small knot of loss at the base of his throat dissolve, he'd lost Sal as well, struck down by his own incompetence. He closed his eyes and fought back tears of exhaustion and frustration. Of rage.

These two days since his resurrection had taken their toll. He wanted, needed, for something good to happen. The shape of two clawed feet dug into his chest, a small, bird-light weight pressing down on him. His damned magic again, the curse he'd called a gift, burdening him with Sal's loss. Fucking perfect.

“Shit,” Sal said, drawing the word out in surprise or appreciation or both. “That was one motherfucker of a catch, Jude. That was some touchdown in the Superbowl shit right there.”

Jude sat up with a cry of joy, dumping the raven into his lap and then onto the roof. Sal ruffled his feathers and struggled to his feet, cursing. “The hell?” he muttered when he'd recovered.

“Sal, you're alive!”

The raven hopped up onto Jude's knee, digging his beak into the short feathers at the join of his wing to his body, scratching an itch. “Not really,” he said. “This is just a shape. I mean, yeah, you blew that dog skin all from hell to breakfast, but I've still got this one.” He shook himself, grumbling. “So what's next?”

“I don't know,” Jude said, not realizing the truth of it until the words left his mouth. That compass in his head had all but vanished. It seemed to be pointing nowhere, or to everywhere at

once, which amounted to the same thing. He could still feel the lost voice of New Orleans, like a stone buried just below his skin, but his gift offered him no direction.

Sal turned one dark, beady eye up towards Jude, shifted his position on Jude's knee.

“You just can't win for losing, can you?”

The words brought to mind what Dodge had said, or what Dodge's shade had said, when Jude spoke with him at that fete of the dead who couldn't, or wouldn't, move on. *So screw it all*, he'd said, *you don't play the game you can't win*. Just like that, sitting on the roof in the sweltering New Orleans heat, the answer, or at least, an inkling of one, came to him. He didn't know who killed Dodge, not with any confidence, but he might, just might, have a way to survive long enough to find out. One by one the pieces of his plan fell into place, something so simple, so *stupid*, it might just work.

Hurt and tired, ass burning from the hot roof, indebted to and on the menu for powers far, far beyond his control, and yet, Jude began to laugh.

That night, Jude walked down Frenchmen Street and listened to live music: a brass band on the street playing for cash dropped in a hat; in one bar, two young women and a burly guy captivated the room, the girls on guitar, the guy on an electric fiddle; in another, a duo played in the corner, a banjo and a steel washboard. They were good, but none of them played with the same passion Leon Carter had shown when Jude returned his violin to him. Jude had expected the light to come on in the zombie's eyes as soon as his fingers touched the wood, but Leon stayed vacant. Only when Jude forced the bow across the strings had a flicker of recognition returned. Slowly,

painfully, Leon had drawn music from his instrument, faltering and discordant at first, growing more and more confident as his voice and his soul and his body were reunited. Leon Carter played himself back from the brink and the sound of it was pure joy.

Inspired by the flash of insight on the roof, Jude left the satchel in his apartment and did his best to spend his night on Frenchmen without the burdens of magic. He drank no more than a beer or two at each place he stopped, out of politeness to the bartenders than any real desire for alcohol. He took the streetcar all the way down to Carrolton and ate his fill at the Camelia Grill and slept that night with the peace of the righteous dead.

The next day he spent enjoying his city, perhaps, though he didn't think of it this way, saying goodbye. The weather cooperated, like a gift, bright enough to lift his spirits, cloudy enough to keep the worst heat away. He wandered through City Park, avoiding the parking lot, and thus, the memories, where he and Dupree had killed a fledgling vampire. For lunch he had a fried oyster poboy at a small grocery around the corner from his home, to his mind the best in the city, and for dinner he ate at Green Goddess, tucked away in the Quarter, letting his waiter choose his dishes. In between the two meals he spoke to Opal on the phone, telling her it was safe to come home, and animated a car to visit his mother in the abbey. At the end of this sweet farewell, with a full stomach and a light heart, Jude walked through the night to the dilapidated building where he had found Dodge's card room just twelve days before, where Leon waited, leaning against a streetlight with Sal perched on his shoulder. Of what might be his last day alive, Jude regretted only that crawfish were not in season.

He wore the same clothes he'd worn that fateful night, loose slacks and running shoes, a dark, long-sleeved t-shirt and thick leather gloves. The cross Augustus had given him hung

around his neck, the iron nail flush against his skin and his magician's bag, with all the tricks it held, slapped against his leg with every step. Jude nodded to Leon, glancing down at the violin case in his loose grip. The musician had forgiven Jude his earlier transgression and had sworn on Thoth's rooftop to do all he could to help Jude survive the coming game.

Jude knew his heart should be pounding, that his thoughts should be racing, but somehow he felt calm. Ready. A worm of doubt remained, however, chewing and writhing through his thoughts at random, making him wonder if his calm was the consequence of making peace with himself, or if he had simply given up. Pushing these worries away, he reached for the wrought iron gate, where, as before, a low shape rose up from the shadows, snarling and snapping its jaws. This time, though, Jude opened the gate and set the beast free.

The dog, some guardian magic Dodge had left behind, opened its mouth wide and lunged for Jude, its teeth flashing in the darkness. A shadow swept in front of him, plunging past glistening fangs and a bright pink tongue, vanishing down its gullet. The dog yelped once and fell to the ground, thrashing in the dust, frothing at the mouth. After a moment, he quieted and lay still, a lone black feather protruding from his mouth.

Jude poked the dog with his toe, and an eye opened. "Well?" he asked.

The dog lifted his head and spoke in Sal's voice. "Hell yes," he said. "That's better." He ran in a circle, great, bounding steps, tongue lolling from his muzzle. He slowed and then bolted, loping along the length of the fence, and racing back.

"Sal," Jude said, drawing the word out, letting his impatience seep into his voice. Behind him, Leon chuckled. Sal dragged himself to a halt and dropped his haunches to the ground, his tail slapping against the dirt.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn't realize how much I liked this skin until it was gone, you know?”

Jude thought of his own loss of flesh. “Yeah,” he said, “I know.” He led the way into the house, the wood creaking underfoot, the smell of mold heavy in the air. When the three of them reached the red door, Jude could see, even in darkness, that the paint had faded, that no light shone in the room beyond. It groaned open at his touch, and Jude found the room just as he had left it, the remains of a poker table in one corner, a faint dark stain on the floor, buried beneath years, maybe decades, of dust. He pulled the door shut and closed his eyes. “Now, Sweets,” he said and pictured the door as he had first seen it, the night of the card game.

Behind him, Leon began to play, a quick, lively tune that made Jude want to move, that made him want to match his steps to the beat. If he had heard it from the throat of a brass instrument, Jude would have recognized it as parts of songs played at second lines, chopped up and rearranged and made into a different kind of magic. He reached out, still in darkness, and turned the knob, opening the door and his eyes to a haze of smoke, the tinkle of ice against glass, the faint hint of cinnamon coming from Bartholomew, to the assembled trickster gods and the empty seat, waiting, once again, for him.

Jude stepped into the room, Sal at his heels, unable to stop himself from meeting, and matching, Dodge's grin. Of the gods, he alone seemed cheerful despite being the only one who was dead. Scarpelli had a distracted air about him, staring into space, his too-long fingers splayed across his cheek. Lillian refused to meet Jude's eyes, though Jude couldn't tell if it was false modesty, despite sharing his bed and taking his life, that kept her from looking into his face or shame that a mere demi-god had thwarted her plans. Her slender fingers hovered over the

pearl that hung around her neck. The expression on Bartholomew's face was as fixed and unreadable as ever, those unnerving, pupil-less eyes seeming to follow Jude's every movement. Legba scowled at everyone and everything, his pipe stem clenched between his teeth. Thoth's ibis-head twitched and shuddered, what had once seemed like the mannerisms of a bird now revealed to be the paroxysms of madness.

Only Dodge remained as he had been that first night, fat and bald and ever smiling, that florescent grin cranked up as bright as it would go. "Good to see you, Jude," he said. "Wanna play some cards?"

Chapter Twenty Eight

It wears a jester's cap and many colored clothes, speaks in rhymes and riddles, speaks the truths no one else dares speak. Or it is the child, who cries out that the Emperor is wearing no clothes. Or it is Falstaff, perhaps the greatest and least understood of Shakespeare's characters, both drunken and wise. It is Loki or it is Raven or it is Coyote or Prometheus or Quetzalcoatl. It is the bringer of fire and it is the bringer of pain, the Trickster who dances with chaos, with madness, with change. It is the ghost in the machine or the element of chance or the exception that proves the rule. It is the unintended consequence, or the lucky break, or the reversal of fortune. It is wisdom through mockery, truth through lies, life through death. It is The Fool.

Bartholomew spoke as Jude took his seat, asking, in that haunting voice of his, why Jude had brought a beast with him. Jude couldn't place what disturbed him so much about the angel's, or the fallen angel's, voice, only that it seemed somehow familiar but somehow wrong as well. Whatever it was, it brought out the worst in him. "He's my seeing eye dog," Jude said.

"But you are not blind," Legba said.

"Aren't we all?" Jude asked. He felt swollen with that cocky, swaggering other presence that had spoken through him since his resurrection, felt the heat of his magic surging through his veins. His heart pounded not with fear but with anticipation, with an almost giddy eagerness to see if his plan would work.

Legba grimaced, and Bartholomew's face puckered with distaste, but Dodge laughed that booming, joyous laugh. "Let the dog stay," he said. The angel opened his mouth to argue, but Dodge spoke over him. "This is still my game. I might be dead, and my word might mean dick out in the real world, but until it's over, this is still my game. My rules."

“Speaking of things being over,” Scarpelli said, staring with his corpse eyes at Jude. “Why don't you go ahead and flip those cards, godling? Yours is not the only blood I intend to feast on this night, and I'd just as soon be about my business.”

“Yes,” Lillian said in her harsh, lisping accent. “I should like to end this game as well.” Thoth and Legba and Bartholomew all made various gestures of agreement, one a bird's territorial bobbing head display, one a dignified tilt of the chin, one an imperious lifting of an eyebrow. Jude gathered his cards in his hand, flicking and twisting his wrist just so. He arranged the speech, the narrative, he had crafted with Opal's help.

Jude turned over the first card, The Magician. “This is for who I was,” he said. “The man between two worlds of power and mortality.” He turned over the second card. “The Wheel of Fortune. This stands for those assembled here, the fortune gods, the tricksters, the obstacles in the path.” The vampire tittered, the noise setting Jude's teeth on edge. He swallowed and took a deep breath. He had to stay calm despite the pulse staggering through his veins, despite the whirling compass needle in his mind. The third card, The Traitor. “This is my moment of enlightenment. This is when I learned who I am, what I'm capable of. Everything hangs in the balance.” The fourth card, Judgement. It depicted three coffins, a man rising from the one in the center, a woman and a child from the coffins on either side. Above them, an angel blew a trumpet. “This is my resurrection, my triumph over death and the triumph of those who stand with me.” The card, the explanation, agitated Bartholomew, who fluttered his spice-scented wings.

Scarpelli giggled again. “We'll see about triumph when you turn that fifth card,” he said. The gods, the ones who remained living, and thus, who remained hungry, leaned in, their eyes

focused on Jude's hands, waiting for the image to be revealed. Only Dodge watched Jude, those money-colored eyes staring coolly into Jude's own.

Jude flipped over the final card, the Fool. Moans and curses rang out around the table. It depicted Jude, a staff over his shoulder, his magician's bag slung on his back, a dog at his heels, smiling as he stepped over the edge of a cliff. "This is my future," Jude said. "This is me, the fortune god of New Orleans."

As one, the gods turned to Dodge. Jude could see it in their eyes, could feel the disbelief radiating from each of them. Jude looked from god to god and knew that if his gamble failed, his only hope was a swift death, and swifter oblivion. And then his eyes met Dodge's, and Jude knew that the fat god knew, that he had known all along, perhaps. Jude's heart seized, fear piercing him at last. He had thrown the dice, he had played his hand, and he had lost. And then Dodge began to laugh.

"We have a winner!" he shouted. He thrust his hand in Jude's direction. "Let me be the first to congratulate you," he said. The other gods mumbled and cursed, studying the cards strewn across the table.

Numb, waiting for Dodge's trick to become clear, Jude tugged the glove from his hand, and touched, flesh to spirit-flesh, with the murdered god. His gift surged within him, identifying all that Dodge had lost. Jude saw a childhood that lasted for hundreds of years, running with the others of his kind, the fae, through virgin forests of endless summer, in a world before, or beyond, the world of man. He saw a time in France, where Dodge Renaud was Renard the Fox, the trickster of fable. He saw when Dodge came to New Orleans, his sister's stolen pouch in hand and plans, so many plans. He saw the night when those plans came to an end, and at long

last, he saw the face of Dodge's murderer.

Bartholomew.

Dodge's grip tightened on Jude's hand and yanked him to the floor. He felt the wind of passage on the back of his neck, heard the whistle of something sharp slicing the air as he fell, as Bartholomew's grasping hand snatched for his throat. His vision narrowed to a fine point, adrenaline and magic flowing in a torrent through his veins. Knocking over his chair as he tumbled to the ground, Jude's satchel fell with him, flopping open. Jude lunged for it, his hand stabbing inside and drawing free the revolver. It responded to the thirst for vengeance in Jude's heart, responded to his touch with a terrible joy instead of the agony it had inflicted before.

The fallen angel leaped onto the table, scattering drinks and playing cards, his wings spread wide, the smell of cinnamon overpowering, his voice spilling incoherent babble from his lips. Jude rolled onto his back, aimed, and squeezed the trigger. The hammer dropped onto an empty cylinder with a pitiful click. Jude squeezed again, and again, panic rising in his throat. On the third try, the gun bucked in his hands and an explosion ripped through the room.

Bartholomew swiped a hand in front of his face, knocking the bullet away with the same motion, the same nonchalance, of someone shooing away a fly. Jude fired twice more with the same result, and then the fallen angel snatched the front of his shirt in a fist and lifted Jude into the air. Jude grabbed Bartholomew's wrist with his bare hand, and again, his gift tore through him, revealing Bartholomew's loss. He saw a young man lying on his back, saw that it was Bartholomew's job to guard him. The young man, the boy, really, lay in a drunken stupor, a liquor bottle in his limp hand, urine staining the front of his suit. As Jude watched, through Bartholomew's eyes, the boy started to vomit, started to choke. Adults, police officers no less,

stood a dozen feet away, on the other side of a row of parked cars. All Bartholomew had to do was shout – he was allowed that much interference into their world – and the boy would be saved. Floating above him, the angel watched, curious, and also angry, that this whelp could be worthy of his attention. The boy gasped and struggled and gagged, and then he twitched. And then nothing at all. And then, for the first time in his long, long existence, Bartholomew's feet touched the ground.

The fallen angel howled into Jude's face, using the voice, the voices, he had stolen from his victims. Sal leaped, growling, at Bartholomew's back, but his massive, beautiful wings flexed and struck the dog to the ground. Over the fallen angel's shoulder, Jude could see the other gods, relaxed around the table, content to watch, content to enjoy the show. Bartholomew lifted his hand to Jude's throat, to add his voice to Tommy's and Celeste's and Nicole's and Augustus', the blood for those deaths on Bartholomew's hands, but the blame should be laid at the feet of his 'Master.' Jude breathed deep, gathered his rage, and spat fire into the fallen angel's face. Bartholomew hurled him to the ground.

Jude rolled on the floor and came up running, the revolver in one hand and his satchel strap in the other, darting through the open door and down the hallway, impressed by his adrenaline fueled dexterity, sprinting for the open air and, he hoped, help from Leon.

He burst into bright light and music and laughter, the never ending party of the dead. Jude cursed and shoved his way through the crowd, brushing up against person after person, their cold spirit-forms searing his hot flesh, and then he shouted, the force of his living voice demanding their attention, clearing a space before him. He nearly reached the door before it slammed shut in front of him. He turned, and on the other side of the ballroom Bartholomew

towered, his wings stretched above his head, murder in his eyes. Smoke rose from his face where Jude's fire had burned it without leaving a mark.

“C'mon Jude, don't run,” he said, using Tommy's voice, then switching to Nicole's “It's nice in here with us.”

“You have to be stopped,” Jude said, reaching into his satchel, hoping for something, anything that might help. “What you're doing is wrong.”

“It's not wrong, son,” Bartholomew said in Augustus' gravel-filled drawl, as he stalked closer, step by menacing step. “It's the nature of things. We are all together in the end.”

Jude's hand closed around the round brass powder flask, the one that held the djinn. His thoughts whirled. The djinn might be strong enough, but without a circle, without a way to impose rules on it, Jude had no way of containing its fury. Jude looked down at the useless revolver he still clutched.

“Oi!” Bartholomew shouted, Dandy's voice now. “You got shit in your King Lear's? You forget I'm 'ere?” The fallen angel switched to Celeste's voice, husky and potent. “Child, I done won already. I'ma take your voice, and I'ma take the voice of this city. I'ma take 'em all.”

Jude whispered to the being within the brass container. He promised it that if it lent him some of its power now, he would release it before dawn, no tricks, just freedom. As the fallen angel leaped into the air, Jude tipped the flask to his lips and drank. Liquid fire ran down his throat, much more powerful than his own magic, like swallowing molten rock, like breathing sunlight. He wondered, as Bartholomew arced overhead, what holding this much power inside of him might do to a demi-god like him. Then he thumbed open the cylinder of the revolver and breathed out the power he'd just taken in, filling the chambers with magic, with power, with

wrath. As Bartholomew descended, his stolen voices singing out in madness, in hunger, Jude flipped the revolver closed with a snap, aimed at the bastard's throat, and squeezed the trigger.

Because he could hear only an insistent whine after the flash and the roar, Jude couldn't be sure, but he believed, he hoped, that with the ruin the djinn's fire made of the fallen angel's throat, Bartholomew died without making a sound.

Though he expected to find the room empty, when Jude walked back into Dodge's card room, he found everyone still seated as though nothing special had happened. Jude collapsed into his chair, his body weak and trembling, the revolver like a lead weight in one hand, the flask that held the djinn a smoldering ember in the other. He laid both on the table on either side of the spread of his cards and folded his hands, one gloved, the other bare, one on top the other. He wanted to ask why no one had left, but the room seemed pregnant with some possibility, so he waited and watched, looking from god to god, and then to the pile of coins and other markers in the center of the table. Then he realized why they had stayed. He had beaten the gods at their own game. He'd won.

And now they had to pay up.

Jude scooped together the markers that Bartholomew had scattered, hiding his revulsion at the teeth Scarpelli used, stacking his coins in front of him. He couldn't remember if they had named what they were wagering. "Lillian," Jude said. "You wanted my passion, and you took it from me before the game was over. You killed me, too. That's twice you owe me. And so that's twice you'll have to pay." The words just spilled out of him, as quickly, maybe more quickly,

than the thoughts occurred to him. "I want your satchel, free and clear, no more attempts to reclaim it."

The faerie's head dropped to her chest, but she nodded.

"I want the pearl, too."

She snapped her head around to face him, her lilac eyes stained with black. In the back of his mind, still, despite all he had done, part of Jude flinched before her inhuman rage, but he held his ground. Whether she liked it or not, he'd won. Lillian broke the chain and dropped the pearl on the table in front of Jude and stood so quickly her chair teetered and nearly fell. She cursed, in what Jude guessed was the language of the fae, and stomped from the room.

Jude turned to the vampire next. Scarpelli picked at his nails as though Jude were boring. "Say whatever you want, sweetmeats, you'll be the fortune god of a freshly risen vampire tomorrow night. Let's see how lucky you feel when she's draining you drop by drop."

Jude smiled. "You've missed the point, vampire."

"Oh? And what point would that be?"

"That I've found my heart." Dodge smiled and nodded, slow and proud.

Scarpelli made a noise, a snort of derision, and twirled his finger in a slow circle. "Well la dee dah," he said. "How wonderful for you."

"I found my heart," Jude repeated. "And it's here, in this city." Scarpelli's eyes narrowed. Clearly beginning to understand, he rose from the table and then above it, the mass of his bruised corpse body lifting into the air, his fangs bared. Even Thoth and Legba leaned back.

"New Orleans is my home, vampire," Jude said, his voice calm and certain. "And I don't remember inviting you in." Before Scarpelli could say anything, threat or plea or parting barb,

before he could lunge towards Jude, before he could even change the expression on his face, he vanished, leaving behind nothing but a lingering taste of blood.

Jude sighed. He was sure, later, that he'd take great pleasure in that moment, but now he felt only weariness as the excitement and the magic drained out of him.

Legba spoke before Jude could address him. "If I were you," he said, "I would want my help keepin dat heart of yours in your ches' where it belong, not down de river."

Jude laughed. "I was thinking the same thing," he said. "How about Bartholomew? The heart of a fallen angel for the heart of an angel's son? Should way about the same, huh?"

"I tink dat bastard's heart gon be heavier than yours, Jude. But it should take your place just fine." Legba's eyes glittered despite the expression on his face.

Jude turned to Salvatore. "Sal? You okay with that?"

The dog lifted a hind leg and scratched behind one of his ears, grunting. "Yeah," he said, "I ought to be getting back below anyway." He rose to his feet and went to Legba's side, allowing the old man to rest a hand on his head, as though he were truly the dog whose shape he wore. "Be seeing you, Jude," he said. "It's been real." Then he led Legba down the hallway, the *loa* shuffling with every step, the death spirit muttering about having to drag Bartholomew's heart all the way to the streetcar.

Thoth stood up and turned his ibis-head one way and then the other as though confused. He honked, changed into a bird, and vanished as well, leaving Jude alone with Dodge.

"Not bad, little one," Dodge said, "Not bad at all." Jude rolled the pearl back and forth with a gloved finger, not wanting to touch it with his bare hands, with his magic. Part of him still waited for everything to turn ugly, for Bartholomew to return and rip open his throat. "I

ain't seen a cheat that ballsy since that kid bluffed the Admiral at English Turn.”

“How did you know?” Jude asked

“That you cheated?” He shrugged and picked up the stump of his cigar. “It's what I'd have done. What I can't figure is how you did it. How in the name of Oberon's nutsack did you change your fate?”

“I didn't.” Jude pulled off his other glove, revealed the cards hidden up his sleeve, the cards he'd switched with a sleight-of-hand trick. Dodge laughed and laughed, tears coming to his eyes. “I figured you'd all be looking for something big,” Jude said, when the dead god had quieted enough to hear him. “So I tried something small.”

Dodge, laughing, shook his head. He reached across the table and flipped over the cards Jude had traded, the cards that held his true fate. They ran in a narrative from Magician to Fool. In front of Jude's eyes they faded and vanished, leaving only the cards he'd brought with him. The fate he'd created for himself.

“I don't understand,” Jude said.

“It ain't always about calling down storms and bringing the dead back to life, Jude. The little things count. You tricked a room full of fortune gods. What you call that, if it ain't magic?” He licked a thumb and rubbed at one of the cards Jude had laid on the table, wiping away some of his mother's fresh paint. “What if it smeared?”

“Then I'd have been fucked,” Jude said and joined Dodge's laughter. It had worked. It had actually worked. He'd changed his fate. He tried not to think about what that fifth card might have been, otherwise. The relief was almost tangible, a warmth in his body as powerful as any magic. Dodge tipped his glass back, draining his Scotch. His smile fading to a grin, then

a smirk. He shook his head. “You know it ain't done yet, right?”

“Yeah. I know. I saw some of it when I touched Bartholomew. He killed you, but someone else told him to.”

“You know who?”

“I do,” Jude said as the sound of Leon's violin filled the room, calling him back. “And I'm going to find out why.”

Chapter Twenty Nine

Jude returned to the dark hallway where Leon waited, closing the door behind him as the music faded away. Sweat dripped from the musician's dreadlocks, and his shoulders sagged when he lowered the bow from his strings. They stood there in silence for a moment, zombie and nephilim, musician and magician, both standing at the crossroads, each living in the seam between one world and the next. "Is it done?" Leon asked.

"Yeah," Jude said. "Just about."

"What's left?"

Jude lifted the slender chain he'd demanded from the faerie and told Leon to hold out his hand, dangling the pearl over his outstretched palm. He breathed his magic onto the pearl, bathing it in flame, watching as the metal grew soft, as the small, round shape slid out of its silver cage and into Leon's hand. It glowed softly in the night. "Swallow it," Jude said, letting the molten silver pool in his gloved palm, rolling the metal as it cooled into a rounded lump about the size of an antique pistol ball. "I'm serious," he said, when Leon hesitated. "Trust me, Sweets."

The zombie slipped the pearl into his mouth and tossed his head back as though he were dry-swallowing a pill. The changes were so gradual and subtle Jude might have missed them if he weren't looking for them. Light flickered in the depths of Leon's eyes where before he had only stared with the cold impassivity of the dead. A solidity hung in the air, as though Leon grew steadily heavier, more imbued with gravity. Vibrations shuddered through the ground at Jude's feet, through the walls surrounding him, through the air in his lungs and in the marrow of his bones, waves of energy with Leon at their epicenter, a vital, vibrant, hum.

“What was that?” Leon asked, his voice his own but infused with a depth, a resonance, beyond anything a human throat should be capable of. “What did you do to me?”

“What it was,” Jude said, dropping the lump of silver into his satchel and tugging off his gloves, “is what you are now. The voice of New Orleans.” He walked out into the light of the street, enveloped by heat, by life, Leon following close at his heels. He dropped the gloves onto the sidewalk, certain that someone would come along that needed them. He no longer did. He would never need them again.

“What does that mean?” Leon asked, nearly whispering, as though afraid of his own words.

Jude shrugged, his hands spread wide. “It means that New Orleans is alive again, partly. She has her magician, she has her voice, and soon she'll have her luck, as well. Mostly, though, what it means is up to you, Leon Carter. You are the voice of New Orleans now. You speak for her, and she speaks through you, just as she works through my hands, as my hands can shape her reality. The rest, well, the rest is up to you.” Leon stared at the violin in his hands, his mouth hanging open, the voice of a city struck speechless. “I will make a suggestion, though,” Jude said. Leon's eyes met his, the face of a man pulled to safety from floodwaters, equal parts hope and incredulity. Jude felt a thrill at his slyly chosen words, hoped they sounded as mysterious coming from his lips as they had coming from Leon's.

“Do what you do,” Jude said. “Open doors. Open them and let people look inside.”

* * *

Mourning waited for Jude behind his desk, shimmering like starlight in the darkened office, framed by the skyline of New Orleans. For the first time, Mourning's radiance didn't overwhelm him. Those emerald eyes, though, were still far too bright. Far too knowing. Jude wondered if his eyes looked the same, now. He thrust his hands into his pockets and stood, calm enough, somehow, to wait, to force Mourning to speak first. He thought he knew, now, where that confidence came from, that sly devilry.

“Am I to presume that this unscheduled visit indicates that your conflicting engagements have been satisfactorily resolved?”

Jude dipped his head, a silent, grudging nod. This was the true game, the true contest, and he couldn't lay all his cards on the table, not just yet.

A wry frown bent the corner of Mourning's lips, a gesture so unusual that Jude thought it might be genuine. “How laconic of you,” he said. “How terse. Might I request some measure of elaboration, if only to secure my own intense curiosity? You must know the pride I take in my comprehensive grasp of current affairs.”

“Bartholomew, a fallen angel, murdered Dodge Reynaud, and others, in an attempt to reclaim his lost voice. I killed him.”

“How fascinating. And how menacing. You say you managed to slay this creature?” Mourning glanced down at his desk, tracing his finger in a circle along the glass. “You needn't have exerted yourself further by presenting yourself immediately. A night's respite is the smallest balm you should grant yourself after such an ordeal. Let us preclude more intricate elaboration of your imminent duties until the morrow, yes?”

“No.”

“Pardon?”

“I said no. Let's get this over with.”

Mourning said nothing, looking at Jude as if he had managed to surprise him. Another first. “Very well then,” Mourning said, smoothing out an imaginary wrinkle on his bleach-white tie. “By all means. You are, of your own accord, obligated to me for a period of service of no less than one year, beginning –” He turned his wrist to look at the face of his watch, waiting for a specific moment, “beginning now. Do you concur?” Jude agreed. When Mourning returned his attention to Jude, the old Mourning had returned, something cunning in the slant of his eyebrows, in the way he leaned back into his chair. “Now then. As I am once again the director of your actions, I should very much like to divest you of some of the more, ah, shall we say, the demanding responsibilities that have come into your possession of late.” His gently mocking tone vanished, the mask sliding away to reveal something old, and hard, and dark. “Give me the voice of New Orleans.”

“I can't do that,” Jude said.

Mourning slammed his hand onto his desk, a jagged crack snaking its way across the glass. “Can't? *Can't?* You find yourself in the fortunate position of not needing to concern your conscience with questions of can and cannot, should or should not. There is simply that which you do, which, at further benefit to you, is simply what I *tell* you to do. Give me the voice. Now.”

“I gave it away,” Jude said.

Mourning's tongue flicked out and ran along the pristine whiteness of his teeth. Jude could see a burning aura burst around the bright god, knew his rage before he smelled the

charred metal stink of it. Mourning stood and clasped his arms behind his back,. “You gave. It. Away.”

“Yeah,” Jude said.

“And your right to proclaim the next fortune god of this city? Did you so generously donate that to the common welfare as well?” Though Mourning stood on the other side of the room, Jude could feel the waves of heat coming off of him, the pulsing, tangible presence of a bonfire.

“No, that choice is still mine.”

“Excellent. You needn't tax your powers of deliberation. The decision has been resolved on your behalf. Name me.”

“No.”

The air around Mourning began to waver, the space between his fingertips crackling and sparking. “You will explain yourself. You will choose your words very carefully.”

Summoning every ounce of courage, Jude kept his hands in his pockets, kept his voice relaxed, even though, heart pounding, legs straining to run, balls tightening. Every instinct he had screamed at him to flee. He took a deep breath of the hot, wet air and spoke. “I swore to work for you,” he said. “I swore, if I'm remembering right, 'to be engaged in your service, for a period of one year.' I never swore to be obedient. I never swore to be prompt or disciplined. Being a good employee was never part of the agreement. You gave me an order that I respectfully decline. In short, Mr. Mourning, if you don't like my attitude, you can fire me.”

Mourning's desk shattered into a cloud of glittering sand, borne on a wind that swept through the office, whirling around the two of them. Like thousands of tiny blades, the

sandstorm of glass cut and gouged, devouring the arm chair Jude usually sat in, scouring a round groove in the marble floor. The stone beneath Mourning's feet cracked and buckled, his perfect, chiseled features cracking as well, betraying his emotions at last, revealing his rage. “Mr. Duboisson,” Mourning said, his sibilants coming out as a hiss, “you do not know who you are fucking with.”

Jude took as deep a breath as he could with the wind screaming hot and furious around him. He couldn't retreat, couldn't escape. If he tried to break Mourning's circle of wind and glass, it would tear him to shreds. Despite all of this, Jude stood his ground and spoke the simple, deadly truth. “Yes, I do,” he said. “You are Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent. You are Loki, god of fire and deceit. You are Raven, the bright-plumed bird who stole fire from Heaven. You are S. Mourning, the Star of the Morning, First of the Fallen.

“You are Lucifer.”

Black wings arched from Mourning's back, proud, strong wings shimmering with the rainbow iridescence of an oil slick, shivering and then striking against one another like a thunderclap. Jude had always suspected Mourning's identity but when he'd smelled the cinnamon of Bartholomew's presence here the day before, those suspicions had grown stronger. Added to the revelation of Bartholomew's guilt, his submission to an unnamed 'Master', and Jude knew where his true conflict lay. He had one chance, one power that might conceivably wound a god as old and as mighty as Mourning.

“I stand corrected,” Mourning said, his voice cutting easily through the keening wind. “You figured me out. But you left out one name.”

Jude reached into his satchel, digging out the brass vessel that held the djinn, the ancient

storm of magic he'd sworn to release. It might kill him, it might kill Mourning, or it might be strong enough to do both. But the primitive, primal circle Mourning had cut into the stone would be enough to contain its fury to this place.

“Do you want to know the name you forgot to call me?” Mourning asked, folding his hands together, folding his wings. Jude raised the flask to his lips, unscrewing the lid. Mourning opened his wings and their color suddenly changed to a snowy white. The white of a swan's wing. Each spoke one word. Jude said the name of the djinn, releasing him into the world.

Mourning said, “Father.”

Chapter Thirty

It is Lundi Gras, very cold for New Orleans, the day of the Bacchus parade. It will be five years since the storm, come August, but no one, least of all Jude, is thinking about hurricanes, or failing federal levees, or loss. It is Carnival, and the Saints have just won the Superbowl. Joy is a palpable sensation running through the streets, a drunken elation that has lasted almost two weeks straight, that seems, today, like it will last forever.

Jude stands on the neutral ground Uptown, his breath misting in the air, surrounded by roaring, chanting crowds screaming their jubilation into the night sky, thinking about the seams between worlds. The impact of bass drums shakes him and sets his blood throbbing, his heart pulsing in time with the beat called out by the throaty growl of brass horns. He watches as the parade rolls by: the marching bands in their proud uniforms and crested helmets; the dance squads marching in step, their tap shoes clacking in unison on the asphalt; the flambeaux with their long torches spinning above their heads, their propane tanks strapped to their backs; the revelers walking the route, costumed throngs with drinks in hand and bags of beads slung over their arms; the huge, brightly colored floats, like royal barges tugged down the river of St. Charles Avenue by rumbling, oil-reeking tractors; the floats, flickering lights and blaring music and masked riders; the floats, depicting scenes from myth and legend and cultures ancient and modern; the floats, casting off masses of beads and stuffed animals and trinkets into the oak branches and the waiting arms of the crowds below, worthless save for the connection, the celebration, that they inspire.

He leans against his staff, the long, slender stave of oak, the tree man's soul living within, siphoned through the finger-branch that Jude found within his satchel. Root was not the first lost

thing he found and made right in the months since Dodge's murder, nor the last. Sipping from a plastic cup of Abita, the first beer he has had all night, Jude watches the Saints Quarterback pass by, dressed as a conquering Roman Emperor, riding a float where paper mache horses rear and prance before a paper mache chariot, and Jude wonders if his wife, beside him, whispers in his ear, "You are but mortal, you are but mortal." Jude grins and thinks that maybe the Quarterback is not mortal, that he is a demi-god as the joke among the city alludes, just as he wondered about the "One Voice, One City" slogan the new mayor has taken up.

Though Jude has come only to watch, he lifts a hand over his head and shouts, laughs when he catches a string of beads decorated with black and gold fleur-de-lis, and sweeps them around his neck. Beside him, a familiar voice says, "Nice catch."

Jude turns, still smiling, to look into the emerald eyes of his father. He shakes his head and takes another swallow of beer. "Thanks," he says. He has not seen Mourning in months and was beginning to wonder if he had fled town.

Mourning gestures, a wide sweep of his arms that takes in the crowds, the parades, the entire night, the entirety of Carnival, perhaps. "Is this your doing?" he asks. Jude shrugs, snatches another handful of beads from the air, and hands them to a passing child. "It's good work, if it is," Mourning says. "This is going to be a really good thing for this city."

"The Superbowl?" Jude asks. "It's just a game."

Mourning shakes his head. "It's all just a game," he says. "Which means it never is."

"Yeah, I know."

A crease forms between Mourning's eyes. "Then why did you say it was?"

Jude bobs his head to the beat of a passing marching band, the trumpets blowing loud and

clear. “Thought you were just jerking me around,” he says, when the young musicians move on. “You’re not usually into good and helpful, I thought.” He is surprised by how powerless Mourning seems now that New Orleans has woken, has risen from her grave and taken control of her own destiny once again.

Mourning sighs. “We Tricksters get a bad rap,” he says. Jude notices that Mourning’s elevated speech has faded away, wonders if he’s trying to connect with his son or if Carnival can get even Lucifer to lighten up. “Especially,” Mourning continues, “when they start throwing around the word ‘evil.’” He makes the quotation marks with his fingers. “It’s never just mischief for the sake of it. We’re agents of change, Jude. Like it or not, you carry that burden now.”

“Yeah? Tell that to my mother.” Jude finishes his beer and throws away the plastic cup in a nearby garbage barrel. He is the most powerful magician in the city, standing next to the devil, and no one notices. He blows warm air, tinged with just a bit of flame, into the the cupped bowl of his numb hands. He misses, for the first time since he cast them away, his old leather gloves.

“I never meant for that to happen,” Mourning says. “I tried to hide it from her, but she saw through to my true nature.”

“Look,” Jude says to Mourning. “Maybe you’re telling the truth. Maybe you’re not evil, maybe you’re not even a bad person. But no matter what you say, I’m not going to make you the city’s luck. My contract with you is up in August, and I’ll name her then.”

“Her?” Mourning asks. “You have someone in mind already, then?”

“Yeah,” Jude says. He thinks about the way she knew the storm was coming, had premonition enough to leave. He remembers other things, the way she always knew which way

to go, the way she could bend down in a patch of clover and scoop up two, sometimes three stalks with four leaves. He thinks of his love for her, the long, long life stretching before him that he wants to share with no one else. “Yeah,” he says again. “I’ve got someone in mind.”

“Good,” Mourning says, nodding. He looks up, peering down the route at a float that has crept to a halt. “Then I release you.”

“What?”

Jude's father smiles, a wide stretch of teeth that holds both pride and mischief. “You were right to deny me that title, that power. I've been in one place for too long. For far too long. I started to get caught up in my own schemes. It's best I keep my interests . . . mobile.” He stares into space for a moment and then shakes himself, a surprisingly, unsettlingly, human gesture. “Anyway, I release you from your obligation to me. Go. Name your fortune god, keep doing what you've been doing. You're free, now.” Jude's father, Lucifer, claps him on the shoulder and grins. “In other words, Mr. Duboisson, you are, for lack of a better term, fired.”

Later, in the short walk off the parade route to the house Jude used to share with Cassandra, Jude thinks about his father, the collection of contradictions he seems to be, and how well that seems to fit. Lucifer. The Prince of Lies. The Lost One.

Jude can sense the loss surrounding him even now, a young woman gleefully losing her virginity in the back room of her parent's house, an old man losing the memory of his childhood home, a child losing his innocence, as he sees his father lying to his mother about another woman.

But he can feel other things now, mysterious and potent and beautiful. Presences that are newborn, nascent gods of drink and revelry, of lust and danger, gods of Carnival and Mardi Gras Indians and crawfish boils, of jazz bands and second lines, the minor pantheon of the reborn New Orleans. Others are older gods with new faces and new names, crab-shaped or pelican-headed, formed of Carnival floats and magnolia trees and Uptown mansions, gods of other lands and other times, shifting forms and acclimating to their new home, as Dodge had. A few kept their old names, ancient, protean river gods and entrancing voodoo *loa*, all mingling and living with relative harmony. Within them all he can feel a piece of Leon Carter, of his magic, his music, giving voice to New Orleans and her sugary, dark, and seductive song.

Jude thinks of all of this and holds all of it in his heart, this secret world he hopes to introduce to Cassandra. He hopes to share this world with her, hopes to make it better with her goodness, her art. He lifts his fingers to the X spray-painted on their door, opening himself to his magic, to the possibility of seeing her again at long last. He will have to accept the wrongs he has done to her. And he will have to prove to her his capacity, the world's capacity, for change. He will have to convince her to take up the mantle of a New Orleans god of fortune. Finding her, he thinks, will be the easy part.

In the end, the World Tree Yggdrasil will burn, and a giant wolf will eat the sun and the moon. Or seven seals will be broken, seven trumpets will sound, and a great Beast will have dominion over the Earth. Or a rain of fire and a great wind will sweep the people of the Fourth Sun from the face of the Earth. Or a great deluge will drown the world, leaving only an immense and empty ocean. Or Apep will succeed in his attempts to overcome the principle of *ma'at*, and the world will devolve into chaos. Or the Earth will start to shake and never cease, tearing great

rents in the surface, casting man into the depths. Or a plague, or a great war, or a famine, or a horde of the undead will cover the planet, destroying mankind. Or a giant rock will fall from the sky and a cloud of ash will blot out the sun. Or the universe will cease its growth and begin to shrink, falling in on itself, tightening into a single, lifeless dot. Or the walls that were built to hold back the waters will break, and the sea will rush into, and fill, streets and homes and lives. In the end, and there is always an end, there will be those who are lost and those who mourn that loss, who become lost themselves amidst their bitter tears.

And yet. There are always those who refuse to let the end be the end. The man and the woman who cling to the highest branches of the World Tree and escape the flames, who return and rebuild a world burned to ash. Or the man, who goes by many names, who builds a massive vessel and rides on the waves of the great ocean until the flood has passed. Or the one who sacrifices himself upon the bonfire and becomes the Fifth Sun, dying so that the world might live. Or there are the faithful who live forever after evil has been cast into oblivion, the vigilant who survive the plague or the war and who create a world where such things do not happen. There are those who are lucky enough to return to their homes after the storm and the flood has passed, to rebuild, to remember. There is magic in all things, in songs and in fire, in the night sky and in the storm on the horizon, in voices raised high and secrets kept deep, in stories and in change and in hope. There is magic in beginnings, but there is magic, such great and beautiful and powerful magic, in refusing to let something end.

Vita

Bryan Camp was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. He obtained his high school diploma from Pope John Paul II High School in 1999 and his B. A. in English with a Minor in Creative Writing from Southeastern Louisiana University in 2006. He attended the University of New Orleans as a graduate student in the low-residency MFA program from the spring of 2007 until December 2010 when he graduated with his Master of Fine Arts. He and his wife Elizabeth live in New Orleans, Louisiana. His future plans include teaching creative writing and publication. He is currently at work on his next novel.