

1.0

Wednesday

I smell blood in the water.

...

Shit.

I close my eyes and press my forehead against the cold tile, exhaling until my lungs feel like they're going to collapse.

I don't want to know.

I have to ask.

-Who?

...

Silence. No editorial comments. No grayscale videos flickering through my head. Guess I should be grateful.

I duck my head back under the shower and let my thoughts sluice away with the water until the steam begins to melt into the floor. The temperature drops another ten degrees when I turn off the tap and reach for...

Of course there's no towel. What does he care.

And it's dark.

-You dump me in a dark shower? It would serve you right if I cracked our head and bled to death.

I flip on the switch and the bulb blows with a static pop that shoots straight up my spine. Fuck it, I didn't want to shave anyway. That would mean looking in the mirror...

...knowing he's killed again.

-*Knowing we've killed again.*

-Oh, there you are.

I grab a dirty tee shirt off the floor and make a half-assed attempt to dry myself before sprinting twenty feet that feels like miles on cold concrete floors to reach my room. Don't let it fool you; the scattered piles of laundry littering the floor are part of a highly-efficient storage system. Clean stuff goes on the bed. When there's too much stuff on the bed, it goes on the floor. If it doesn't stink too bad, it's still clean.

Pants, shirt, socks, boots, jacket, wallet...check. Time to go to work.

My stomach growls as I stop to fish the last of the spare change out of the pickle jar in the kitchen and dump it into my pocket. Maybe there's enough for a cup of joe at Jolly's.

When the door gives me trouble, I fantasize about using it as an excuse—sorry, couldn't make it in cause my door wouldn't open. Yeah, like he'd buy that. After kicking it a few times, the rust releases its grip and I shove the heavy metal aside, though I regret it when I step outside. I turn my back into the wind to lock up, so I don't pick up the scent until they're a block away.

-*Getting careless.*

-Shut up.

I suck in a deep breath. Clean, healthy, musk...male. Two heartbeats. Not gutter trash, and definitely not homegrown. I take my time with the third lock and wait to see if they pass.

They don't.

"Mr. Matthews?"

I turn slowly to meet eyes the color of faded denim, nearly level with my own, which puts him between six-one and six-two. On the lanky side, shaggy brown hair, well-worn jeans, high-mileage work boots, and a bluish wool coat that would have seen better days a decade ago. About my age or a little older, smells...earthy and...something I can't pin down, though I feel like I should. We don't sense any kinetic or animal energy, but there's definitely something about him.

He's staring at me like he just saw a ghost.

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm Darrius, and this is Theo," he says, recovering.

His partner is a full head shorter; board-straight black hair, brown eyes, and possibly some Mongolian or Tibetan blood in the mix. He balances on the balls of his feet. Like a fighter. Not in the mood to test that.

"And?" I ask.

The one who calls himself Darrius hunches against another gust of wind and glances around like he's about to spill state secrets. "We need your help."

"Really?" I pocket my keys and zip my jacket, waiting. A truck rumbles past, rattling the surrounding buildings and stirring up a fresh cloud of dust. The driver's eyes skip over us.

Darrius looks at his partner, who offers a slight shrug, then back at me. "Is there some place we can talk...privately?"

"It's important," Theo adds.

Seriously? Who the fuck are these guys? I motion Darrius closer. "Piece of advice—I don't know what you're selling, but if you enjoy breathing, you might want to do it somewhere else."

When I turn to walk away a hand closes around my arm. I shrug free and spin, my face inches from Darrius's. My hand closes around his arm, lips peeled back in a snarl.

"Not a good idea."

I release him and he shuffles back a step, holding his arms out. "No problem. We just need your help."

Breathe. Get it under control.

I swallow and nod for him to continue. It's just crazy enough to listen to.

"It's our sister."

No way are these two related. Besides the obvious physical differences, the short one looks at least twenty years older. "Sister?"

"In a manner of speaking," Theo says.

"We were raised together. Foster home."

"You two and the mysterious sister?"

He nods. "We kind of—"

"She's gone," Darrius blurts.

I glance between them. "Gone? As in dead, or vanished into thin air?"

"Someone took her."

"You mean kidnapped?" They nod in unison. "Sorry. Can't help you. Call the cops."

"We can't."

I sigh; this conversation is quickly losing its charm. "There's a PI or a hunter on every block around here. Go bother one of them."

"You're the only one who can help us, Mr. Matthews."

"Lose the Mister crap. It's just Laec." I don't like when strangers know my name. "What makes you think I can help you?"

"We've heard things."

What kinds of things? I exhale and look them up and down. I don't want to believe any of this, but for some stupid reason my gut is telling me to listen. Knowing me, it could just be hunger.

"Fine. Buy me a bagel and a cup of coffee and you can tell me your tale of woe. No guarantees."

The bagel is fresh and the coffee strong. Jolly's Diner is a dump, but the food is cheap and no one bothers you. That's because, due to a long-standing agreement, Jolly's is neutral ground. If you want to know something, you start here. If you don't like what you hear, you take it outside. Jolly doesn't tolerate fighting in his place. Word is he can kill a man with his pinkie, though I've never seen that particular talent demonstrated. Apparently the word is good enough, because no one ever makes trouble in here.

I claim an empty table against the wall and motion for my new shadows to join me. Jolly's crappy radio dulls the edges of the surrounding conversations, but I'd wager most of them have shifted to the identity of my two companions. Fresh meat is always newsworthy here. Sometimes it can even be profitable. Be interesting to know how this one comes out.

Darrius and Theo wait for me to finish, opting not to partake in the diner's fare. I shove the last of the bagel in my mouth and sit back with a mollified sigh. Eating is a serious matter to us.

"Okay. Tell me about this sister of yours."

Darrius scoots his chair closer and lowers his voice. "She disappeared last night. Theo and I had come back to visit for her birthday."

Birthday? "How old is she?"

"She turns thirteen on Saturday."

I ignore the eager chittering inside my head. "Thirteen?"

Prime number. Thirteen is powerful, particularly in the life of a female—age of puberty; child crossing into womanhood. Sounds like something I should be avoiding. Her birthday is Saturday; three days away.

The chittering gets louder.

–Quiet.

“What makes you think she was kidnapped? Maybe she just ran away.”

“That’s not what happened,” Darrius insists. Theo gives him a look and he drops his eyes. The subtext is deafening. “We know where she is.”

“Great. Tell the cops, they’ll go get her.” I stand up, crumbling my napkin and shoving it into my empty coffee cup. “Look guys, thanks for breakfast and the story, but I got to get to work.”

Darrius grabs my arm; this time we control it better. The bagel helped. “Please.” I glare at the hand on my arm and he pulls back. Still holds my gaze though, so points there. “You’re the only one who can get her back.”

Please tell me this isn’t some of that There Can Be Only One bullshit. I know these two are hiding something, I just don’t know if I care enough to find out what.

“Why?”

“They took her to a place north of town,” he continues. “We can show you.”

I look from one to the other. “How do you know that?”

“We followed them.”

“I thought you said she disappeared.”

“I didn’t say that,” Darrius glances at his partner, who gives his head a slight shake. “We heard her scream and ran into her room as the car was leaving. We followed it to an old house outside the city.”

“So why didn’t you call the cops?” If it happened in Upper Erebus, they might even have shown up.

Theo pulls out a folded piece of paper and hands it to me.

NO COPS OR WE’LL KILL HER.

“We found it on her bed.”

I couldn’t give a cup of rat’s piss about these two jokers, but the kid—if she exists—is innocent. Which means...shit...I should probably make sure she’s all right. But why me? This has nothing to do with me.

–Does it?

Yeah, that’s what I figured.

“Mr. Matth–Laec?”

I exhale and run my hand through my hair. “I’m assuming you want me to go get her.”

“Sooner rather than later,” Theo snaps.

“Hey, lose the attitude, Kung Fu. You came to me, remember?” I glance at the greasy clock behind the counter. Three-fifty. I promised White Eagle I’d clean out the storage room and flush the lines today. Oh well. He can add it all the other stuff he’s pissed at me about.

“I need to go back to my place to get my bike.”

“We have a car.”

“Thanks, but I’d rather drive myself.”