

My Name in Every Language Means Death

by Wrestlr

[M/M, Hypno, MC]

Synopsis: A vampire and a pyrokinetic are paired for a special assignment.

Disclaimer: The naked hypnotist strides confidently into your room. His lips curl in what might be a smile as he dangles his shiny crystal pendulum before your eyes and announces, "Listen and obey. If you are not of legal age, or if you offended by sexual situations, you will leave this place immediately. From here on, no matter how realistic it may appear, everything will seem like fiction to you, a pleasant dream where scientific possibilities and laws may change according to my suggestion. Now, if you are willing, sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride."

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1.

Moonlight and dull fluorescents sent shadows slithering over the cracked concrete floor of the warehouse. The building appeared empty except for the other man and me. He slouched in the folding chair, precisely in the center of the floor and drawled, "So ... why does a fine, upstanding gentleman like you want to join the army?"

"First, I'm no gentleman," I said.

I'd driven three hours nonstop after completing my last job in order to reach this rendezvous point in the nearest neutral area, a half-occupied steel town that hadn't been absorbed into an Other territory but had no human government ties either. Another twenty minutes in any direction would put us squarely over the boundary claimed by one territory or another, and neither side would appreciate having a hunter on its turf unless it had hired me itself.

The reverberating space made our meeting seem isolated, though I suspected cameras concealed in convenient places kept careful watch, with support soldiers ready to burst in if things went south. Neutral ground or not, they'd arrived first, and they wouldn't take too kindly to having a monster eat their agent if things didn't go well in our first face-to-face.

"Fine," he sighed, with a small, irritated smile. "What would make a vampire like you want to join the army? Better? I try to be polite and not call anybody out by species."

"Second," I replied, "I was under the impression that this technically isn't the army. You must have listened to my phone interviews. You know exactly why I'm willing to compete for a government contract."

"I've had a long day. Why don't you remind me?" His expression seemed arrogant, but he kept his eyes safely on my chin.

Good. He understood what he was dealing with.

I stalked closer. He leaned back in his chair. When I stopped in front of him, my boots nearly touching his, he still had some distance. Up close, I saw that his close-cropped hair had the faintest hint of curl. The thin line made by his pressed-together lips didn't detract from his face, and had he relaxed his expression he would have been quite handsome. He was younger than I'd expected, not a wrinkle anywhere on his cheeks or around his eyes. If not for the status separating us and the fact that I wanted this job, he would have made a tasty snack.

Thinking of a meal made me notice my sluggish pulse, a slow, limping rhythm. I needed to feed soon. Were I sated, I might not have noticed the rich scent of his flesh under the hint of aftershave. I took two steps back, away from him.

"Your side contacted me first, and now you're playing games?" I snorted.

"I didn't set up this meeting. The big brass did. *I* don't know much about you." He straightened in his chair and held out his hand, posture stiff. The slouch disappeared. "I'm Baker. You must be Todd. Todd what?"

I closed the distance between us again, and we shook hands, the traditional human greeting. "Just Todd, for now."

When he tried to pull his hand back, I held on and pressed my fingertips into his wrist, feeling his quickening pulse. He lifted his eyes to me, finally, and they burned with barely controlled anger. I smiled just wide enough to flash a bit of fang. He was a soldier and likely a competent hunter too, but I was treating him like food. The insult telegraphed where he stood with me: a rude little upstart.

"You aren't the only one who wants to vet your potential teammate personally," I said finally. "The offer said you're a Special. I've never had a human partner. They can't keep up. Why should a Special be any different?"

I locked my hand around his arm. He yanked hard against my grip, bunching the muscles hidden under his fatigues. He was strong, for a human, but not strong enough to free himself.

His face flushed with dark excitement. "'You think I can't keep our end of the bargain? Well, Normals can't keep up with me either."

Sudden flames flared around our clasped hands. I yelped in surprise and instinctively jerked away, stumbling

back several steps. My skin was unmarked, but I'd felt the heat. He kept the fire in a tight bracelet around his own wrist, palm open, his stare haughty. He stood, and the dancing fire spread, until it stormed in a nimbus of blues and yellows and oranges around his body, though it never touched him.

"Pyrokinesis." he grinned. The inferno flickered and spun, arcing off his body in coils of flame that disappeared in the air. "Think you can get through this, vampire? I can melt bullets. One body isn't much of a challenge."

I inhaled to calm myself. Breathing wasn't necessary unless I wanted to speak, but it was comforting. "Nice trick. But can you use it at a distance?"

Behind me, a fluorescent bulb shattered with a crash. I looked over my shoulder. Another cloud of nearly white flame wreathed one of the light fixtures hanging from the bare metal bones of the ceiling for a second, though it disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. He cut his power, and the show ceased abruptly, leaving him standing pale and un-singed. The chair behind him, though, was scorched.

"Impressive," I said.

"Still think I can't keep up with you?" he asked.

"You've made your point," I said as I sketched a half-sarcastic bow in his direction. His lips twitched, repressing a smile, and his stance relaxed slightly. Minuscule reactions, but he hadn't quite hidden them from me. He was pleased that he'd impressed me.

I said, "If we're going to continue, I'd like to hear in your own words what this contract has to offer me. The recruiter was specific that they wanted an Other. I'd like to know why. It's ... unorthodox." I asked that question because the curiosity was devouring me. The government and Others alike only hired hunters of the supernatural on a contract-to-contract basis, when there was unrest or dangerous elements that required our expertise. Long-term employment was unheard of. Ideally, we lived on neutral ground; we paid tithes to no Other leaders and didn't interact with the territories except on a professional basis, even if they tried to wrangle us under their power on occasion. All I'd had to do to become a hunter was escape my old territory and declare myself ready for business--it was as simple, and yet as difficult, as breaking all my political and personal ties.

"It was somebody else's idea--way above my pay grade. I got the news through my, uh, commanding officer that they had a job for me." He paused, the briefest shadow of a grimace flickering over his face. I didn't comment. "Basically, the way I see it, we're building a team that can go into Other territories that need ... restructuring."

"Don't you think that's their business?" I asked.

"No, I mean the ones that are getting so out of control they're starting to draw the Normals' attention--the ones where the territory leaders are part of the problem, not fixing it. Hunters can handle the kills, but someone else needs to tackle the politics that come after. Why not us? You must be pretty well-adjusted if you got this interview, and I'd like to think I am."

"What you mean is, you've encountered too many upheavals an execution can't fix," I said. Perhaps that should have been a sign that they needed to keep their noses out of supernatural business, but they'd never learn. "And you can't ask a glorified assassin to stay on hand and rule afterward. Even if they agreed, most hunters wouldn't know how to do it."

That had never been a problem before the humans started policing us better than we did ourselves, but they had a vested interest in creating the occasional coup. An Other would never hire a hunter to take out the leader of a rival territory--they would do it themselves to ensure their claim to the land. It came down to the fact that, while both sides cared most about secrecy, the Normals seemed to be a bit more concerned with crime. After all, victims of supernatural violence so often tended to be humans, and a few human deaths here or there weren't a huge concern to an Other community--but they were to the official authorities.

"Bingo, but I'm a human on their radar. If it was just me by myself and I killed one of the territory heads in combat, the Others there still wouldn't pledge their loyalty. It would just fall apart. Or, you know, someone would assassinate me in my sleep and claim the position themselves," he said. He spread his hands wide in a gesture of frustration. "But if I've got you, it's not disputable. We might lose a few groups who decide they'd rather form their own little territory rather than declare loyalty, but it would hold together for long enough to stabilize the situation."

He shifted, pretended to be bored. I watched while he theatrically lit a tiny nimbus of flame around the tip of his finger.

"Maybe you're right," I said. "But why are you interested in this? You're not part of a territory. Other politics doesn't affect you."

"I could say the same to you. But"--he paused, and the flame disappeared--"really, I'm waiting for the revolution when we all get to come out of the fucking closet and the territories go away. Until then, this is the best I've got. Some of these leaders treat their citizens like slaves, and there's nothing they can do about it but leave--and that's only if they can find a way to escape and if another territory will even have them. No rights. I don't like that. We're people, too."

Contrasted with this easy conversation, his earlier rudeness was out of place. It must have been our nerves. That was a relief. And the fact that he didn't count himself as a human, and that he saw himself at war with those who abused their power more than anything else, raised my opinion of him.

"Yes," I agreed, "real freedom would be nice, if a revelation like that goes well with the Normals--though I have my doubts about that." I let wistfulness show in my voice. I had been born in his country and died a citizen there. To be a citizen again and legally serve my country was a fine dream, if they didn't decide to burn us all when we revealed ourselves.

"But it's not just about the humans freaking out. The Others won't take an upheaval easily either," he said, defensively.

"The powerful benefit from being outside the law, certainly," I concurred.

"How old are you?" he asked suddenly, tucking his hands in his pockets.

Rude little upstart, I thought, but gave no sign of offense. "Two hundred and sixty-four," I said. "Give or take a year."

"Jesus," he sputtered. "You really could play King wherever we go kicking in doors. I thought the only hunter-vamps taking contracts from the government were babies. The old ones usually hate us too much."

"I am the oldest to ever turn to your people for work," I agreed, lowering my voice. "And the most powerful. I will be an asset."

"Yeah, I thought so," he said. "But can you do teamwork?"

"We'll see," I said.

"Damn, but I can't turn you down," he said. He thumped me on the back, grinning at the look I gave him, and walked past me toward the rusted bay doors. "Test run--first job together, me and you. Tomorrow night. My handler set it up. You in?"

"Yes," I said. He didn't seem to notice that he'd switched from using the phrase *commanding officer* to *handler*, but I had.

At the door, he paused to call back to me, "Hey, what's your special vampire trick, anyway?"

I smiled at him, and he left when he realized I wasn't going to answer.

2.

My phone buzzed against my hip as I curled a lovely young man's hair around my fingers. I listened to his breath deepen as I kissed his throat, tiny feathered kisses to taste his sweat and life on my tongue. We had met half an hour before at a nightclub, among shadows and blitzes of flashing colored lights and writhing bodies out on the dance floor. The music had blasted loud enough to hurt my ears, but I blended so well in these places--just another handsome-enough man with a dangerous look. I dressed to impress for dinner-nights; a balance of threatening and sexual that never failed to entice one person or another. The leather vest and pants I wore also kept his curious fingers from too much of my cold skin as he petted me and traced the curves of my pecs with his fingertips.

Now, in the privacy of his small nearby apartment, my hand found its way beneath his shirttails to his belt as I licked the point of his pulse. I opened his belt, then the snap and zipper of his pants. He lifted his hips and bit his lower lip, anticipating, as I eased his parts and underwear down to his knees. His generous erection sprang out of meet me. No doubt he expected me to suck him, but I had a different kind of sucking in mind.

I took hold of his erection, licked it, grinned up at him. Our eyes met, and his thoughts quieted. I kissed his thigh, finding the pulse there. I bit him gently, at first, so the pinprick of fangs went nearly unnoticed. He did cry out as I pierced his flesh, but I made sure to provide him with as much pleasure as pain. I drank, heat searing from my mouth down my throat and throughout my body in a rolling wave. My heartbeat sped, the only time it would do so. He orgasmed, and life filled me like wine poured into a goblet. When I was satisfied, I eased away from the wound I'd made and rubbed my wet lips across his black underwear.

He met my eyes, dazed and smiling, and I pressed a thankful kiss to his cheek. The smallest tweak of power would convince him of what I said: "You are a lovely young man. You had a night of great sex with a stranger, and nothing unusual happened. Nothing unusual at all. Thank you."

I left him there to recover from the befuddlement I'd laid on him and escaped outside, my skin nearly warm to the touch and my nerves thrumming. It didn't always happen. Sometimes I left the hunt starving and disappointed because I wasn't willing to trick a person into wanting me. That smacked of things I didn't approve of, wouldn't have wanted done to me in return. I was glad I'd fed tonight if I was going to be with the pyrokinetic on a job for who knew how long. Not knowing his feelings on donating blood, I thought I'd best be prepared.

In the brisk night air, I opened my phone, and returned the missed call.

Baker answered after one ring. "You ready for tonight?"

"I've just finished my preparations. Where are we going?" I slid back into my car and eased out of the parking space.

"I'll tell you in person," he said. "Where are we getting together and who's driving?"

"I'll meet you at my hotel, if that's acceptable. You can drive," I said, then told him the place I was staying.

"Got it. See you in a bit." He hung up.

The drive was quick, and when I reached the hotel, the lot was half-empty. It was a small building, four stories with intermittent lights on throughout, probably all travelers passing through. I couldn't imagine coming here to this steel town for a vacation. I passed through the lobby, attracting a curious look from the night-clerk thanks to my outfit, and rode the elevator up to my room.

I stripped out of my leather club-hunting outfit as soon as I made it inside, dabbing the slightest bit of sweat off my skin with one of the white towels. It came away pinkish; the staff would probably assume hair-dye or makeup. I slipped into a pair of jeans and a button-down shirt that hung loose enough on my frame to hide the holster and gun at the small of my back.

Someone knocked on the door.

"You?" I called out as I rolled my sleeves up.

"Yeah," Baker said.

I flipped the latch and opened the door, stepping aside to let him enter. The fatigues had been replaced by dark jeans and a loose tee-shirt. I looked him over but saw no weapons, unless he had a knife in his boot. He took the moment of silence to inspect my room, his eyes roving over the closed suitcase and neatly made bed.

"So, what's the job?" I asked.

He pulled the chair out from the desk and sat down, ankles crossed, one arm dangling over the side. It was a pose of relaxation, but his muscles were tight. Faint tension lines showed at the edges of his mouth.

"The situation's gone downhill since yesterday. It was going to be a simple job where we settled a dispute about leadership," he said.

I leaned against the wall and crossed my arms over my chest. "What changed?"

"There were three contenders for the territory after the old boss died," he said. "Now there are two. The third contender managed to get himself nailed to the first one's door. Literally."

"Are we to investigate the murder and execute the guilty party?"

"I don't think so," Baker said.

"Think?"

"We have full discretion," he shrugged. "But I have a feeling there's something going on that I don't know about, something that's going to bite us on the ass when we get there."

"The murder's extraneous, then. Figure out which one did it, propel the other one to leadership, and let them handle it among themselves." I pushed away from the wall, gathering up my suitcase in one hand and the duffel bag I used for weaponry in the other. "And isn't the purpose of this contract to see if we make a good team?"

"I guess so. Yeah."

The silence that settled between us held a sharp edge, a tautness brought on by equal parts uncertainty and eagerness. If I performed well and the trial run was a success--whether that was decided by Baker, his handler, or the "big brass" who had done the initial interviewing--it would be a positive mark for vampires as a whole. They must have had trouble finding any of us willing to even speak with them; but I was willing, and I would show the value that we represented. We were strong, fast, and nearly all of us past our first fifty years were gifted with intensified abilities, woken from our mortal lives. I could be the one to help us take a step toward legality. I had to do something--I couldn't bear waiting for it to happen on its own any longer.

The moment passed as Baker stood and brushed past me, trailing the faintest whiff of smoke. I followed him to the door, and he held it open for me. I noticed as I passed that we were almost exactly the same height, which put him at a little over six feet tall. I was glad because--while he knew what I was, and what I wasn't--being equals in physical stature would keep him from underestimating what I could do during the job. The fact that he hadn't offered to help carry my bags was a point in his favor.

"What do you do during the day to stay safe?" he asked as we walked down the hall.

"In hotels, I put out the do-not-disturb sign, latch the inside bolt, and wedge a chair under the door." I hesitated. My face flushed, warm with borrowed blood. "I prefer to sleep in a confined space, but I've found that a tarpaulin bag keeps out the light well enough. The zippers have locks on the inside."

Baker stared at me for a moment before grinning again. "You sleep in a body bag?"

"Would you prefer I lugged a coffin around with me?"

The blush still burned artificially under my skin. For a moment I wished I hadn't fed at all. He seemed to notice as soon as I thought of it, and his smile faded at the edges, his eyes losing some of their previous humor.

"You already, ah, had dinner, I guess."

I sighed and pushed past him out of the lobby doors. "Where's your car?"

"That one," he said, pointing to a generic dark green sedan.

"And where's the job?"

"About three hours from here," he replied. "Edge of Mississippi."

I calculated the distance. "We should beat dawn. But if we don't, I'll have to bed down in the trunk."

He opened it for me and I loaded my suitcase and bag inside. My suitcase would need to be moved to the

back seat if I had to use the trunk space, but it was big enough to fit me.

"That dormant-during-the-day thing has got to be fucking inconvenient," he said after a pause.

"The things I'm paid to hunt generally keep the same hours I do," I replied, "so it's not that inconvenient."

My chest tightened, belying the lightness of my words. Lamplight, moonlight, firelight--none of them replaced seeing the sun rise or set again, or sleeping a sleep with dreams. I lived as well as I could, as happily as I could--but some losses, seemingly minor at first, had become too large to forget. If Baker didn't understand that already, explaining it would be both painful and pointless.

"Do you have a case file I can review?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, "in the back seat."

A paper file. So delightfully old-school. I settled into the front passenger seat, reached back, snagged the folder, and plucked the rubber band off of it. A sheaf of photos spilled into my lap as I opened the folder, lurid images of a man's body liberally splattered with blood. It was pinned, butterfly-like, to a door. I angled the photo to the outside light and inspected it. There was no blood under the body, only on it, so he had presumably been killed first elsewhere and then tacked up.

"A nail gun?" I mused, "or was it done by hand?"

Baker glanced at me as he pulled the car onto the road with a flick of his wrist. "The depth of the nails when they pried him off suggests that it was by hand. Some of them didn't go in at a good angle, and some just didn't go all the way through. A nail gun would have been uniform. But even the ones that penetrated the wall only took one hit, though."

"Supernatural strength," I concurred. As if there was a doubt.

The first few pages covered the leadership situation. According to the notes, the old King had died of reasonably natural causes. Death by combat was easier, because the winner became the new leader of the territory. In these "natural causes" circumstances, with three potential new leaders and none of them clearly capable of taking power, things could get ugly.

One candidate was an alpha werewolf, recorded to have an even temperament; he was alpha of the local pack. The second was a woman--a shaman, or possibly just a very powerful psychic. No one seemed to be entirely sure, but her supporters were almost worshippers. The "message," so to speak, had been left on her door.

Which left the victim and third contender, a were-panther. That surprised me, because they were rare. The small collective of were-panthers in the area were understandably enraged about his disappearance and subsequent discovery as décor.

"What do you think?" Baker asked, glancing at me briefly.

I caught the flash of light in his eyes, like sparks, before he turned away again to watch the road. "I believe you might be right."

"About?"

"Something is missing from this information," I said, tapping the files. "Who gathered it for you?"

"I--" He stopped, jaw muscles clenching. "I can't be sure."

"Would it be safe to assume the gatherer is also your, shall we say, boss?" I asked, discomfort rolling over me.

"All right," he said. "Yeah. Assume that. It's really important to my well-being that we don't fuck this up, okay? I can't say any more."

I took in a slow breath. "Are you really a volunteer for this team?"

He laughed. The edge under it was not pretty. That was answer enough, if he truly couldn't tell me more about the person. The information, if this was as much a test for Baker as it was for me, was faulty. I tossed the folder into the back seat again and stared ahead at the dark road. The town had disappeared already, leaving rolling fields and the occasional tree. We passed under a green highway sign advertising an exit one mile away.

I had thought the official policy was to leave humans with abilities alone unless they became too much of a nuisance. I had also thought that hunters, human or not, always freely chose to be hunters, whether the work was government-sponsored or from Others. Baker's tension, and the fear that smelled rich under his skin, indicated something outside the official policy, and that made me uncomfortable.

"I need to stop, okay?" he asked suddenly.

Without waiting for a response, he pulled off onto the exit ramp that had come up on the right side. The end of the ramp didn't seem to lead much of anywhere, just a lone road with no restaurants or neighborhoods, but there was a gas station further down it. He turned into the station lot and parked.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him crooking a finger toward the building. He pointed at the building so, when he climbed out of the car, I followed. The clerk gave us a cursory glance and went back to whatever he was doing as Baker wove through aisles of snacks and drinks. Once we were out of sight, he grabbed my arm and pulled, which was not terribly effective. I stared at him and he made an irritated noise, stepping up close to me instead.

I pulled back and bumped into a shelf. He pursed his lips. "Be still, dammit," he whispered.

"Why?" I whispered back.

He crowded up against me, so his mouth was against my ear. I froze with my cheek pressed to his jaw, my mouth near the tender parts of his throat. I ran my tongue over the points of my fangs, the little ridge of sharpness catching on my own skin. I wasn't hungry, but my muscles shivered just the same at the temptation.

"I think we're out of eavesdropping range for the telepaths," he murmured, shallower than even a whisper, "but the car's bugged and I'm pretty sure my phone is rigged--maybe yours too--so I have to be pretty damn quiet. I need this team to come together. Because if it does, I get my own command post. I get freedom."

I moved, pushing my face against his to whisper back, "Freedom from what?"

"My handler," he replied. "His bosses will make him let me go if I prove I'm useful and under control. It's the deal. I hit the age point."

The shelf rattled, and Baker flinched, lifting his head.

"You two need to buy something or leave," the clerk called from the front of the store.

I worked a hand up between his chest and mine to cover my face, hiding an unstoppable grin. How ridiculous. Baker cleared his throat, shuffled away from me, and tucked his hands in his pockets. I turned on my heel and walked out, listening to the tap of Baker's shoes on the tile behind me.

I had more questions, but if he was right, I needed to find a better time to ask them. *Age point*--like an indenture contract? And, more interesting yet, what experience had taught him to suspect that he was always being spied upon, and what had taught him to fear it? The mystery itched in the back of my mind.

As I climbed in the car, he shot me a look, and I nodded. No talking, not here. In the quiet that settled afterward, I realized that the taste lingering on my lips was the flavor of his skin from the brief moment of contact. I laid my head back against the seat and wondered if wiping my mouth would be too obvious.

Baker barely spoke for the rest of the drive, until we reached the border of the state and I had to rouse myself from a growing torpor. Dawn tugged at the edge of my consciousness like a dragging weight.

"Stop the car," I said.

He jumped, startled.

"Sorry," he said as he caught his breath. "I thought you were asleep."

"I don't sleep," I said, rubbing my eyes. "I need to get in the trunk. We won't make it by morning."

"How can you tell?" he asked, easing us onto the shoulder of the road.

"I can feel it."

He put the car in park and popped the trunk. I climbed out, dazed, my limbs already heavy. I'd waited too long. I needed to pay more attention. It took me a moment to rearrange the luggage and dig out my "sleeping bag." I climbed into the dark hollow of the trunk and pulled the lid shut behind me, wriggling into the tarp. I'd lined the inside so it was soft, though in a moment I wouldn't feel it. I clipped the lock on the zipper closed, turned onto my side, and tried to relax. Nervousness made that difficult. My body grew heavier and heavier, until my eyes closed of their own accord and my mouth fell slack. It wasn't sleep; I was dying again, and again, and again.

I slipped away into emptiness as the sun must have crested the horizon.

3.

Disorientation: too gentle word for coming back to life with a frantic gasp and a stuttering heartbeat in a tight, dark space. The air I gulped stretched stiff muscles and I coughed it out, wishing I knew how to stop doing that every time.

I shifted to find the key to the lock, but my elbow banged something hard when I shifted. I paused, then reached out with the other arm and encountered the same hard surface within a few inches. That wasn't right. I had passed out in the trunk of a car, safely in my sleeping-bag, with a pyrokinetic guarding my body. At least, I'd assumed that was what he would be doing. The ruse was too elaborate if he simply wanted to trick me into letting my guard down.

I patted along the cold metal sides and found that they were attached to a lid with textured bumps, like the inside of a tool box. I shoved against the section above me and it clinked but wouldn't break open.

I struggled and kicked with all my strength. The metal dented under each kick but I didn't have enough leverage to force it open. Someone had put me in a box and locked it up tight. They must have known what I was. Baker? No, I was never that wrong about a person's sincerity--their scents and tiny bodily reactions were impossible to hide from me. Which meant that Baker had been incapacitated in some way and I was a prisoner.

Unless they'd put the box in a quiet, secret place and didn't plan on coming back. Vampires could be starved to death, as punishment or torture. I would grow weaker, and I would fade, day after day, until one morning I died and didn't come back. It could take months. I yelled and slammed at the box with all my might.

Two sharp knocks on the lid of the box stopped me.

"Who's there?" I shouted, trying to sound calm and not the least bit frightened.

"Someone who don't want his throat separated from his spine any time soon," a male voice said. "Or to get burnt to a crisp neither. So, we've gotta figure out what we're gonna do with two remarkably incompetent hunters--that's you and your buddy, by the way."

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Somebody who's supposed to be figuring out why y'all are really here," he said. "Our sources said y'all was gonna try to depose our king."

The box shifted as if he'd leaned against it, and I caught a whiff of scent. It was were-animal, but not wolf or panther. Our dossier had indeed been incorrect. They were prepared for me, but what he said about burning meant they'd been prepared for Baker too. That didn't bode well--we'd been set up.

"That was not our intention," I said. "We were told to moderate a leadership dispute between two local combatants after the old king died. The interested parties were a werewolf and a shaman. You aren't either."

"Right," he said, thumping the case again. I flinched at the hollow sound all around me. "But if ya'll are telling the truth, then we're gonna be in some deep shit with y'all anyway for doing this, am I right?"

"I'm more interested in my freedom than a grudge," I said.

"See," he said as if I hadn't spoken, "the king ain't dead. Whoever done told y'all that was lying." I didn't respond. "We ain't had a dispute for leadership here for longer than I've been alive. No werewolf or shaman is even gonna think about trying to take over this territory--trust me."

"If the king's not dead, then may I speak with him?" I asked.

Keeping my voice steady was growing harder. The box was not warm, but it was small, and I kept brushing my limbs against it when I moved. It seemed to squeeze down around me--but if I wanted to get out of the goddamned box, he needed to hear me as an amiable acquaintance willing to let go a misunderstanding, not a panicked vampire.

"Oh, y'all gonna meet him pretty soon," he said. "I might not be able to handle y'all myself, but he can. I promise that."

I heard shifting again, then footsteps leading away.

"Where's my partner?" I called out.

"Somewhere else," he replied.

A chill wriggled down my spine. Hopefully Baker wasn't dead. If an informant had told me a pyrokinetic was coming to assassinate me, I'd not take the chance of letting him live long enough to get close. Sniper shot--no stress, no fuss.

The small lump of fear in my stomach hardened into a dead weight. Since I didn't need to speak, I stopped breathing, and the silence was absolute. I started breathing again just to have something to listen to: rush of air in, rush of air out. Quiet, but something. I had to hold myself in check and think this through. If Baker's handler had intentionally misrepresented the job, which implied a trick if not an outright trap, likely he had also been the one to set us up.

The motive seemed clear: Baker's handler was a military man who had held Baker's life some way or another in his hands for years, who had instilled fear and hate in his charge, who had not been willing to let him slip away even when his superiors told him he must. It appeared that his handler had made the decision so common to jealous boys: *If I can't have it, no one can.* And a combat-ready pyrokinetic was a very special toy indeed.

Another sunrise and sunset left me beating my fists in a blind rage against the mangled inside of the box as I woke. The panic coalesced into a burning sensation in my guts, so strong it might rip me apart from the inside if I didn't let it out. My original master had done this to one of his girls. Once, only once, because even he had eventually discovered a kernel of compassion too great to continue the torment. He'd simply ushered her on to her final death instead of letting her fully starve. But convincing him to find that kernel had taken three weeks. That was one of the reasons I'd finally taken action against him and fought my way out of my territory and become a hunter.

I did not want to die this way. I also did not want to come out of the box a raving lunatic--if they let me out at all. I uncurled my fingers and lay still again, or as still as I could while my body quaked and trembled uncontrollably. I hadn't realized how much this would frighten me. I spent every day in a small, dark space, but it was mine and I wasn't trapped. Trapped. I bit my lip, the pain sharp enough to wrest me out of the terror. The wetness of thicker, cooler blood trickled down my chin. I swiped the thin trail up with my thumb and sucked it off my fingertip. I couldn't afford to waste it.

No one came.

The third night, I came back to myself with a whimper and tried to roll onto my side, banging my shoulder in the process. I curled up as tightly as the box would allow and pressed my fingers to my own pulse. The beat thumped irregular and lethargic. My mouth watered, teeth and fangs alike itching with need. I had another day, maybe two, before the hunger became debilitating. I needed a plan, but if my captors left and never returned, who could I convince to let me out? The strength in my limbs was already fading.

After a while, I heard footsteps, faint but promising. I held very still.

The metallic thump of a lock opening came a moment before light dazzled my eyes. It took me a squinting, awkward second to realize the box lid was open. Tension sang through me as I prepared to spring, but I stopped and let it go as my sight adjusted--attacking one person would not get me out of my prison. What I

needed was leverage, a position of power over their king. The room, a small basement judging by the bare concrete walls, was empty except for the metal box, my captor, and me.

"Good evening," said the man leaning over the box.

It was a testament to my hunger and exhaustion that I identified him by smell first. As soon as the bloody tang of kindred hit my nostrils, I felt him, the flickering sense of his power brushing against my own. I wanted to smile. Instead, I bared my teeth at him and sat up to my full height, shouldering his arm out of the way. That was what a frightened, weakened hunter would do, not a man with a trick up his sleeve. The leak, Baker's handler or not, hadn't done quite enough research on me. Baker had asked what my "special trick" was the night he'd interviewed me--because he didn't know.

"You must be hungry," the vampire said. He tucked a lock of dark hair behind his ear with a winsome smile, playing his pale good looks for my attention. It wasn't going to work. "I apologize for the treatment, but I've found that making a point about consequences at first meeting keeps a guest from acting out."

The real king alone in the room with me, and a vampire at that. Not letting my fierce joy show taxed my acting abilities.

"Is that what I am? A guest?" I grumbled.

"You could be a guest," he replied, parrying my sharp tone with his relaxed ease.

"You would offer me hospitality?" I asked.

"Oh, no," he said. "You won't get me to agree to that. You invaded my territory."

"I already informed your associate that we were sent here on a diplomatic assignment, and our information was incorrect," I said.

"That isn't what we were told," he said.

"Then we are at an impasse." I swung my legs over the edge of the box and brushed by him to stand. My back popped as I stretched. "Will you offer me a meal?"

"I'll offer you your partner," he said. A knot loosened in my chest: Baker was alive. "Because if I offer you one of mine, you'll claim I offered hospitality, won't you?"

He met my smirk with one of his own. I let him believe I wanted to trap him in our laws. I tasted the edges of his power in my head, trying it and finding it a heavy thing, rich and thick with age. I was too weak to challenge him just yet; I needed to feed.

"Follow me," he said, pushing away from the metal box and walking toward the door.

I glanced at my prison and saw that it was a coffin of sorts with a row of thick padlocks and chains to hold it closed. It must have been specially made. The bare, small cellar and lone box made a perfect little dungeon torture chamber. Failure, and a return to that slow death, was not an option. I hurried to catch up to the vampire, inspecting him from behind. The pants he wore were tailored, as was the grey silk shirt with its glittering jewel buttons. He gave me his back not as a sign of stupidity but of strength. He trusted that if I was idiot enough to attack him, he would win; and his arrogance confirmed it. Psychological warfare of the smallest sort. His shoes, leather and well-polished, clicked on the wooden stairs.

"And how have you kept my partner from burning your house down around you?" I asked as we emerged into a large room, carpeted and decorated sparsely. The small windows at ground level showed me darkness and grass, but nothing else.

"Drugs, of course," he answered. "Our informant suggested a certain tranquilizer combination to keep him conscious but unable to activate his ability."

"I see," I said.

"You must know who it was, by that tone," he said with a little chuckle. "I might believe you, about your misinformation. But if I allow you to leave, will you come back prepared and destroy us? I can't risk that."

"We were told there was a murder. A corpse nailed up to a door?" I asked, knowing what to expect as the answer.

"Were you really?" he murmured. "That happened in our neighboring territory last year, but it was solved by a hunter in short order. We've had no murders at all."

"Then you have no reason to fear us," I said.

He turned on his heel, catching a handful of my hair and jerking me to my knees. I went along with loose limbs to keep from losing that clump. I stared directly up at his cool blue eyes and said nothing. I'd play along until I fed, and then ...

"You must be terribly hungry," he murmured. His thumb pulled my lip back and I let him touch the tender, itching surface of my fangs. I even winced for him. "You'll feed, and then we'll discuss options. I have no interest in destroying two perfectly good soldiers, if I can win you both to me instead."

I pulled my head away from the invasive fingers to say, "I agree to discussion."

"Your partner is in that room," he said, gesturing to a door on the far side of the room. A bedroom, I assumed. "You'll have some privacy, but don't take too long, please."

I got to one knee first, laying a hand palm-up on it in traditional fashion. "Your name, if I have need?"

"No invocations of hospitality, I've told you," he said. "But it's Ballantine." A pretentious name for a pretentious little king--but a king with formidable old power, I reminded myself.

I nodded once and rose. Without taking his eyes off of me, he collapsed elegantly onto one of the tan couches arranged in the middle of the room.

The bedroom door opened when I pushed it, and I closed it behind me, cutting off Ballantine's line of view. The room was dim, lit by a small lamp, and contained only a bed and chair. I took a breath, scenting the bitter, poisoned sweat from the lax body tied spread-eagled on the bed. Baker was naked. I noted his fuzzy chest and tight stomach, the quiet curve of his flaccid cock that made metallic-tasting saliva pool in my mouth. His body was trim and muscular, as I knew it would be, though the drugs left him unable to use those muscles to do more than struggle faintly against his bonds.

Baker blinked at me, rolling his head toward me, an awkward spill of motion. His eyes needed a moment to focus. "Todd ...?" he slurred. *Taawud*.

"Hush," I whispered, kneeling on the edge of the bed. I brushed the side of his face and watched his pupils, which were huge and black. Baker was fighting the drugs. A little spot on the sheet where he lay was already starting to singe. Ballantine had misjudged again by assuming that if he won me he would also get control of Baker. Others often discounted those they considered merely human.

"I need to bite you." I enunciated into his ear, so he'd understand me through the drug haze. "I apologize, but I must."

He groaned something that might have been a disagreement, but I had no time for that. I pressed my hand to his chest. His skin was clammy but still warmer than mine. He groaned again. I stroked his jaw to calm him. I stared into Baker's eyes and let my gaze work its magic on his drug-addled brain. After just a few seconds, his thoughts quieted and his body responded with arousal; his scent darkened with the musk of it. His dick began to swell.

I was too hungry, and he too uncooperative, for anything fancy. I found a workable angle and pulled his semi-erection into my mouth. The bitterness of his drugged sweat tasted like ashes in my mouth as I found the thread of his pulse under his skin. I suckled at his dick until it was hard and he was nearly at the point of climax. Then I turned to his thigh and sank my teeth in as gently as possible as I stroked him. The tranquilizers and the nearness of orgasm dulled his pain at least. The blood that filled my mouth was acrid from the additives but still rich and hot. He shuddered as he came. I shuddered, suddenly ravenous, but carefully drank only what I needed. The flow of life through my limbs woke my body in a burst of light and pleasure rivaling Baker's. I pulled away with as much care as I'd used to feed on him, pressing my fingers over the oozing wounds.

A small part of me didn't want to pry myself away from the warmth of his body, his blood. I slid off the bed and patted his arm. Inadequate, but that gesture plus the orgasm were all I could offer in this situation for stealing something as vital as life from his veins.

I drew my own power around myself in a wash of static and anger. Ballantine was twice my age, but my old master had been even older when I rolled him under the force of my will. There were good reasons not to bring over a psychic who, in life, had possessed gifts with the dead, but my old master had chosen to bring me over anyway, which intensified my gift.

"Ballantine," I called as I strode into the room. "Ballantine, I call you."

He was on his feet in a flash, fangs bared, his energy rippling in a wave of strength against mine. I dove for him. He caught me and slammed me to the floor under his weight, trying to trap me. The bastard realized his mistake too late: he had touched my skin, and contact amplifies all control. My aura ate into his, a sensation that filled me like a feeding. I consumed him, colored him my own, as he spasmed and fought helplessly on top of me.

"You didn't ask my name," I hissed into his terrified face. "I am Todd, Devourer of Masters and Conqueror of All Things Dead." The titles might have been silly, but vampires were a pretentious lot, and I had lived up to mine time and again.

He went still above me as the light went out of his eyes. All of his impossible, inhuman strength was bent to my will.

"Ballantine," I said. "Get off me."

He backed up on his knees until I pulled free. The power was a rush, a dangerous one. To reduce a king to a slave, or elevate slave to kingship? Too much power entirely.

"You will tell your followers that you have released us," I said. "Baker and I will leave unharmed, with your good will. You may play king if you choose, or give away your title to a successor."

I had to think for a moment to make sure I had not missed anything of importance. An insidious whisper in my mind suggested that I finish this with an order to lay himself in the sun, or lock himself in that terrible box.

"You will behave with kindness and generosity toward those you meet, and you will brick up that basement room with the coffin. Do you understand?"

Ballantine nodded and stood. The first step, he wobbled, but afterward he walked smoothly once more. I rubbed my face. The plan could backfire, if anyone noticed that his aura had changed entirely and guessed what had happened. I returned to Baker's room and ripped his bonds free of the bed frame. I wrapped him in the top sheet and scooped him up, light as a feather. His legs and arms dangled, but I carried him easily out. Through the other door, I emerged into a spacious, high-ceilinged foyer, leading to a glass paneled front door.

Ballantine was speaking to a confused-looking were-animal. Judging by the other man's distinct scent, he was the same one who'd spoken to me when I'd first woken in the box, probably the lieutenant of the territory--I still couldn't place his musky smell. Coyote, possibly. He stared at me, bristling, but Ballantine gestured us to the door with a smile. I nodded my thanks, ignored the other man's glare, and walked outside.

Nerves sang under my skin. I'd have a headache soon, from the strain of bending Ballantine.

No one came after us, but I was still on edge. We hadn't completely escaped just yet. I jogged down the porch steps into the balmy night air. Our car sat in the driveway, the keys in the ignition. I glanced back at the mansion, aglitter with light and surrounded by forest, and I wondered how long my influence and orders would hold on Ballantine. Sometimes they faded.

I fumbled the back car door open, trying not to bang Baker's exposed legs against the frame. He grumbled as I laid him in the back, wrapped the sheet across his naked body, and looped a seatbelt around his waist, buckling it so he wouldn't tumble if I had to brake suddenly. I started the engine and pulled away down the solitary country drive. I had no idea where we were, and I needed to find an interstate if I wanted to get clear of this territory quickly.

The headache I expected was already starting in the back of my skull.

4.

Baker roused from the drugs and the feeding gradually, rolling in the sheet I'd pulled up to his chest. I watched from the other bed in the darkened hotel room. It was as anonymous and as far away from the territory we'd escaped as I could manage in the limited amount of time I had for driving. With less than an hour before sunrise, I was starting to ready my sleeping-bag. Baker sat up and shook himself. His fingers crept under the sheet, heading to the bandage on his thigh. I looked away.

"Where are we?" he asked, hoarse.

"You managed to get us both captured," I said. "Though I wouldn't blame yourself."

"Shit!"

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"I pulled up to a hotel and got out of the car ... Shit, I don't know what happened--I passed out, I guess. They must have shot me with a tranquilizer dart, since I don't remember anybody clocking me over the head. Where the hell are we?"

I held up my hand to forestall his questions. "The king is still very much alive, and there was no dispute. He was told we were coming to hunt him, and had also been fed information about you. He said an informant told him how to drug you so you couldn't use your ability, for example."

Baker's jaw clenched, and his face went pale. "He did it. He finally tried to fucking kill me."

"And you can't prove it," I said.

"I--what?" The tone of Baker's voice sputtered somewhere between incredulous and panicked.

"How can you prove, definitively, that it was your handler? Or that he was trying to kill you? You tell his superiors that he set you up, and he'll say that he was testing you and you failed." I paused and studied Baker's bleak expression. "We did succeed in our assignment. The territory is stable. Contact whomever you need to contact to terminate your connection to him. You've freed yourself."

"But he's not gone, and I can't get rid of him," Baker whispered. "I've got to walk around knowing that he's out there, watching and waiting to try and make a grab. Or just kill me."

"He's only one man," I said.

"If I can't kill him, he still wins," he said. "He doesn't forgive and forget, Todd."

I smiled. "Who says you can't kill him?"

"I can't," he whispered. "I just can't. So he's still got me. He can still--" Baker choked and turned and punched the mattress, still weak. His shoulders trembled and he resisted a hiccupping sob. I slipped off of my bed and sat on the edge of his. I understood being trapped under a master who held so much power that it was nearly impossible to see a way to escape him, but I also suspected that one day Baker would find the strength to win. He had to grow into it, like any fledgling.

I reached out. He didn't pull away when I touched his back, so I rubbed smooth circles over his spine as he wept. I, however, jumped when he grabbed me around the waist and burrowed close. I moved my hand to his hair and held him. His skin was burning hot under my fingers, feverish, alive. I must have gotten the job as his partner, or maybe he was still drug-addled, because the man I'd met four days ago didn't seem like the type to let anyone see him weep. Or perhaps I'd misjudged him and still had more to learn too.

After a long moment of quiet shivering, he rasped, "I need a shower."

"You do smell," I teased.

He snorted and sat back, avoiding my gaze. "How did you get us out?"

"When we first met, you asked what my ability was, remember?" I said. He nodded. "I used to be a Special too. I was a gifted psychic when I was alive. I had an affinity for all dead things. When I died, it intensified."

"So you, what, mind-control other vampires?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, fuck," he said. A moment passed. He pulled the sheet back to expose one bare hip, his thigh, the bandage near where his thigh met his concealed crotch. He pushed down on the bandage and winced. "So, I remember this amazing feeling, but I don't remember this. Was it you? Or ..."

He was trying to look brave as he revealed his uncertainty about who had touched him, who had fed from his body so intimately. His attempt at a nonchalant smile was nearly a grimace.

"I was me," I confirmed calmly. "They locked me in a box for three days. I'm sorry. If I hadn't fed, I wouldn't have had the strength to capture the master, and we would have died there. Don't worry--just one feeding won't bind you to me."

"Fuck," he laughed, a burst of relief, and collapsed onto the bed like his strings had been cut. "I don't care. What's a little blood between friends when you save my ass like that?"

"Thank you," I said. "And it's a very nice-looking ass too, by the way. Now, go shower. I need to prepare for morning."

He did not get out of the bed, though. Instead, he watched me in silence as I moved around the room, readying myself for the dawn. Then he said, "Hey, Todd."

"Yes?" I murmured.

"Want to be my partner?"

"Of course." I walked back to his bed. "But I expect you'll try to rescue me next time."

"You don't seem like a man who needs a lot of rescuing," he said, voice low with arousal. "C'mere." His eyes were still almost all pupil. Sudden tension, and the aftertaste of his blood in my mouth, made my breathing stutter. When he spoke again, it was a whisper. "I don't think I can sit up again yet, so if we're going to do this, you'll need to lean down."

I smiled and bent at the waist, balancing over his prone form with one hand beside his head. He waited until the last moment to close his eyes. I pressed the smallest of kisses to his mouth, a thank-you even if it never led to anything else. When he fully shook off the drugs, maybe he'd blame them for this, or maybe not. I rested my forehead against his for a moment.

Dawn pushed heavy outside. I squeezed his shoulder and returned to my own bed, the safe darkness of my sleeping bag. As I closed the zipper, I caught a last glimpse of him and our eyes met briefly. His held a hint of flame.
