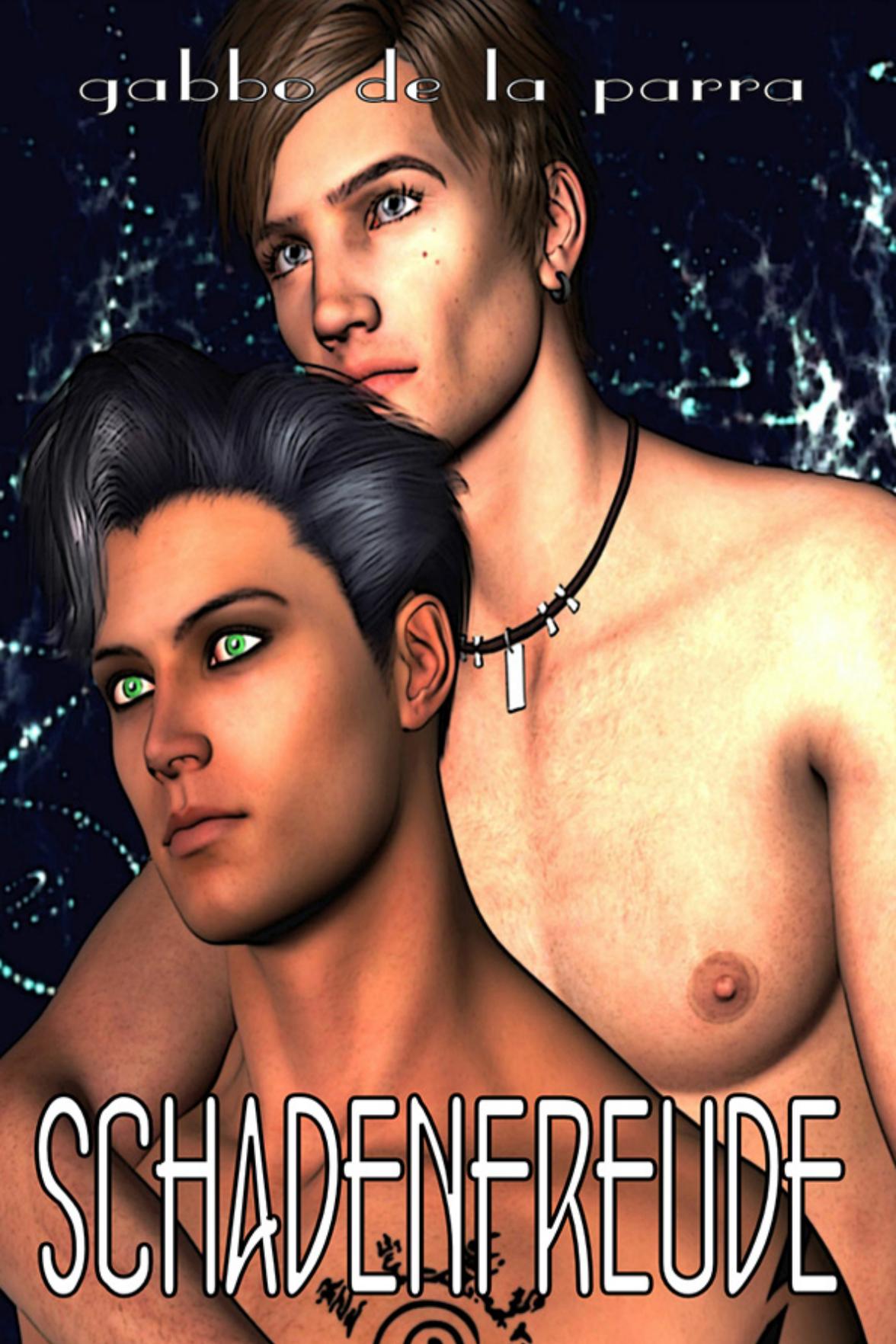


gabbo de la parra



SCHADENFREUDE

SCHADENFREUDE

The year is 2127, and Meridian (last Human-controlled city in the U.S.) is threatened by the unnatural forces governing the rest of the country. Covertly, they are searching for a way to destroy her magical protective boundaries.

Droser Sundew and Orfeo Lathan are at opposite ends of this situation until their attraction and the hope of a free future for those living within the boundaries make them join forces with formidable allies to save the city.

Anything but heroes, Orfeo and Droser will discover that the other's darkness is what makes them gravitate toward one another, beyond imperfection and mistrust.

Table of Contents

Blurb	2
Love is an Open Road.....	4
Schadenfreude – Information.....	7
Schadenfreude.....	9
Chapter One	11
Chapter Two.....	16
Chapter Three.....	22
Chapter Four	29
Chapter Five.....	36
Chapter Six.....	43
Chapter Seven	51
Chapter Eight	59
Chapter Nine.....	66
Chapter Ten.....	71
Chapter Eleven.....	76
Chapter Twelve.....	80
Chapter Thirteen	87
Chapter Fourteen.....	93
Chapter Fifteen.....	97
Chapter Sixteen.....	105
Chapter Seventeen	113
Chapter Eighteen.....	119
Chapter Nineteen	124
Chapter Twenty.....	132
Glossary	138
Author Bio	140

Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

SCHADENFREUDE

By Gabbo de la Parra

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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SCHADENFREUDE

By Gabbo de la Parra

Photo Description

In a semi-dark, narrow flight of stairs two young men are about to show how much they like each other. One is already shirtless and the other is in the process of losing his top while his upward stretched arms cover both their faces. What we could actually see is that both have dark, pretty hair and hairless, twink bodies.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

In the photo are two young scrappy men making out in a dingy stairwell.

I would like to have a real bad boy be one of the characters. Perhaps a bit of a criminal, perhaps something like a thief or a dealer of something illicit, or some crime that is more otherworldly or futuristic. Not a sex worker or child abuse in the story, please. I would also prefer a place and time where being gay is a not a stigma. It can definitely be futuristic, a space station, or dystopian world, or urban fantasy etc. Whatever realm it's in, I like a bit of decay, perhaps corrupted and weakened governments.

The other man can be more innocent, and perhaps there is tension around the corrupting influence of the bad boy, as he might be from other side of tracks? I would like both of them to be flawed and perhaps not totally redeemable—bad habits?—I would like the tension to be on the psychological side, and no excessive violence.

A HFN ending is great. Please tweak or delete any elements above that do not work for you!

Sincerely,

Clark T

Story Info

Genre: near future paranormal, futuristic urban fantasy, dystopian

Tags: Meridian, supernatural beings, moral conflict, antiheroes, mercenaries, interracial, bionic eyes, hunters, acrobatic sex (?)

Content Warnings: death of secondary characters, graphic violence, drug use/addiction

Word Count: 43,450

SCHADENFREUDE

By Gabbo de la Parra

“To feel envy is human, to savor schadenfreude is devilish.”
—Arthur Schopenhauer

Chapter One

Carefully

Orfeo

Meridian. Last Human Controlled City in the U.S.A.

Year 2127

“Normal people use elevators.”

“Exactly.”

“What do you mean with ‘exactly’?”

“That we *are* using the stairs, so other people don’t see us.”

“You are absolutely nuts.”

“Don’t be such a pussy. Do you want the damn drugs or not?”

Orfeo hated to be called “pussy.” He had balls of steel (and the weapons and skills to accompany those balls). “I’m going to shoot you if you ever call me *pussy* again,” he growled. He had been a *Furia* Master since he was sixteen for crying out loud.

“It was an endearment.” Nat shrugged, his ill-fitting red camouflage jacket bunching on the shoulders. He looked like something belonging in a Yaoi novel—with his big eyes, Samoyed ancestors, and purple locks.

“I’m going to endear you to my frigging gun.”

“Hush,” hissed Nat, extending his arm to stop Orfeo’s ascension. “Did you hear that? Someone is coming.” He was looking upward as if expecting a Werewolf or a Vampire to simply solidify before them.

“So what?”

“Nobody uses stairs.” Nat’s tone was business-like and insanely incongruous with the present situation.

Orfeo rolled his eyes. “Aren’t we in the effing stairs?”

“Shhh.”

A guy appeared on the upper landing, his svelte body nicely framed by a burgundy leather jacket, a crimson tee, dark denim, and biker boots. He walked

toward them as if finding each other in the deserted narrow stairs of a twenty-five-story building at the end of Wherefore was the most common thing in the world. His eyes were fixed on Orfeo, and his intended gaze was an unabashed leer. He winked, and Orfeo realized those haunting green eyes had bionic enhancements. The guy was handsome, and there was something dark and stupidly hot about him. Perhaps the way a lock of crow-black hair fell over his forehead, or the way his lips curved as he smirked, or the frigging *manliner*. He looked like a beautiful giant feline stalking his prey. As they passed each other, his manly cologne tickled more than Orfeo's nostrils.

Nat elbowed Orfeo. "The fuck?"

"What?"

"You two almost poked my eyes out with your stiffies!"

Nat was a bunch of years older than Orfeo, but when he said stuff like that he sounded like a whiny toddler.

"Asshole." Orfeo pushed Nat upward.

"Ah, forget it. This is our floor." Nat opened the emergency exit and searched for the right door in the narrow corridor. He knocked, and the house computer asked his business. "We have an appointment with Prussia," he answered.

"Your name?" the computer enquired, as if all this was stupidly boring.

Orfeo didn't like house computers with attitude, but some owners loved that shit.

"Nat the Destroyer of Holes."

A snort was the response of the computer, and the door opened with an anticlimactic click. The interior looked like the house of a nice lady with a lot of cats: fluffy sofas, tons of crocheted doilies, and so many flowers a flower shop would feel utterly inadequate. The only thing was... no cats were visible. Still there were empty shelves, the kind cats would use to stare at you evilly as they licked their paws, preparing to catch you unawares as they jumped out at you. Orfeo couldn't see any scratching posts though.

A woman (Orfeo assumed this was Prussia) came out from behind a fading yellow lace curtain, and she did look shabby, like a person with a lot of cats. "Sweet Nat, what can I do for you today?" Her voice had an ethereal ring to it, not in a Suprabeing way, more like a nurse used to tending to the very feeble.

“Hello. This is Orfeo, and he needs some *Deus*. I think he’s going to become a regular, if he likes your product,” Nat said the last bit scratching the back of his head, as if he were somewhat embarrassed.

Orfeo was five eight, and she didn’t reach his shoulder, but her soothing presence made up for her squatty body and her massacred, sad-looking blue hair.

She inspected Orfeo carefully, squinting and crossing her eyes a little. She licked her lips and said, “I’ll give you five days for the price of three. Introductory offer.”

Orfeo was sure she was using the term wrongly but didn’t say anything, just smiled and thanked her. He was getting a good bargain; she could destroy the language for all Orfeo cared.

“Did you bring gold? ’Cause I don’t do credits.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be right back then.” She moved placidly toward the back.

“Where are the cats?” Orfeo asked Nat in a huffy whisper.

“Hmm, I was wondering the same thing. They usually rub on people as if humans were catnip.”

“Cats don’t like you, Orfeo,” the computer said snobbishly.

“Good.” Because Orfeo didn’t like them either.

“That’s weird.” Nat gave him a once over. “When cats don’t like you they hiss, not hide.”

Orfeo shrugged.

Prussia emerged from her lace curtains and put five ampoules in Orfeo’s hand; the orange liquid inside them had a disturbingly sunny glow. He gave her the obscene street-price for three doses. “I’m pretty sure you’ll be back for more.” She smiled with a crooked, tooth-missing smile. “I have to go and figure out what’s wrong with my kitties. Just leave your name and a code word so the computer knows it’s you next time when you make your appointment.”

*So that’s why Nat is “destroyer of holes.” Odd because he likes **his** hole destroyed.*

“Thank you, Prussia. Let’s see how it works.” Orfeo shook her hand.

She scurried off to find her cats.

Before they reached the door, the house computer asked, “What is going to be your code word, Orfeo?”

He didn’t think twice. “Orfeo pussy-scarer.”

“Of course,” said the computer with a not-so-tiny measure of contempt.

Nat snorted as the door opened to let them out, his purple hair bouncing with the motion. They went back to the stairs. The way down was always quicker than the way up. Soon they were out in the bright afternoon sun of February away from the lugubrious emergency stairs of Prussia’s building.

Around the corner, a group of people, dressed in white robes and green cords fastened on their waists, were wailing and moaning with signs in blood red stating: THE END IS NEAR and REPENT and MAKE YOUR PEACE. The fanatics looked like some Medieval nightmare and totally incongruent with the tall, sleek buildings of the twenty-second century (even if Wherefore wasn’t the fancy part of town) that it was ludicrous to a nauseating level.

“These idiots are annoying,” Orfeo grumbled, as they left the fanatic protesters behind.

“And it’s getting worse. They are all over Meridian now. First it was just like in the poor neighborhoods, but I saw some the other day in the middle of the shopping district.” Nat shook his head. “May the one who started this bullshit get much fucked-up in very unpleasant ways.”

“You sound like a Witch, bitch.” Orfeo smacked Nat’s nape.

Nat grinned smugly, like a kid eating his snot defiantly. “Perhaps there’s some Warlock blood in me.”

“Can’t be that much if you are inside Meridian,” Orfeo retorted, unruffled.

The magical boundaries around Meridian protected its inhabitants from all things Suprabeing. Nothing belonging to the Vampires, Warlocks, Faes, or Werewolves could enter or live within the limits of the city’s territory. These one thousand square miles over the 100th meridian were sacred and untouchable for the Supras, their own powers preventing them from crossing its demarcation. Still, Orfeo was sure there were very few pure humans around the U.S. after the Supras became mainstream at the beginning of the previous century. All, except the Vampires, could beget offspring with humans, so pure humans had to be the exception, not the rule. But if you lived within the

boundaries, your biological connection with the Supras had to be minimal (like a great-grand parent or older) or you'd be disintegrated by its power.

“You can't be sure of that,” Nat huffed.

“Any Wizardry in you must amount to card tricks, and there are learning kits for those.” They reached their cars. “Thanks for taking me to Prussia,” Orfeo said, amicably cold. “Your debt is paid.”

Nat nodded.

“I'll see you in the next hunt. Now I need to go back to Star.” Orfeo touched the car door and it surged upward.

“I know it's none of my business but, shouldn't you be trying to get her off drugs instead of enabling her?”

Orfeo knew Nat was right, but drugs were the only way to keep Star happy, and her happiness was the only thing that mattered to Orfeo. When his parents abandoned him, she took him in as her own and raised him. Now, it was his turn to take care of her and keep her happy. “You are right. It's none of your business.”

~ Supra Facts – 2016

During a press conference in the spring of 2016 the Suprabeings made their existence known to the people of the U.S. and the world, in a hotel near Washington D.C. This was followed by a series of appearances on television shows and public speeches where they assured the citizens that they only wanted to live in peaceful coexistence with their human neighbors. Many people raised their voices against accepting the Suprabeings but generous donations to charities and research quickly changed the tides.

~ Supra Facts – 2017

The U.S. Congress approved the Assimilation Act, in which all the Suprabeings residing within the limits of the United States of America were granted immediate citizenship. This was followed by devastating riots in all major cities in retaliation for Congress' actions by giving priority to the Suprabeings over millions of human illegal immigrants. For the first time in Congress' History amnesty for illegal immigrants was approved in a first vote.

Chapter Two

Rarely

Droser

“Thanks for taking the time to speak with us, Mrs. Mayor. What is the city’s position regarding these groups spreading panic with their doomsday allegations?” Blue-eyed, night-haired Phillip N. Eckhart (hottest reporter in Meridian) asked recently-elected Mayor Kira Kurosawa, on the giant holo-board facing the intersection where Droser waited for the light to change.

Hot according to the majority of people in Meridian, who sighed and fanned themselves every time Eck’s muscular body appeared on holo-board, wall screen, or video device even if it was covered in rocking designer suits. Droser preferred guys with a slender frame much like his, strong but not bulky. You didn’t need huge muscles to kick ass, and having a Fae ancestor plus knowing the ancient, defensive techniques of *Furia* weren’t setbacks either.

The image of the pretty dude from the ill-lit emergency stairs of Prussia’s building came to mind. Perhaps an inch or two taller than Droser, he was a tight little sweet piece of yummy. In the last thirty-six hours that chestnut-colored hair, iron-grey eyes, and sultry lips had come and gone from Droser’s mind tauntingly.

“Well, Eck.” The mayor giggled. “Can I call you Eck? This is our first interview after all, so I don’t know if...” She put one of her manicured hands close to the base of her neck bashfully. The ends of her bob haircut quivered with her fake self-consciousness. Her campaign slogan had been the silliest thing ever: WITH KK ALL IS OK. She was lucky neither her middle name nor her mother’s maiden name started with K; that would have brought back memories of unpleasant things.

This was a late night repetition of an afternoon show—the city never had enough of Eck. Droser rolled his eyes.

“Of course, Mrs. Mayor,” Eck purred and his bedroom eyes became heavy as he smirked. The fucker had dimples for days.

Droser was sure the Lady Mayor must have needed a change of panties after that.

She cleared her throat. “Yes. The city is not concerned, Eck. It is true that the one hundredth anniversary of the city is next September, and we have many events in the following months so everyone can get in the spirit for the great celebration to commemorate it,” she stressed enthusiastically, “but there is no correlation between that date and the boundaries that protect our great city.” She did a movement as if straightening her dress, but Droser was sure she was fixing her boobs for Eck. She continued, “We have contacted Suprabeing Officials and they assured us the boundaries do not, I repeat, do not have an expiration date. They will be in place as long as they are needed.”

The light changed, and Droser’s bike purred anxiously as he stroked the controls on the handlebars.

Droser left Mayor Kurosawa and Eck to their holo-board antics. Later on, he crossed the magical boundaries of Meridian and stopped by Inspection Point 14. Here, away from the city lights, the stars were clear and myriad in the moonless sky. He went inside the shoebox-like building. “Hello, Rooster. All good?”

“Yeah,” Rooster said, eagerly moving from his desk to meet Droser—a shaggy dog rushing to meet his master’s friend. “You come for your thing?”

“Yep, and I brought you something because you are such a nice dude.” Droser put an ampoule of *Deus* in Rooster’s hand, closing it with his own.

Rooster’s beady, beetle eyes shone with gratefulness. “Oh, thank you. Let me get your thing.” He trotted to the back and returned quickly, giving Droser an ornate ring.

Droser put the ring on his middle finger. The ring had so much magic in it, Droser had to leave it outside the boundaries of Meridian so it wouldn’t get destroyed by the city’s protection spells. He wasn’t worried about Rooster or anyone else stealing it for its properties since it had been made especially for him; it amounted to a cheap, run of the mill cock ring for any other human.

“All right. I’ll be back before oh nine hundred hours.” Droser knew Rooster would be on duty until noon because the one hundred and eighty Inspections Points circling Meridian had twelve-hour shifts.

Droser had calculated his arrival at Mega-Vegas for his meeting with the Supras to be an hour before sunrise. That way, obnoxious Vampire Tonis Clark would not have much time to bother him. In Warlock’s North Area, Mega-Vegas was a place where humans and Supras mingled easily, and since it was

only 90 miles north of Meridian, it was the perfect place for this kind of unholy rendezvous.

Route 283 was visible a few minutes after he left Rooster's Inspection Point, and his *Owatatsumi* 2100 ate the distance to Mega-Vegas as if it were an itty-bitty bag of peanuts.

The idea of stopping at an all-male revue after his meeting with the Supras was tempting. Droser needed something to get the dude from the stairs out of his mind. He should have said something and not just smirked like a freaking asshole. He was a lot more forward than that, but he hadn't liked the other man. The cartoon-looking friend had been dressed in those red camouflage garments the Supra hunters favored and wore like honor badges.

Anyway, the probability of seeing that hottie again was seriously nonexistent. Still, the Lithe & Tight Guys Revue at the Stellar would give Droser some eye candy (and maybe something more) to erase "stairs dude" from his thoughts.

The valet parking attendant whistled and gave Droser an enthusiastic thumbs up when he saw the shiny bike. Droser winked as he tossed the keys to the man. At the entrance of the suite on the ninetieth floor, Droser gave his name and the computer allowed him to enter.

Luxurious-smart was the theme of the Ultra's décor. Everything looked expensive and comfortable, but it was not overabundant or unnecessary. His eye enhancements processed the auras of the four Supras spread about the inner lounge of the suite. Contrary to human auras (which changed constantly depending on mood, health, and myriad other things), Supras' auras were constant: Fae, dark blue; Werewolves, dark orange; Warlocks and Witches, dark green; Vampires, dark red. The only difference was the intensity of the darkness if they were in a foul mood.

Right now, two out of four radiated almost black, indicating their owners were pretty pissed off thanks to Droser's late arrival. He didn't give a sloppy fuck.

"Finally," growled Tonis. "When I said night I didn't mean by the end of the night."

What a freaking fussbudget.

"And you are wasting time calling me on it. Cut to the chase." Droser leaned on the wall close to the entrance, keeping his distance from the Supras. He crossed his arms and addressed the Werewolf, "Sup, Mike?"

You rarely found slim Werewolves, but Mike Hardy wasn't overly big and his honey-colored beard framed his tanned face nicely. Best of all, he was a good fuck. He and Droser had shared hot nights, so it was kind of encouraging that the wolf was part of this meeting. If not totally a friend, he was somewhat of an ally. The Witch and the Fae were new to him though.

"Waiting to see what the night brings," said Mike, in his guttural tone with a promising leer.

Droser nodded with a smirk, perhaps he wouldn't need to go to the Stellar after all. Tonis gave him a withering scowl as their eyes locked.

The young Witch had a drink being magically prepared at the bar. It flew to her hand, and she took a sip. She looked Droser up and down as if he were an auctioned object, her pretty grayish-blue eyes flashing. She was beautiful in a very Nordic way, with her blond ringlets and skin so pale Droser could see the blueness of her tiny veins from a distance. "I am Antha, and we have a job for you." She had a faint accent Droser couldn't place. Her voice was syrupy—enchancingly bewitching. Good thing he wasn't into ladies.

"Let's hear it." Droser didn't move a muscle from the wall.

"Your mission is to bring us a prophet, a woman who has visions." The Fae woman had silvery hair that cascaded over her slight shoulders and was all creamy dark olive skin, but the strangest thing about her was the eyes, the surreal teal with its silver ring was insanely becoming. She had forgone all glamour and was as unnatural as she was meant to be, and the metal glove on her left hand indicated a very powerful magic that she needed to keep controlled. Her multi-colored bustier flashed in stark contrast to the dark, almost severe wardrobe of the other Supras; although, Antha's outfit had the iridescent quality of a black bird of prey's feathers.

"So, any prophet woman works, or you have a specific one in mind?"

The Witch's aura went a tad darker, and three scowls surged, only Mike looked at him indulgently. Tonis stood up. "You're going to get a lot of money for this. At least try to pretend you are a professional."

"Then leave the mumbo jumbo and the mystery aside. Do you have a name, a picture for this woman?"

"We don't have a name," Mike offered, "but you'll find her in Old Dodge City." He looked at the Fae. "Ashley, baby, do your thing."

Ashley was probably one of those names the Fae adopted when their true name was unpronounceable and destructive to human ears. She moved from the plush settee toward Droser. If she tried to harm him it would blow up in her face, so he remained calm. She removed the hank of hair falling on his forehead and placed her ungloved palm over what some people called the “third eye.”

The face of a thin, red-headed woman came to him. There was something wrong with her, but he couldn't figure out what it was in the magically induced image. The hand left his brow, and Ashley whispered, “Rocking good protections.”

“Cost me a buttload,” Droser hissed.

“Well invested.” Ashley moved back to her seat, her aura turning lighter than before.

“How long do I have to find this woman?”

“A week,” Antha said, before taking another sip to finish her drink. She winked at him.

“The first half of your payment has been deposited to your account.” Tonis studied him somberly, after setting the transaction-pad in his hands on a nearby glass table. “We'll stay at this hotel until you find her and bring her to us.”

“All right.” Droser pushed from the wall to leave.

“Whatever it takes,” Tonis said. “We don't care if you have to kill people to get her.”

“Of course you don't. I will be the one going to the freaking slammer.” Droser grimaced. He turned to the lounge's door, giving his back to the Supras, showing them how little he cared about their power and jinxes.

“Why don't you stay for a bit?” asked Mike.

Old Dodge City borough had at least a million and a half people living in it, and seven days wasn't that much time, even with all the technology Droser had at hand. The assignment had changed the plans Droser might have had in mind for the coming hours. He turned to face Mike and gave him a disarming smile. “Not tonight, hottie. I have a prophet to catch.”

~ Supra Facts – 2020

Marius Smith, an independent, won the U.S. Presidential Election, and after a few months in office appointed several Suprabeings as judges of the Supreme

Court. This was consistent with the increase of Suprabeing as governors, mayors, congressbeings and other public officials, especially in the northern states. Marius Smith's government saw the amendment to the Marriage Freedom Act to include both human/Supra couples and polyamorous groups. The increment of Suprabeings within the military forces deployed around the world brought the conclusion of several long-standing wars before the end of President Smith's mandate due to his assassination in September of 2024.

~ Supra Facts – 2024

Marco Marquez, a Sevillian Vampire born during the last years of the Spanish Inquisition, became the first Suprabeing elected president of the United States of America. Sixty-three percent of the U.S. Senate is formed by Suprabeings. The tug-of-war turned from Republicans and Democrats into Supra and Non-Supra followers. Reforms to the health system were approved to legalize Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide (things that were part of the Suprabeing Tradition from time immemorial) during the first sessions of Congress' new term.

Chapter Three

Reluctantly

Orfeo

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

They crossed paths in the somber stairs again, but this time they went in the opposite directions. Orfeo was going down, and the hot guy with the green bionic eyes was on his way up.

“You know, I have a theory about this,” the crow-haired guy said as he stopped on the upper step and fully turned to face Orfeo.

“Lay it on me.” Orfeo grinned. He had to admit he’d thought about the guy once or twice in the last five days since their first encounter. And those times had ended with geyser-like, gushing orgasms.

The guy moved until their faces were very close. His optical enhancements were similar to the ones preferred by some of his fellow hunters, used to identify and assess Supras through their auras. The biomechanical gears and lens turned, perhaps adjusting to their closeness. It was a mesmerizing process, and the *manliner* just made it more evident. His butterscotch complexion was simply too lickable to resist, but Orfeo waited.

“We must kiss,” the guy murmured huskily, his eyes focused on Orfeo’s lips now.

“I agree.”

Yeah, kissing is better than just licking.

“Droser...”

“Orfeo...”

And Droser’s lips touched Orfeo’s.

Closing his eyes, Orfeo let Droser control the kiss for a few heartbeats. After that, it became a sweet, sweet war for domination that started to descend to other parts of their bodies by sheer instinct. Their jackets found the floor, and their shirts followed almost instantly. Each second needed to discard a garment made the return to the kiss more violent, more desperate, more absurd.

It'd been a long time since Orfeo had felt such a strong, reckless connection with someone, so he embraced it willingly, unquestioningly. When you were twenty-two, seventeen seemed like a really long time ago.

Orfeo mentally chuckled with that thought.

Panting, Droser broke the kiss to latch onto Orfeo's neck immediately. Lips and tongue roamed from side to Adam's apple, sending a trillion signals to harden all the appropriate places about Orfeo's body. Big hands caressed his chest until deft fingers focused on taunting his nipples while Droser's mouth continued its mapping of Orfeo's throat.

"Let me adjust my cock 'cause it's at the wrong angle." Orfeo tried to grab his crotch to ease the position of his engorging cock.

"I can take care of that," Droser offered before licking Orfeo's chin. "I'll do it gladly."

Before Orfeo could blink twice, his cock was out of his pants. Droser descended, leaving kisses over Orfeo's torso in his wake while stroking the hardness he had released. He leered at Orfeo's length with greedy interest as his still-covered-in-denim knees found the right step to engage with his prize.

Their eyes locked, and Orfeo almost fainted. He always thought that people with eye enhancements were unable to convey emotion using them. But Droser's eyes didn't speak—they screamed all the intensity of what was bubbling in his mind.

The first lick was pure torture; the second had Orfeo's knees wobbling. He hissed as wet heat covered his cock's head. He combed the hank of crow-black hair over Droser's eyes with a backward stroke.

Droser's tongue circled the sensitive area happily before the real sucking started. He did it European style (just the head) and squeezed the shaft like it was something he wanted to take home with him.

Orfeo loved it, but he wasn't a selfish man. "Loosen your pants."

Droser unbuckled his belt and undid his zipper. Orfeo leaned forward and buried his hands into the dark denim. The man at his feet was commando, so Orfeo easily found creamy glutes that he massaged, wringing encouraging sounds from Droser's busy mouth.

The tight hole clenched around Orfeo's digit invitingly.

"Pity we don't have butt-juice," Orfeo sighed.

The suction stopped.

“That’s not a problem. I can take you with spit.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’m gonna be more hurt if you don’t fuck me.” Droser chuckled.

Intoxicating. That was the only way to describe the recklessness of the moment. People fucked with strangers all the time, and Orfeo wasn’t a neophyte to random tumbles. Still, this man called to something truly primal and ludicrously rash inside him, and he was ready to take that call with a big glob of spit and his cock buried to the hilt inside Droser.

Reluctantly taking his hands away from the sweet ass he had been kneading and fingering, Orfeo pulled Droser up. He stared into those bionic eyes with information swirling in them, and, yet, a thing that was beyond lust lurked there, promising. “I don’t know how you make me lose control so easily,” Orfeo murmured as he brushed his lips over thin ones, and pumped his new friend’s solid, leaking cock.

“I’ve been dreaming about you fucking me for days. So freaking distracting,” Droser admitted, shaking his head a little.

“The last thing I want’s to disappoint a dreamer.” Orfeo smirked.

The following kiss was rough, urgent, ferocious. A mix of their own cock fluids and spit eased the way, and soon Orfeo was pounding Droser like there was no tomorrow. Flush against the wall, Droser grunted encouragingly, alternating curses and cheers.

Orfeo had one hand on Droser’s shoulder for leverage. The other kept both of Droser’s hands crossed over his lower back, dominating him. Orfeo watched, mesmerized, how his cock disappeared between firm cheeks with each thrust.

Time became a blur, a meaningless notion, as their groans, profanities, and panting inundated the narrow, desolated stairs. They held their climaxes at bay; Droser begged Orfeo not to come, to keep fucking him until he was broken and marred, drained and wrecked, sated and ruined.

And Orfeo obliged happily—until there was no other option than to let the dam break and be swept by the furious current of their orgasms, their cries of satisfaction bouncing on the silent, stoic walls. Both shuddered and chuckled.

“That was...” Orfeo was the first to utter words when their breaths were close to normal.

“Fucking hot,” conceded Droser.

“That’s a mild way to put it.” Orfeo was reluctant to take his cock out to avoid messing Droser’s pants. He toed his shirt closer and flicked it upward—not an easy feat when you were joined to another person by your boy-parts.

Droser laughed. “Don’t worry about it too much, I can change upstairs,” he said, looking over his shoulder.

So he lives in the building...

Positioning his shirt to receive the proof of their good time, Orfeo pulled out. He could have stayed there a while longer, but he was running out of time for a meeting. The only thing gushing forward was his own cum. “Squeaky-clean, huh?” He swatted Droser’s round cheek playfully.

“Trust me, I’d have made you come with my mouth if I wasn’t sure my ass could stand the trial of your fat cock without making a mess.”

“Are you always so descriptive?” Orfeo laughed.

“I tell things as I see them. No point in being straight-laced about your cock when I just had it inside me, don’t you think?”

“You are just giving me an opening, aren’t you?”

Droser nodded as he fixed his pants.

There was only one tight thing about Droser that Orfeo wanted to care about, but the way Droser was looking at him in that moment made him want to know more than mere body crevices. Shit. He wished he didn’t have to be somewhere else real soon. Well, he was not going to be coy about what he wanted. He took Droser’s wrist and activated the communicator on it.

A masculine, disembodied voice said, “Input.”

“Orfeo Lathan. ODC3-100-195.”

“Accessing Orfeo Lathan’s information to save,” the communicator informed. “Phone number and data registered.”

Orfeo stuffed his T-shirt in the back pocket of his pants and picked his jacket up. “I really have to go,” he said. He caressed Droser’s cheek. “But I want to see you again. Call me. *Please.*” He smiled.

“I will.” Droser smirked, once more becoming the guy who had said “fat cock” and letting the other one (the one who made Orfeo want more) dissolve away.

“Don’t take too long.” Orfeo gave Droser a quick kiss on the lips. It had to be fast, if not, he would never be where he was needed on time. He turned around, without waiting for a response, and ate the stairs as if frigging Supras were chasing him.

“Alright, laddies, them targets’re inside that cabin. Intel says them were-fuckers’re in fer the night. We go ’ard. We kill, and we get ter be ’ome before the Late Night Show starts.” Arthur Flax, leader of the Red Vanes, didn’t like to dilly-dally, especially when they had more than one target in the same place.

Orfeo checked the magazine of his rifle one last time. More than two hundred years ago, the .50-90 Sharps were introduced to hunt buffalos, now they contained silver bullets to eliminate Werewolves.

The cabin, where the three murderers hunkered down, had been jammed. Without signatures, all their instruments could read was a big black block, and the simple structure stood there, alone and aloof—confident of its impenetrability. They had to trust the intel received a couple of hours before their arrival; they were seven against three, but these were brutal SOBs, and numbers rarely mattered against vicious beasts.

Arthur signaled to move forward. They advanced over the rocky desolation of this deserted part of Kansas, near to the Oklahoma border. The moon was just a sliver, and the stars seemed to look the other way, wanting no participation in the things to come.

This was the part Orfeo liked the least. They had an idea of what they were supposed to be facing, but couldn’t be sure of anything until they were inside, with annihilation at hand.

Massive, bald, grey-eyed Jove disabled the door. They scattered inside, mentally using the map of the place they had acquired. Orfeo and dark-as-the-night Vicario headed to the left, Leo and Toma moved toward the right, and Arthur, Nat and Jove continued forward to engage the targets directly.

They had been betrayed.

The Werewolves were expecting them, and, instead of three, fifteen Supras welcomed them—armed to the teeth. A big mountain of a Werewolf jumped Jove, who thank the gods was equally large and with a temper to match the deity that had given him his name (if that was even his real name). They grappled for several heartbeats until Nat shot the Supra in the head.

Orfeo took two down as he dodged fire against him.

“Let’s get out. These fuckers’re not worth it!” Arthur yelled, as he grabbed Nat by the scruff of his neck and pulled him away from the deadly trajectory of a bullet that, luckily for him, only grazed his shoulder.

They barely escaped the cabin, jumping higgledy-piggledy into their jeeps. Toma was the last to reach Orfeo’s vehicle after throwing a silver-laced Molotov-cocktail at the cabin. The explosion must have taken a couple of Supras, but the others were hot on their tails. The exchange of fire between the two groups sounded like the detonation of cannons in some long forgotten battle.

“Don’t worry about us. Just keep driving!” Vicario shouted as he fired another round, Leo and Toma beside him shooting as well.

The rocky terrain made them jostle, and Orfeo knew how difficult it was to aim and duck when you were bouncing around. He heard Nat yelp on the other truck. Shit, he had been hit again. Jove was the only one shooting on the other truck while Arthur drove. Now their only option was to trick the Supras into fucking themselves over. They were close, really close.

Meridian’s magical boundaries only had visible markings on the Inspection Points, so Orfeo swerved away from the closest to them, hoping that the Supras in their frenzy kept the chase. He veered violently to keep his truck and shooters protecting Arthur, Jove, and Nat.

Arthur’s truck crossed the invisible barrier first. Orfeo’s followed ten seconds later. They drove on for a minute before the two jeeps behind them crashed into each other after their occupants were disintegrated by the boundaries.

“Suckers!” Toma yelled, flipping the bird with both hands and laughing riotously.

Orfeo always thought Toma was handsome with his chestnut hair, hazel eyes, peach cheeks, and cherry lips. He had that East European look a porn studio by the name of Belami had famously exploited for most of the last century. Now Belami’s videos with those almost nubile but muscular young men indulging in each other’s bodies were cult classics, exalted by devoted porn connoisseurs.

After what happened with Droser in the emergency stairs of Prussia’s building, not that many hours ago, Orfeo wasn’t able to see Toma as before. All

he was able to feel (as the adrenaline of their hairsbreadth escape waned) was the weight of those haunting, bionic green eyes and their *manliner*.

~ Supra Facts – 2025

The summer of 2025 saw the biggest agglomeration of Humans and Suprabeings in one place within the continental U.S. for the Solstice Music Festival, a three-day affair with more than three hundred musical acts and more than a million people congregated in the Mojave Desert.

A referendum was held in November, and the path to divide the U.S. into four areas governed by each Suprabeing Group separately was accepted by a demolishing majority, seventy-seven percent. Isolated revolts happened in the following months with few casualties.

~ Supra Facts – 2026

On Easter Day, the biggest revolt against the new governmental distribution originated in Waco, Texas with eighty-three casualties and hundreds injured.

A great human exodus began to the Suprabeing Areas where they thought they would be more comfortable since once the limits had been defined the mobilization and relocation between areas would be more complicated.

The 100th Meridian Act was approved, creating a protected area of approximately a thousand square miles with its center on coordinates 38°N 100°W. The law provided that the area would be outside Suprabeing legislations and regulations, solely under human control, and guarded by magical boundaries, including its air space.

Chapter Four

Unapologetically

Droser

“I’m glad you came.”

Droser eyed the Werewolf suspiciously. “You said it was important.”

“Well, I wanted to tell you that I support you, and if you need more time, I’m willing to talk with the others.” Mike smiled predatorily.

“You know you could have said those things in a vid, right?”

“What’s the fun in a vid? I can get more of you if you’re present, especially if Tonis is not here to ruin our fun.” Mike walked toward Droser and grabbed him by the waist, using both hands and joining their bodies. “You look insanely delicious this afternoon.”

Droser couldn’t deny his attraction to the Supra, and perhaps a fumble with another would help him to evaluate his obsession with Orfeo. It was simply too much. It made Droser feel out of tune and out of character. That part of him that rarely surfaced was taking central post, annoying him to no end. He was not used to being discombobulated, and certainly not for a guy he fucked once and vid’d for a couple of hours the following day. “What do you have in mind?” he finally asked, knowing the answer full well.

“Your lips wrapped around my prick for starters.” Mike waggled his eyebrows. “Then we can examine other positions.”

Being extremely proud of his *hit it and quit it* policy, Droser wasn’t even sure why he was letting that minuscule, annoyingly confused, mental flotsam to make him hesitate.

Mike’s hand, lowering and squeezing his ass playfully, dispatched that nagging confusion back into its dusty, cobwebby corner.

And then a different thing surfaced. “I have a question first.”

“Uh-huh?” Mike’s other hand joined the first on Droser’s butt.

“What’s so special about this woman that it has to be her?”

The hands went still. Mike cocked his head and blew a sigh. “Well...” He paused, then nodded as if coming to a resolution. “Since I know how you are,

and I'm not gonna get what I want until you get what *you* want, I'll tell you the little I know about it."

"I promise you'll be rewarded." Droser winked. They didn't move but stood there crotch-to-crotch.

"A group of Suprabeing Seers came together to find a way to breach Meridian's boundaries..."

Droser wanted to ask why they would do that if it had been their own decision to segregate that space out of their control, but he waited.

"...but the enchantments and spells creating the protection were too strong to be penetrated even by their powers. Then they thought of a way around it. 'Why don't we find someone inside the boundaries to give us the way?' Now they were looking for a prophet within the city, not a way to destroy it. And it worked even if limitedly. There is something special about this woman for her abilities don't come from Suprabeing stock because they are not curbed or diminished by the boundaries. Perhaps she's a human mutation, and I don't know if she's the only one within Meridian. What I know is that she was the one that shone bright, and the Seers saw her face and her general location."

Droser's curiosity was somewhat satisfied; he wasn't even sure why he asked about it in the first place. "Thank you, Mike." He grinned softly.

"My reward?"

"I really don't know why you still have your pants on," Droser said, arching an eyebrow—his grin turning into a leering smirk.

With inhuman speed, Mike was sans pants and sprawled over a comfy, green leather couch. The hair on the legs and wild pubic area of the Werewolf were a tad lighter than his honey-colored beard and glinted nicely thanks to the late afternoon sun entering comfortably through a partially open floor-to-ceiling window. The Supra's cock was hard and towering before Droser could take two steps toward it.

"Where are Antha and Ashley?"

"Afraid to give them a free show?"

"You should know better than to say shit like that," Droser sneered. "An audience is the least of my concerns. I just don't want them thinking they can come and join us because we're doing this in the common area of the suite."

"They went shopping. We've got about two hours to do whatever we want."

“You think I’m gonna let that puppy hold it for two hours?”

Mike contracted muscles Droser knew well, making his cock jerk in some kind of bouncy salutation.

“Show off,” Droser huffed.

“Your lips are too far from my prick.”

“Just so you know. You’re not fucking me.”

“You want to fuck me? I’m game.”

“Nope. Just oral today.”

“Then bring that pretty mouth where I can smear it with all this.” Grabbing the base of his cock, Mike shook it, and tiny drops of precum fled in all directions. “Actually take your pants off, so I can suck your prick too.” The Werewolf’s naturally dark orange aura softened with his last remark.

Still, they were nothing compared to the beautiful greens and blues and violets of Orfeo’s aura mixed with a darkness that was a reflection of Droser’s own energy field. And that was a big part of the Lathan Conundrum. Droser had seen the good and the bad within Orfeo’s soul thanks to his aura—of how it had changed in Droser’s presence, because of Droser.

His pants pooled around his feet a moment later, and Droser stepped out of them and moved to stand in front of Mike, utterly hard and ready for action. A single drop of precum emerged from the tip of his cock.

Mike hummed. “Just like the carnivorous flowers that gave you your name,” he chuckled, “that you use to create the fucking *Deus*.” He leaned forward and collected the offering with a quick lick. He closed his eyes, apparently savoring the flavor, then opened them and engulfed the cock head with an appropriately wolfy grin.

It felt good, yet not wonderful.

Like before.

“I thought I was going to suck you.”

His cock was released with a pop. Mike looked at him, eyebrow arched. “Can you appreciate the gesture and shut the hell up?” His voice came more guttural than usual and his aura darkened.

“Thank you?”

For fucks sake, what is wrong with me?

Droser removed Mike's hand from his cock, went to his knees, and took hold of Mike's cock, lapping upward then licking around the head.

"Yeah, that's the Droser I know," Mike sighed.

The girth was good, the flavor was nice, Droser's body was reacting, but the situation wasn't quite as hot as it should be. Some elusive spark wasn't there to be ignited.

Now a dreadful thought occurred to Droser. He stopped servicing Mike and asked the Werewolf, "How do you know if a man is your mate?"

"Aren't we chatty today?" Mike growled. Still, he answered, "Well, you feel some absurd attraction, an unexplained pull toward him, but you know for sure the moment you are inside him."

"What if he goes inside you?" Then Droser realized he was holding Mike's cock like a microphone. He scowled at the ridiculous mental image, because what came to his mind was that idiot Eck interviewing a Supra. Which pissed him even more, because only Eckhart had the balls for such a thing, since most people in Meridian were scared to death of even Supra children. Even if in other parts of the country people had made their peace with the Supras' existence.

"Same difference." Mike narrowed his eyes. "Are you letting another Werewolf fuck you? You know we don't mate like that with humans, right? And if you were even a third of a Suprabeing you wouldn't be able to cross Meridian's boundaries."

No, there had to be another explanation for his insane attraction to Orfeo. "Nah. It was just a random question," he offered unapologetically.

Could it be a bit of Werewolf in the iron-eyed hottie causing this unseemly wreck inside Droser? But Mike just said that humans and Werewolves didn't mate like that. They could have children with humans even if not life-mated though. And Droser didn't know of other Supras having the life-mate situation.

"We can have another cute Q&A as soon as we both come, Droser. Focus." Mike put his big paw on Droser's head, but instead of pushing him toward his dripping cock, threaded his fingers through the hair. His aura shimmered gently, its hue brightening. "I wish we could become mates with humans."

"Good thing your cock is *not* as soft as you're becoming." Droser dove before Mike could retort with some smartass comment.

The Werewolf's growl turned into a purr as Droser make quick (but mechanical) work of the piece in his mouth. He did it because he was a man used to finishing what he started. If he hadn't been on his knees already he would have told Mike to save his Supra jizz for someone else.

Gently, of course, there was no reason to burn that bridge.

Droser swallowed diligently as Mike shuddered and some fur sprouted out of him as he came with a "fuck, fuck, fuck" agonizing howl and his eyes tightly shut. Droser sat on his haunches, letting the Werewolf ride the wave of his climax. It was always nice to watch the aftermath of his work.

When his body relaxed, Mike opened his eyes and leaned toward Droser, pulling their faces together with a hand on Droser's neck. He brushed his lips over Droser's and sought a deep kiss two heartbeats later; he hummed, probably enjoying his own flavor. "Let me take care of you," he whispered huskily in his guttural tone, their eyes locked.

It only seemed fair. Droser should take the offer. He started to consider it, but his communicator took the decision away from him. "Facial recognition successful," the manly disembodied voice emerged. "Target located."

"Gonna take a rain check on that, hottie. I found your prophet." Droser stretched to get his pants, went to his feet and started pulling them up. He zipped up and winked. "I'll be back with her tonight."

This was a problem Droser hadn't expected to encounter.

Ninety percent of the time he didn't give a flying fuck about anybody but himself. Now, Orfeo Lathan had entered his life, smoothly, unobtrusively. The hours they had spent on the vid had eroded something Droser thought inexpugnable, and perhaps that was the flaw in the system. It had been created to avoid forceful intrusion, and Orfeo had breached it with his soft, deep voice—and gallantly mischievous smile.

This chink in his armor wouldn't be an issue if Droser weren't about to cross a threshold inside a modest skyscraper of Old Dodge City, where the prophet woman lived unaware of her fate. His mission wouldn't be a conflict if the woman weren't Star Danzig, the person who raised Orfeo since he was a little kid.

Droser had decided to do this when he was sure Orfeo was with Star because this was one of those ten percent moments when he couldn't put his own purpose above the feelings of another. And this was beyond the

unfathomable connection, thing, toward Orfeo he couldn't quite catalog yet. He would explain to Orfeo that the Supras only wanted Star to deliver a prophecy for them. Droser didn't know the use of the prophecy beyond the fact that it was something to fuck with Meridian, to breach its boundaries. He couldn't care less what happened to the city or its people. Mostly two kinds of people lived in this city: those who were born here and those who came escaping the Supras for their own reasons. If he cared about his fellow citizens, he wouldn't have created a drug so freaking toxic and insanely addictive that the police didn't know what to do with it.

Humanity had taken his parents from him, but Droser couldn't take away the only parent Orfeo knew just like that. He didn't know what the Supras were planning to do with Star afterward, and this hadn't been important to him until he discovered (a couple of hours before this crossroads moment) who the prophet was to Orfeo.

Maybe this was a sign, and he shouldn't let his heart interfere with the business of his genitals. The heart was a soft thing that didn't have a place in the life of a predator.

"Can I help you?" The voice was smoky like the sultry timbre of a songstress. Many people gave their own voices to their house computers, and Droser had a feeling he had just heard the voice of Star Danzig.

"I came to see Star and Orfeo," Droser stated simply.

"May I have your name?"

"Droser Sundew."

"One moment, please."

After a minute, Orfeo yanked the door open. "What an unexpected surprise!" He was all smiles and his aura shimmered happily. "Please come in."

Droser felt like shit for five seconds, facing the sunny colors of Orfeo's aura. He entered and offered with blunt frankness, "You might rescind that invitation very soon."

"What are you now? A Vampire?" Orfeo chuckled.

Perhaps, in a way I am.

"Hold on a second. The house computer said you came to see Star too?"

The red-haired woman he had seen, thanks to Ashley's powers, entered the living room. She was tiny and fragile, and Droser knew immediately why by

the wonky angles of her aura. She was a drug addict, full of *Deus*, Droser's designer drug.

Her quasi-absent aquamarine eyes settled on Droser. "You came to take me." Her demeanor was docile, resigned.

Orfeo rushed to her. "No, Star. This is my friend Droser. He just stopped by to say hello."

A golden signature, like the long body of a snake, slithered in Star's aura. Droser hadn't seen it at first because it emerged from her back, then rounded her shoulders to continue in a circular upward motion over her neck, face, and head—just to move again downward after it touched the top of her cranium.

Droser had only seen that kind of slithering golden light around two auras before; one in a female teller of First Meridian Bank, and the other in a healer—the husband of Tiger Jansen, a transporter and a member of Droser's biking club.

Bunny Lapin.

~ Meridian Facts – 2027

On February 1st, the construction of the city of Meridian started, and it was properly founded on Wednesday, September 8th of the same year. In November, the first elections for Mayor and Council of the city were held with the city having approximately five hundred thousand voters. The city was organized in seven boroughs: Old Dodge City, Pontus, Hardihood, Wherefore, Mongoose, Scarpia, and Petrarch.

Chapter Five

Suspiciously

Droser

“I taught you to face your fears, yet I’ve never truly faced mine.”

“What are you talking about, Star?”

She knows.

Hey, there were Vampires, and Witches, and Fae, and Werewolves, who was Droser to say prophets were hokum? May be she was truly a human mutation. He took a deep breath. “Orfeo, I came to take Star to some Supras who hired me to find her.”

“Supras?” All softness and care fled from Orfeo’s face.

“Yep. They need her to deliver a prophecy.”

“Don’t they have Witches for that?”

Star tugged at Orfeo’s arm. “There’s a reason for everything.”

“I know that.” Orfeo sighed. “I’ve been dreading this moment since you delivered that first prophecy five years ago, and we had to move to avoid people following you around, asking for their future.” He looked at Droser suspiciously. “You found her because of me.”

“No,” Droser offered frankly. “When you spoke about the woman who raised you, you never said her name, just how good she had taken care of you and how much you loved her.” He shrugged. “I didn’t even know her name until this afternoon and learned who she was because you lived at the same address.”

“Then how were you looking for her?”

“A Fae put her image in my head, and I transferred it to my instruments. The only thing they knew about her was that she lived in Old Dodge City. My face recognition program found her today.”

“I must go with the Maker.” The resignation in Star’s voice was reflected by the wavering of her wonky aura.

Orfeo’s aura fluctuated between worry and anger. Anger finally won. “If she goes I go with her, and I carry my weapons.”

Droser nodded. The Supras never said she had to come alone. “Let me call them.” He activated his communicator, bringing his wrist close to his mouth. “Vampire Tonis.”

“Connecting...”

“Fae, Vampire. What is this?”

“My employers are one of each,” Droser explained before Tonis’s grumpy voice emerged.

“Do you have her?”

“Yep. I’m hiring a limo to take us to Mega-Vegas and you’re paying for it.”

“Just fucking bring her.”

“And we’re coming with her son.”

“Why?”

“She needs him.” Droser looked at Star, and she smiled at him approvingly. Orfeo’s face was a completely different thing.

“Whatever.” Tonis hung up.

Fucker.

“He sounds delightful.” Orfeo took Star’s hand in his. “You sure you want to do this?”

“We all have to do our part.” She patted his cheek with her free hand.

Apparently, Orfeo was used to her not-answers because he didn’t insist. The missiles coming from his eyes as he focused his attention back on Droser were nuclear. “I’m not afraid to fuck-up some Supras. If anything happens to her, I’m hurting you too.”

“Fair enough.” Droser put his hands up in acceptance; after all, Orfeo was a *Furia* Master, he could deal with the Supras just fine. “Let me get the limo.” He winked. “The trick is to meet them just an hour before sunrise so we don’t have to deal with the cranky vampire for long.”

Star giggled. “I like him.”

“I’m not liking him very much at the moment,” Orfeo grumbled.

Droser pursed his lips and moved toward the door to call the limo service, turning away from them. That persistent, unnamed thing inside him wanted to

run to Orfeo and grovel at his feet, but with every second closer to the encounter with the Supras, its chances of success withered sadly.

“Why are we stopping at this Inspection Point?”

“I need to pick something up.”

“Leave him alone,” Star said lazily, like a cat stretching but not ready to move yet. She had her fix of *Deus*, saying it would help her to give the Supras what they needed. She seemed eager to help the Supras even if it would certainly end in something horrible for Meridian.

It couldn't be something that horrible if she was so eager to do it.

Right?

Droser left the limo wrapped in Orfeo's murderous gaze. In five minutes, he was back inside the long, sleek black beast taking them to Mega-Vegas. The less-than-an-hour trip went in silence, except for Star making chirping noises now and then. Droser had seen the effects of *Deus* in many people but never bird-like mellowness.

They alighted at the main lobby of the Ultra. The elevator taking them to the ninetieth floor was a glass cage with an impressive view of the long obscenely illuminated expanse of the gambling paradise—or hell, depending on your luck.

Droser wasn't feeling particularly lucky in these wee hours of the morning. It was late February, so the oh five hundred hours on his communicator told him they would, at least, get rid of Tonis quite fast. They stated their business at the entrance of the suite, and the computer let them through. “Where are these weapons you said you will bring, and why didn't the computer register them?” he whispered in Orfeo's ear. More than the slight tremble, Orfeo's aura told him a thousand things Orfeo would probably die before revealing them at the moment.

“I got them. Not metal, Custom-made,” Orfeo murmured before they entered the inner room where the four Supras lounged. The Vampire, Werewolf, and Witch wore long coats, in different styles but all black. Ashley wore another bustier, this time so yellow it hurt the eyes.

“Good,” Droser hissed under his breath to Orfeo.

“Welcome,” said Antha cheerfully. She drew two Tarot cards, adding them to the reading she already had on the small table before her. “Hmm. The Lovers

and Strength. Powerful combination,” she mumbled, looking at Orfeo and Droser suspiciously, “destined to do great things together.” She picked up her tri-colored drink, her eyes completely trained on them as she sipped.

“I want you to know that we don’t appreciate your little *show of force*, coming this late. We are not *all* Vampires. Some of us like the sun.” Ashley flipped her lengthy, silver hair as she sipped a bubbly concoction with a straw and sank into her comfy seat with a huff.

“My understanding was that the Fae were party people. Only kids’ parties are during the day.” Droser shrugged.

Mike just shook his head and smiled. “So this is the prophet. And what a pretty son she has.” He eyed Orfeo like that famous Wolf after he blew the first piggy’s house; the only thing missing was the drooling.

“I’m Star.” She gave a shy waving with an even shier smile, then chirped.

“Well. That’s just charming.” Tonis arched an eyebrow and paced in front of the giant floor-to-ceiling window dominating the area. “Let’s move this along then.”

“What is it that you want from her?” Orfeo asked without preamble.

“We need a way to destroy the boundaries of Meridian,” Tonis stated without an iota of emotion.

If this surprised Orfeo he didn’t let on, and Star looked as if she knew all along. She probably did. Droser didn’t flinch because he knew the fucked-up thing they wanted thanks to Mike.

“It must be really messed up when you depend on a human to give you a plan of action,” sneered Orfeo.

Ashley shrugged. “It has to be someone from within the boundaries, and the sages found her.”

Droser cleared his throat.

“I mean, the sages determined it was her.” The Fae scowled at Droser.

“Can you do this, prophet? Can you give us the answer that we seek?” Tonis asked.

Star opened her mouth to answer, but Orfeo cut her off. “Hold your fangs a second. Free visions are for common folk. You assholes are loaded. One just needs to look at this suite,” he made an expansive gesture with both hands, “and

I'm sure you didn't pay the *carnivorous flower* here with soil and sunshine." Orfeo purposefully stared at Ashley as he pointed with his thumb at Droser.

She snarled, and her silver hair started to undulate and levitate like a sea creature with a million tentacles.

"Pfft. I'm not afraid of your powers Fae. Save the parlor tricks for other people," Orfeo growled.

Mike snorted.

"Have something to say, Mike?" Droser poked.

"I'm not saying a single thing until I've assessed my chances with the prophet's son." Mike waggled his eyebrows and winked.

Orfeo blew a kiss in Mike's direction. If Droser had ever felt murderous, it was nothing compared to what surged inside of him in that instant. He had to summon so much restraint not to jump Mike, it was ridiculous, truly absurd.

"Wouldn't be the first time a human pimps his mother." Tonis's eyes were glowing embers. "What's your price?"

Orfeo didn't rise to the bait. He spoke easily, "Fifty grand." He pulled Star to him. "And she's not spilling a vowel until the money's deposited and verified."

"Fine." Tonis produced his accounting tablet from one of the pockets of his coat; the outfit seemed like a freaking cassock. "I'm sure her drug habits are expensive," he added with enough venom to kill a fully grown elephant.

Once again, instead of take offense, Orfeo retorted happily, "You bet your dead ass they are."

Star laughed, a little maniacally. "None shall have power above the others because even divided you're nothing but the one spawn of the same wonder."

The four Supras gave each other knowing glances. It was a weird thing to say out of nowhere, but Droser's employers seemed to understand her. Perhaps she knew the true meaning of their purpose. Toni barked, "Your details?"

Orfeo stared at all the Supras suspiciously, then said, "Orfeo Lathan, ODC 3-100-195."

Tonis punched and swiped and glowered and after a moment spat, "Done."

"Let me check." Orfeo activated the silent features of his communicator and played with it for several minutes.

Droser was positive Orfeo was transferring the money to a different account, so Tonis couldn't void the transaction afterward—an old and handy trick.

Tonis's face was turning a very un-Vampire shade of purple. He was angry and his time awake was running thin.

Star was trying to catch invisible things flying around her. Her aura had a childlike quality, showing that the *Deus's* effects were in full force. Orfeo turned to her. "You are truly positive you want to do this?"

"We already paid for her services!" Tonis seemed to have lost the last feeble strand of politeness inside him.

"She's fragile, Tonis." Antha glided from the window (where she had been silently leaning after she finished with her reading) toward Star and Orfeo. She said softly, "We just want the way to cross the boundaries, and then you can go home." She didn't say any other words, but her tone was clear, *home to your drugs*.

Antha's hand landed on Star's shoulder in an almost friendly way, and something shimmered in her aura, making her demeanor change in a heartbeat. She cocked her head sideways, her blond curls jittering gingerly. "There's a bit of preternatural in you, and it's not of the Four. What are you?" Antha didn't sound disgusted or confused, just merely curious, as if she was asking about some exotic bird in a pretty cage at a friend's house.

Ashley perked up. "We have ways to find out," she offered.

"I can figure it out. Let me lick her," Mike said cheerfully, "although I'd rather lick the son." He smirked.

Freaking horndog.

"Nobody is licking anyone, and nobody is investigating anything about Star." Orfeo pushed his mother behind him, as if he could take three interested Supras at once.

It was one thing to be a *Furia* Master and another to be a fool. If a fight started, Droser would never know the way to destroy the boundaries, and that knowledge was worth a king's ransom.

"Listen to the kid." Tonis tried to cross his arms over his impressive chest but staggered instead; he growled a not-so-muffled, "Fuck."

Droser looked at his communicator furtively; sunrise neared rapidly.

“They must wait here until sundown. I can’t do this now,” Tonis said, straightening himself.

“You’re not that important,” Ashley pulled a face, “we can do this without you present. You will be informed when you wake up.”

“What the fuck is your problem, Fae?” Tonis’s eyes flashed red. “You think I’m an idiot? By the time I wake up, these people are dead, and the Vampire nation gets nothing while you fuckers plan your invasion to re—” He stopped himself there; he almost spilled something he shouldn’t.

“Everybody calm down.” Mike made a placating gesture with his hands.

Antha shrugged. “If I get calmer I might dissolve in a fluffy cloud.” A drink popped in her hand. She scrunched her nose at Star. “Want one?”

Star chirped, then said, “No,” giggling.

“We’ll wait until sundown.” Droser stepped forward. “But all four of you must swear solemnly that no harm will come to any of us, Star, Orfeo, and me, now or in the future by your hand or any other Supra. And we move to a different suite, that you will pay for, of course.”

Orfeo narrowed his eyes at Droser then nodded, understanding Droser’s plan.

“I won’t do such a thing.” Ashley’s hair started to rise in its oceanic monster way.

“Droser, we can’t swear on behalf of others.” Mike smiled.

“But it means you have to defend us from other Supras if they attack us,” Orfeo stated simply.

“Oh, pshaw.” Antha put her hand over her heart. “I swear solemnly, no harm will come to these three humans, Droser, Star, and Orfeo by my hand or any other Suprabeing while *I’m around them* now or in the future.” Her aura flashed, sealing her vow. She browsed around the room, “Come on, the Vampire has to go night-night. Or is it day-day?” She laughed delicately and sipped her drink.

The other three Supras reluctantly swore, each limiting the extent of the vow differently, but all Droser needed was to keep Orfeo and Star safe, at least until Star revealed the way and they left Mega-Vegas.

What would happen between Orfeo and him after that—was a different, more complicated matter.

Chapter Six

Irrevocably

Orfeo

“If you think you earned some kind of brownie points for how you tricked the Supras into protecting us, you are pathetically mistaken.” Orfeo huffed. Droser Sundew wasn’t his favorite person at the moment.

“I just did what I thought was best for us.”

“There *is* no us.”

Droser flinched at his tone.

Good.

Before Droser could open his mouth again, Orfeo asked something that had been driving him crazy all night, “Star called you ‘the Maker.’ What did she mean by that?”

“Let me show you.” Droser pulled an ampoule from his jacket. The orange liquid glowed in the semi-darkness of their suite’s lounge.

“Are you a *Deus* dealer?”

“No. I created it. The dealers, well just Prussia now, get it from me.”

“You motherfucker.”

“Hey.” Droser put his hands up in surrender. “I’m not going to say that I created it to save the world and it went wrong. I was experimenting with the mucus of some Drosera plants. You know how scientists use their mucilage to elaborate tissue-connecting glue and other medical stuff. Well, I discovered that in certain combinations they become psychedelic stimulants to release endorphins in the highest levels known to mankind.”

“Save me the autobiography nonsense. The outcome’s a drug that keeps people like slaves.”

“That is not my fault.” Droser narrowed his eyes. “Each idiot knows why they go to it.” Then he flinched. “I didn’t mean Star...”

“I know what you meant.” Orfeo shook his head. Technically, it wasn’t Droser’s fault that Star was a drug addict. It was Orfeo’s fault for not doing anything to help her quit them. “You are just a frigging facilitator of commodities.”

“I’m a businessman.”

“You are a murderer,” Orfeo hissed. Did he really have the right to be calling Droser a murderer when he killed Supras for a living?

Supras were people too, had mothers and fathers and children that mourned them. Still, the Red Vanes only eliminated convicted Supras that escaped the justice system, so that had to count for something.

“It’s a bit hypocritical coming from you, isn’t it?” Droser smirked.

Orfeo’s body reacted to the smirk. Goose bumps sprouted, but he was able to suppress the shiver that would have followed in their wake. Even his traitorous nipples hardened. Never had his body reacted to a man in such a desperate way. He didn’t know if he wanted to shoot and quarter Droser or fuck him blind right there. “We can say we are no angels and call it even.” His voice sounded almost natural.

Droser cocked his head and studied him. The smirk turned into a saucy grin.

Shit. Bionic eyes.

“You’re watching my aura, aren’t you?”

“My enhancements assess more than auras,” Droser offered, shrugging.

His wayward body might be wanting to screw the living daylights out of Droser (and silently but inexorably convincing his mind), but the Supra’s involvement in their situation had given it a one hundred and eighty turn straight to Crap Town, Alaska.

“Mister Lathan,” the suite’s computer pronounced officiously, “Mike Hardy is here to see you.”

Droser chuckled. “That dog is not going to stop until he has his nose buried in your ass.”

The Supras’ suite was two doors down from theirs, and Antha and Ashley had provided it with spells and enchantments to avoid unwelcome visitors. Mike had offered a more hands-on protection approach... A Machiavellian

thought occurred to Orfeo. “Perhaps I’ll let him do more than sniff my hole.” Orfeo twisted his mouth as if he were actually considering it.

The change in Droser’s face was brutal and instantaneous. Before Orfeo could move out of the way, Droser had gripped his arms, shaking him. “You won’t!”

With a swift maneuver, Orfeo broke the hold and punched Droser in the face. “What? You still think that if we survive this trip to Mega-Vegas, we are on? That hovercraft crashed hours ago, asswipe.” He shook his hand, releasing some of the pain after its meeting with Droser’s mug.

Sprawled on the plush carpet, Droser touched his broken lip and looked at the blood left on his finger. “I didn’t know who my target was until after I met you.”

The sad part was that Orfeo believed him. Nobody was that good of an actor. He could not deny the things he saw in Droser’s eyes that afternoon on Prussia’s stairs—when they vid’d. “It doesn’t matter. Whatever this is—was,” he moved his hand to encompass them, “isn’t an option anymore.”

“There is always an option,” Droser said softly, sadly.

Orfeo closed his eyes and sighed.

“Mister Lathan, your visitor awaits,” the suite’s computer insisted softly.

“Let him in.”

“My, my,” said the Werewolf as he entered the lounge. He had showered and looked particularly dapper in a nice fitting red shirt and dark pants that accentuated every sexy bulge. He uttered (almost with relish), “Seems like enemies invading your quarters are unnecessary to start the punching party. I’m here to kiss those wounds better.” He opened his arms grandly.

Orfeo chuckled. “You couldn’t be cheesier, even if you were stuffed with cheese.”

“Or hornier if he were covered in horns,” said Droser, who had produced a handkerchief and dabbed it on his lip.

“Now, puppies, you were fighting a moment ago. Don’t gang up on me... Well, I don’t mind—”

“Don’t say it,” Orfeo stopped him, raising his palm up. “Do you need something?”

“Are you offering?” Mike grinned. His eyes flashed with lecherous mirth.

“I asked if you *needed*, not if you *wanted* something. There’s a difference.” Orfeo made a half smile to remove some of the harshness from his statement. He wasn’t keen on Supras, but Mike was entertaining in a corny way.

Maybe we can stuff him with corn.

“Just came to check on you, boys.” Mike browsed around. “Where’s Star?”

“She’s watching a movie.” Droser went to his feet.

Orfeo grabbed Mike by the arms and turned him toward the door. “All right, you checked. We are good. You can go now.” He spanked Mike once.

Mike jumped and guffawed. “I can get used to that.”

“Not in this lifetime, Mike!” yelled Droser behind them.

“A submissive Werewolf, that’s new,” Orfeo whispered in Mike’s ear.

“Liking pain is not necessarily about submission.” Mike looked at Orfeo sideways, his guttural voice making the statement sound like a threat.

“Still not going to happen, Wolf. See you later.” The door opened, and Orfeo pinched Mike’s ass. “For the road.”

“Tease,” Mike growled fondly.

Orfeo winked, and the door closed.

“Not happy about all that flirting,” Droser hissed, as Orfeo approached him.

“Your happiness’s the least of my concerns, Sundew.” Orfeo made a “give me that” motion. “Are you going to charge me for the *Deus*, mister businessman?”

Droser’s face crumbled for a second, just a blink. “I should.”

“And it’s your right. Although I must stress the fact that it is your fault that Star doesn’t have today’s dose, and because of that, we need to resort to this exchange.”

Wrong words.

“What are we exchanging?” Droser’s face brightened and Orfeo felt that obnoxious pang of desire surge—uninvited.

“I’m letting you live.”

“Oh.” Droser drew the ampoule from his pocket and put it in Orfeo’s hand. His fingers lingered longer than necessary.

What’s a blowjob between enemies?

No. What the fuck did this man do to him? Orfeo couldn’t seriously be contemplating that possibility amid this fucked-up situation, let alone with Star just a door away.

“Consider it a business expense.” Orfeo’s harsh tone wasn’t fooling Droser, who could frigging read his aura. Orfeo moved forward and kissed Droser, just a whisper of lips. He shook his head. “Perhaps, we were not meant to happen.” He turned around. “See you at sundown.”

He didn’t look back.

“What are those for?” Orfeo asked as they entered the Supras’ suite and three recording devices floated around. Strict laws prohibited hotels and other places of stay to have cameras or sound recording systems; the information registered was voided instantly in places with computer butlers. They couldn’t ask this suite’s computer to repeat what was said a second ago.

And they didn’t have these gadgets floating around last night.

“We need to record the prophecy, so we can show it to those we represent,” said Ashley flatly. “You didn’t think we four were planning to take Meridian on our own.”

“I couldn’t care less what you do with Meridian.” Orfeo only cared about Star, and by the time these fuckers were able to do whatever procedure Star told them, she and he would be long gone.

“How anticlimactic,” said Droser in a disappointed tone. “I expected a little bit more drama to relay this message to your masters. You know, rocking *Suprabeingness*.”

“Those things have their time and place. We might be arcane creatures, but we do not shun technology.” Antha winked, pulling her drink up in a toasting manner. “Still we don’t let it overwhelm us like you humans did.”

True, the frigging Supras had arisen the previous century in a moment when humanity, especially here in the U.S., were living through their gadgets and forgetting about actual human contact, becoming frivolous people and stupider and stupider by the second. Somehow the apparition of the S.O.Bs had snapped the world out of its technological stupor.

“Okay, let’s get this show on the *road*.” Mike gave Orfeo a pointed look. He made a pinching motion with his fingers that had Orfeo laughing against his better judgment.

“Something funny?” Tonis asked with a disgusted look on his handsome face. The Vampire was seriously hot, but crankier than a bunch of gluttons forced to fast.

“You wouldn’t know funny even with your fangs in its throat.” Orfeo shrugged and turned to Star. “Are you ready?”

Star chirped, then said, “Yes.” She wore a nice flowery dress that Droser had bought from one of the hotel boutiques. He also bought Orfeo a tee with a big unicorn...

The cunning bastard.

Orfeo sat her on a comfortable, fluffy chair. She rested her thin, pale limbs on the armrests—a bedraggled, fairy tale princess.

The recording devices took positions like hovercrafts ready to strike an enemy.

Antha crouched beside Star. “Hello, beautiful. Search deep and wide and tell us how to destroy Meridian’s boundaries.” Her voice was soothing in a very maternal way, even if she was asking for something horrible. Maybe she was an old hag disguised as a young Witch.

Orfeo couldn’t place her slight accent. Scandinavian perhaps?

Star nodded. “Meridian. Boundaries.”

“Yes, sweetie. You can do this.” Antha encouraged her.

For all Orfeo knew, not every person with the power to seek visions was able to do it on command. He wasn’t sure if the drugs had given Star the ability,

or she had it in her and the drugs just unleashed it, but her gift had increased a hundredfold as soon as she began using *Deus*. In any case, this was the part about visions that he hated the most, when Star's eyes rolled back and went stiff, her body vibrating lightly.

Ashley, Mike, and Tonis moved closer with the expectation of people hoping to behold a miracle written on their faces. For a second, something inside Orfeo hoped that Star couldn't deliver. He looked at Droser, who stood with his arms crossed over his chest, leaning on the furthest wall from the Supras. Their eyes locked, and Orfeo (for no particular reason) wanted Droser to give him a hug. This pissed him off because he was not used to such moments of weakness.

Star sat there, white-eyed and throbbing like a skinny dynamo, for several minutes, her mouth pressed in a thin line, gripping the ends of the armrests. Suddenly, she started laughing—an absolute maniac's laughter.

"The fuck?" said Tonis, pulling a face.

Ashley huffed; she seemed ready to slap Star.

Antha made a placating gesture. Perhaps she could perceive something the others in the room couldn't.

Mike looked at Orfeo, then pointed at Star as if saying, "Do something."

Orfeo didn't know what to do. Star had never laughed like this after she came from a vision-searching trance.

"Can I slap her?" Ashley asked to no one in particular.

"Touch her and not even your mother will recognize you after I'm done with you," Orfeo growled taking his knife out.

Tonis bared his fangs. "You dare, human?"

"I'm going to fuck each of you up if *you* dare touching her."

Mike eyes flashed gold, and he shuddered, his body mass increasing. "You don't want to do that, kiddo."

"Oh, stop showing your dicks!" Antha waved her hands. "Or you'll all end up like ugly frogs!"

Droser snorted. "Not even the cute golden ones?"

Antha arched an eyebrow, and the rest of the Supras sent murderous scowls his way.

“I’d listen to the Witch,” Droser said. “Besides, Star is quiet now. Perhaps, waiting *for all of you* to shut the fuck up.”

All eyes turned to Star; fangs retracted, and body mass diminished. She had sobered up, her aquamarine eyes glowing faintly. She stared at an unknown point beyond the suite’s walls. “It’s inevitable. The boundaries will fall sooner than you think.”

Orfeo didn’t like the furtive glance Tonis and Ashley exchanged.

“What do you mean with ‘sooner than you think’?” Mike asked, short of scratching his head in confusion.

“We cannot wait until it happens on its own.” Tonis crouched beside Star and opposite to Antha. “What do we do to accelerate its fall?”

“The strength of the boundaries is the strength of the gods.” Star still stared toward that far out place.

“Shit. I hate prediction riddles,” Ashley huffed, rolling her eyes. “How the fuck does one destroy the strength of the gods?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Droser moved from the wall and walked toward them, toward Star actually. He sounded like a teacher giving a lesson to a bunch of seriously obtuse pupils. “You stop believing in them.”

All the Supras looked between them as if the solution was so simple it was beyond ludicrous.

That maniacal laughter erupted from Star again.

And Orfeo was irrevocably afraid for the first time in many, many moons.

Chapter Seven

Haphazardly

Droser

Forty-eight hours after Star revealed how to destroy Meridian, Droser drove his bike along a massive fountain with a giant petroglyph in the middle of it on his way to a business meeting. This area was considered the perfect center of Meridian and thus dutifully called Central Fountain Plaza. It was a beautiful place with lush gardens, elegant coffee shops, and high profile boutiques. It was like a green and lush oasis in the middle of an urban valley surrounded by shiny, metal and glass skyscrapers fighting to reach the sky. Blasts of oranges and pinks colored everything at the moment, since the sun was about to say good-bye.

Since Meridian's days were counted, Droser had decided to move his drug business to a different area, and this meeting was to find a niche within the South area controlled by the Fae—and where psychedelic drugs were not as highly punishable as in other areas.

Enormous holo-boards announced everything from soft drinks to skimpy underwear to obnoxiously expensive jewelry and clothing.

Orfeo wasn't answering Droser's calls, and he seriously wanted to find a way to purge this need for the man from his body. It was an ache that became more unbearable with each passing hour. So all Droser could do was to throw himself into the mindless chatter of the busy city and find a way to keep this side of his livelihood afloat. The police had systematically eliminated all his dealers; Prussia was his last and the only one who knew his face. The others had always received the product through delivery drones, unmarked and untraceable.

But Prussia was from a long gone part of his life, before Droser's parents had been imprisoned and died during a virus outbreak in that freaking Bitter Lake Penitentiary surrounded by wetlands in New Mexico. Perhaps it would have been better if they had lived in the East area controlled by the Werewolves; as soon as his parents had been convicted, Droser would have died with them because the death penalty included all immediate family. On the other hand, Vampires didn't kill people they could keep using as blood bags; especially if they have exotic blood types (the chances of finding a married

couple with both having RH Null blood type were smaller than one in a billion).

Once a neighbor back in New Mexico, Prussia had run into Droser in Meridian eons later, and he had helped her with her money problems by turning her into his agent.

Now Prussia was ready to leave Meridian with her eight cats and Droser, but they needed a place to go first. As Droser parked his bike, a muscular guy on the closest holo-board smiled mischievously as he stripped to promote a new brand of male underwear. Suddenly, Star appeared on that holo-board and all other holo-boards around the plaza simultaneously. "It's inevitable. The boundaries will fall sooner than you think," she said in an ethereal voice that had been clearly modified to make it sound even more remote and unnatural. Tonis, Ashley, Antha, and Mike had been removed from the frame, and Star appeared to be in some church or castle; Droser couldn't decide which one was closer to the background they had added.

The Supras had hacked into the city's video network, and he was sure the same feed was exploding all over Meridian.

The clip repeated in a loop. Droser hadn't noticed the group of white-clad people in one corner because they'd been quiet when he arrived, probably on a smoking break. One of them shouted, "I know that woman. She's a prophet. If she's saying we are doomed, we are!" The others started to yell and wail, "Repent! The end is near!" They waved their red-painted signs frantically. Three minutes of that and the passersby began to scream and run haphazardly. The patrons of the cafes overturned chairs and tables in their haste to flee. Others spilled out of boutiques as if chased by swarms of demons.

Amid the increasing chaos, Droser stood there, arms crossed over his chest, wondering why these idiots ran and screamed. It wasn't like the boundaries had already fallen and there were Supras flooding the city. Auras flashed with fear and consternation around him, and there was a surge of glee within him as he saw people trampling each other in their desperation to go—where?

Fuck them all.

The meeting never happened. The guy wasn't where he was supposed to be, probably spooked by all the commotion at the plaza. Droser neared his building in the east side of Pontus almost two hours later thanks to the pandemonium throughout the city. The last thing Droser expected to encounter was Phillip N. Eckhart interviewing people on his stoop with two recording devices floating

around him and covering his every move. The street lights seemed spotlights trained on Eck and his acolytes.

Droser had to do a double take, not just because, even surrounded by people debating between stress, frustration, and attraction, Eck's aura remained that of a grounded and self-assured person, but because it had that golden serpent like the auras of Star, Bunny, and the bank teller. Whatever it meant, these four seemingly completely different people shared something in common.

Were they all mutations? Nah, Antha had said there was something preternatural in Star. Were they all related somehow?

Boundaries' fearmongers approached from the left sidewalk in their white robes and green cords, waving their blood-red signs and chanting some religious nonsense. Their auras trembled with conviction and despair, and they weren't wrong, the thing they feared the most was a reality. Still this group had something Droser hadn't seen before. They all had the same inscription on their cardboard signs: REPENT FOR THE END IS AT HAND. Droser couldn't shake the feeling he had read that somewhere before. They also had ashes covering their faces. Talk about outré displays.

Anyone would think that when these two groups converged it would become a wailing festival, but Droser saw how the tides veered in a different direction for Eck's admirers. Soon anger shone dangerously, and they started to boo the white robes. The recording devices moved to record both groups, and Droser sidestepped to avoid the inevitable confrontation. Part of him wanted to witness the morons pummeling each other, but he wanted more to call Orfeo again until the stubborn asshole answered. He needed privacy for that.

Surreptitiously, Droser reached the lobby's entrance, but against his instincts he turned to look at the unfolding melee (it was too much of a temptation), and caught Eck's eyes as someone, taking advantage of the chaos, ripped his cotton candy pink shirt apart, pulling him into the fracas. Signs swung, punches flew, and Eck's eyes begged for help. Droser was ready to leave him to his fate, and he remembered the golden serpent in the reporter's aura. Maybe it meant something worth knowing, and this was his chance to investigate.

Droser lunged forward, giving silent thanks to his Fae ancestor since the *Bardagamaður* (one of the few perks of that sprinkle of Supra in him) slowed the movements of the people fighting around him. He maneuvered around the jabs and kicks, grabbing Eck's thick upper arm and pulling him out of the commotion.

“Secure the doors, none of those people live in this building,” Droser ordered the building’s computer as Eck and he looked at the riot from behind reinforced glass. They saw how the two hovering recorders were used to smash faces. More people were joining both bands, and police sirens could be heard in the distance.

“At once, Mister Sundew,” the computer agreed serenely.

“Thank you. It would have not been good to start punching viewers,” Eck said, heaving.

“Are you kidding me?”

What a pompous jackass. Droser narrowed his eyes as another surprise emerged from Eck’s aura. The man was saying something, and his aura projected a completely different thing. Deep inside, Eck was concerned for the safety of those outside—not for what they would have thought of him, if he had violently defended himself

Your aura revealed your state of mind, and very few people were able to contradict with their mouths what their auras showed brightly. Droser got distracted by the tribal sun circling Eck’s right nipple. His eyes moved lower, and there were words tattooed, like the stanza of a poem or the chorus of a song (because it had a certain rhythm to it), but it wasn’t English. On the left flank, the face of a lion stared back at him menacingly, his mane flowing toward the center Eck’s defined abs.

“Ahem.” Eck cleared his throat. “As much as I appreciate you ogling me with such enthusiasm, it would be nice if we could go to your apartment so I could borrow a shirt or something.”

“There was no enthusiasm,” Droser uttered harshly.

Eck arched an eyebrow. “If you say so.” He didn’t physically shrug, but his voice was a blatant shrug.

“I can still throw you outside to join your *viewers*.”

“That would be most disappointing.” Eck winked.

“Save your charm for someone who might actually enjoy it. C’mon.”

They walked toward the bay of elevators. They entered, and, as the door slid closed, Droser kept his eyes pointedly forward after he put his thumb on the recognition pad, and the metal cage sped upward. He could feel Eck’s eyes on him though.

“You’re cute.”

“You haven’t seen my shotguns.”

“Is that a proposition?”

The mirth in Eck’s voice was sunny and preposterous. Droser remained looking forward. “You’re not my type.”

“I am everybody’s type.”

“And I’m not everybody.”

“Touché.” Eck chuckled.

Since Droser wanted Eck to cooperate when he started questioning him, he came up with a peace offering, even though Droser could always drug Eck’s ass with a cool truth serum he had stashed in his interrogation kit. “What are those tattooed words?” Droser asked, as the doors opened on the seventieth floor and they exited the elevator, turning right to his apartment.

“It’s the first stanza of Baudelaire’s ‘The Cat’,” Eck offered proudly.

“You have it in French.”

“Of course, all the known translations are rubbish. Besides *Je parle parfaitement le français*.”

“The only thing I can shoot in French is *Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?* And everybody knows that.”

Instead of going with the opening Droser had stupidly given, Eck placidly said, “But you are not everybody.”

“You’ve got that one right.” Droser laughed in spite of his reticence to encourage Eck. He thumbed the apartment’s recognition pad.

The door opened, and the house computer greeted him happily, “Welcome back, Droser.” It took a heartbeat to do facial recognition. “Welcome, Mister Eckhart.”

Eck stared at Droser askance—then smirked.

“What? You are on the media all the time. The computer would have recognized Madonna too. Don’t flatter yourself.”

Eck guffawed. “Shit. If Madonna ever comes to your house please give me a call. I’ll be here in a jiffy.”

“Idiot.”

“Ha!”

“I need to make a call.” Droser waved Eck away. “First door to your left. I don’t think I have anything that will actually fit you, but maybe a vest could cover your nipples at least.” He rolled his eyes.

“I’m sure I’ll find something.” Eck smiled and walked toward the bedroom.

His round ass looked good in his navy blue dress pants, but for Droser it was too perky, too in-your-face. There was only one ass worth of occupying his thoughts. He needed to call Orfeo. He activated his communicator and made the request.

Miraculously, Orfeo answered. “Are you all right?” He sounded truly concerned, but didn’t activate the image function, and there was loud music in the background. Although, it was not happy music; it was Madonna’s (how déjà vu -ish) First Life “Love Tried to Welcome Me” song.

“I’m good, but that in the background is *depression* music.”

“Oh shut up. Nick Cave’s ‘O Children’ would have been worse.”

“You *do* know your *depression* classics,” Droser chuckled, “and perhaps I have the keys to the gulag. ‘Cause your gun is not little, but it’s lovely.”

Droser had to admit he sounded a lot like Eck. That wasn’t a good thing, but something inside him just went cheesy around Orfeo.

“I’m going to hang up if you don’t stop the corniness.”

“You never gave me the chance to say good-bye.”

“Say it then.” Orfeo lost all signs of the original concern in his voice.

“I need to say more than good-bye.”

“What for? The city is going to hell in a basket after the frigging Supras broadcasted Star. People will lose faith in the boundaries and the motherfuckers will attack. We’re leaving before that happens. That growing thing between us doesn’t have a place anymore. Not after what you did and what’s coming.”

“If you’d just give me a chance to prove I’m not a total asshole.”

“Only half?”

“I’m pretty sure you could live with half an asshole beside you.”

“We met at the wrong time, Droser.”

“Everything happens for a reason.”

“That’s what Star says.”

“Then believe her.”

“I’m not going to force it. Say it.”

“Say what?”

“Good-bye.”

“Good-bye?”

“Take care of yourself, Droser. You can be a complete asshole now. So long.” Orfeo disconnected the communication, leaving the dark screen mute.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Droser turned around and found Eck staring at him with an uneasy grimace.

“Seems like whatever that was didn’t work out,” Eck said softly.

“It didn’t.”

“Well.” Eck shrugged. “How do I look?”

~ Bad Guys Facts – Antha Trolsksson (b.1993 – d.)

Born in Sweden, she came to the U. S. when she was six years old and her parents decided to expand the Warlock Church of Light to the American continent. Being a Millennial Witch she exerted great influence on the defunct Social Media, gaining notoriety by her informative tips in Paganism and Witchcraft at the beginning of the twenty-first century when people were more open to the idea of things beyond the logical realm and creating a path for a future understanding of the Suprabeing Collective Consciousness. The SCCS (Suprabeing Collective Consciousness Studies) became a permanent staple in many Suprabeing founded colleges around the four areas later on.

She decided to go dark and align herself with those wanting to conquer Meridian after a human colleague at the Tenebra University of Illinois broke her heart. The pain of the break up made her healing powers go awry.

~ Bad Guys Facts – Ashley Moon (You really don’t want to ask her age)

Ashley has been a Fae Royal Assassin for almost five hundred years. She possesses what is called a blood hand; this touch makes all human blood

vessels explode at once, and it's a rare trait in Fae born on the African island of Madagascar. Apart from the natural ability of the Fae to control nature and certain weather phenomena, Ashley can command and understand mammals, big and small.

She was permanently relocated to the U.S. from Russia (by a secret group within the Fae Council) as soon as the South area was defined.

Chapter Eight

Completely

Droser

“Do you know what you are?”

“What kind of question is that?” Eck asked, offended.

Droser tapped below his eye. “You are aware of this, right?”

“Yes. You have bionic enhancements.”

“Your aura has a signature I’ve have only seen in three other people before. I recently learned that one of them is not completely human.”

Eck arched an eyebrow. “That doesn’t make any sense. If I wasn’t human I couldn’t be in Meridian.” He took a sip of his beer.

Good thing Droser wasn’t attracted to muscular guys and had a troubling ache for Orfeo, still everything in Eck was stupidly distracting, from his night hair to his pale blue eyes to the way his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. Luckily, the reporter was covered by one of Droser’s stretchy tees, although the nipples were pointy and persistent.

“I didn’t imply you were part Supra. I’m talking about something else,” Droser explained patiently.

“And what does this signature look like?” Eck delivered in his best interviewing voice, leaning toward Droser.

“Have you ever seen an aura?”

Eck nodded. “Not like you though. Just pictures.”

“Okay. Normal auras look more or less like an aurora borealis. You four have something I can only describe as a golden serpent made of light slithering upward and downward from the top of your head to your shoulders in an endless spiral. It’s not that you don’t have a normal aura, but you have this extra thing that I don’t have a clue how to explain.”

“That’s messed-up.” Eck pulled a face. “All right, you said one of us is not completely human, but you don’t know what this person is.”

“Didn’t have the chance to figure it out.”

“Beside that one, do you know the other two personally?”

“Only one and not directly. He’s the husband of someone I know, and the other, a woman, is a teller at my bank. Now, husband boy is a healer. Can you heal?”

Furrowing his brow, Eck shook his head. “But I don’t recall ever been sick.”

“Anything special about your parents?”

“I’m adopted.” Eck shrugged. “For all I know, one or both of them could be a demon.” He chuckled at his own silly joke.

“You don’t look like a demon.”

“Have you ever seen one?”

“Nope.”

Eck made an I-rest-my-case face, finished his beer and stood up. “Want another?” he asked Droser as if this were his house and not Droser’s.

Droser sighed. “Yep. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” Eck walked confidently, disappearing into the kitchen, and returned with two beers in hand. He gave one to Droser and sat back on the burgundy leather sofa. “Do you think it is important to learn what the golden serpent means in the middle of the city’s situation?”

“Not really. But it’s intriguing,” Droser answered honestly.

“True, but you are not the only one with aura recognition and other interesting assessing tools in his eyes. Somebody else must have seen this *anomaly*. Why haven’t they said anything to me before?”

“How would I know? Most people would not tell you shit unless they’re gonna gain something from it.”

“And what are you gaining from telling me?” Eck narrowed his eyes.

“Knowledge,” Droser said simply. “And knowledge always comes handy.”

“Now, I’m intrigued. So, what do we do?”

“There is no we.”

“Aww, come on. Don’t be a sourpuss. I’m good with investigations. Haven’t you seen my show?” He smiled self-assuredly. “What do you do after all?”

“I’m a mercenary.” Droser didn’t need to add that he was the creator of the hottest drug in town.

Eck whistled. “That *is* handy.” He smacked his thighs twice and went to his feet. “Let’s go meet your friend’s husband.”

Orfeo

The traffic jam on the way to exit Meridian was beyond ridiculous. Citizens were abandoning the city like the proverbial rats flinging themselves out of a sinking ship.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Nat asked from the back seat.

Orfeo wasn’t thinking the same—but was relatively close. He looked upward; the cloudy night sky had all the stars hidden. The moon peeked out now and then, midway on her journey west.

“Them fuckers deserve whatever we give ’em. Look the shite they’ve created,” Arthur growled and smacked the steering wheel.

The line moved the length of a supermarket cart. At this rate they would get to Mega-Vegas in two days.

Vicario casually commented from beside Nat, “My question would be, why the fuck are we taking the normal road when we could go through the desert like the badasses we are?”

“You’re absolutely right.” Arthur palmed his head and turned the wheel violently, leaving the line and making a signal for Toma who was driving the jeep behind them with the other members of the team. Their ear communicators were off until they reached their destination.

“I’m all for fucking up Supras, but these haven’t committed an actual crime nor have been sentenced.” Orfeo put a healthy dose of ‘you can disagree and I don’t give a fuck if you do’ in his tone.

“Well, that’s a pile orf ’orse shite. Don’t yeh think planning ter destroy the boundaries’s crime enough?” Arthur looked at him askance. “It’s not preventive because the shite already ’it the bloody fan. Let’s call it retaliation fer all the fucked-up things coming Meridian’s way.”

“Indeed. Those bastards didn’t have to hack into the media grid. I mean, use Star to spread panic, that’s just wrong, man.” Vicario sighed.

“They know what they are doing. If the citizens panic and stop believing in the boundaries they’ll get weak and might not keep the Supras out.” Orfeo was ready for this to be his last run with the Red Vanes. He just came on this one because his big mouth had caused it.

Soon they found Route 283 through their unconventional shortcut. The multicolored lights of the gambling mecca welcomed them quickly after that.

“Are we even sure they’re still in the same suite?” Nat asked. He wasn’t usually this questioning and hesitant. Something about this mission didn’t sit right with him. Orfeo just couldn’t pinpoint what or why.

“As of twenty minutes ago, the suite was still in Tonis Clark’s name.” Vicario sounded confident.

“Nat, if you want ter wait fer us somewhere else spell it out. I’m not gonna ’old it against you.” Arthur looked through the rearview mirror at Nat. “I can’t ’ave you all jittery during a mission.”

“I’m not jittery.” Still, Nat’s small voice didn’t exactly proclaim confidence.

Orfeo turned in the passenger seat to see Vicario elbowing Nat before saying, “You just stay beside me, and you’ll be fine.”

“Stop that mother ’en shite. We all need ter be able ter work independently. ’E can’t be glued ter yehr balls, Vicario.” This time, Arthur kept his eyes on the street.

“I don’t know what the two of you think is happening with me, but I don’t need to be babied,” Nat whined, his protest feeble and uncharacteristic.

“Then quit acting like a pussy,” Orfeo coughed into his fist. He didn’t have the opportunity to rile Nat up all the time.

“Says the man afraid of pussies,” Nat growled, sounding more like his usual self.

“I am not afraid of cats. I just like to keep a healthy distance from them.” Orfeo shrugged and turned back, hopefully ending the conversation.

Frigging cats don’t blink, that’s creepy as fuck.

It didn’t end, though. “Good thing there’s no feline Supras then. You couldn’t be doing this job if those existed.”

Yeah, the bitch is back.

“*Ladies*, save your *catty* remarks for later. This is it.” Arthur parked the jeep away from the Ultra’s main entrance. Jove, Leo, and Toma followed suit a minute later.

They entered through a side lobby (with less traffic) as if they belonged. The garblers in their bags would conceal their weapons, making them read as the contents of common luggage to the hotel scanners.

Once in the elevator, Vicario hacked into the hotel’s main computer. “The suite is still under Tonis Clark and there are three people in there. By the hour we can assume, the vampire is one of them.”

The gadget in Vicario’s hand wasn’t bigger than a playing card (or a Tarot card), and Antha’s words came back to Orfeo with smashing force. “*Destined to do great things together.*”

This was the least convenient time to be thinking about those things, about *what ifs* with Droser, when they were about to kick some Supra ass. Orfeo focused on the now. They exited the elevator and stopped at the suite’s door.

“Command 13-47-39-85,” Arthur said before the suite’s computer could ask their purpose.

“I will not inform of your presence, officers.” The door slid open quietly.

Arthur had given the Mega-Vegas’s law enforcement code to access without disturbance due to a possible terrorist cell or other major conflict situations. The code changed daily, but (with enough time) Vicario could hack into anything with a computer chip.

They moved stealthily inside, and the last thing Orfeo could have been expecting was waiting for them in the lounge area of the suite.

Framed by the enormous floor-to-ceiling window, on his knees, and bare-chested, Tonis had Mike’s and another man’s (whose pointy ears and faintly blue complexion marked him as a Fae) cocks in his hands, ready to take a double plunge. His eyes were closed, and his face had a beautifully lustful expression Orfeo never thought possible on the usually sour mug. The impressive red mandala tattooed between his pectorals seemed to be a bloodied lotus.

“Fuck,” said the Fae as he saw them. Tonis opened his eyes, his fangs descending instantly with a resounding click. Mike hissed a “motherfucker.” The three Supras jumped, spreading out as if a bomb had exploded in the

middle of their suck session. Mike landed on four paws, his tawny Wolf-form brutal and magnificent, his eyes feral.

The Supras' speed would have been dizzying for any untrained human but not for the Red Vanes. They broke in three groups to control each Supra. Jove and Leo chased Mike; Nat and Arthur went after the Fae; and Toma, Vicario and Orfeo blocked Tonis.

"You!" Tonis hissed as his red eyes locked with Orfeo's. "I'm going to leave you dry like a mummy and then send your carcass to your mother." His eyes appraised Toma and Vicario. "These two I'll fuck before draining them."

Mike's snarls and the Fae's whooshes of power around them were deafening and clashed with the war cries of the other Red Vanes, but Orfeo had to focus on the Vampire threatening to bleed them.

"Dinner first, sugar pecs!" Toma rushed to Tonis, his silver vambraces aiming for the Vampire's throat. A basic *Furia* technique since ramming body parts were harder to block or divert than flying or colliding weapons.

Tonis made a swift sidestep, but Vicario was already lunging for his legs. He had them in his grasp for a heartbeat before Tonis swirled, dislodging himself and kicking Vicario in the face. Orfeo shot at close range, calculating the angle of Tonis's next move to keep the bullet in the right direction. Instead of moving left (as Orfeo had expected), Tonis threw himself backward, his hair whipping upward. Toma caught Tonis's arm, bringing him down with a powerful boom and sending his silver-covered forearm down to crush the throat again. The Vampire blocked the attack with both hands; they sizzled and burned on contact. Vicario moved to help, and Orfeo was about to shoot Tonis between the eyes when the floor-to-ceiling window exploded into a billion shards.

Antha and Ashley landed in the room like twin tornadoes, lightning flashing from Antha's hands, Ashley wielding a sword three times her size and her left hand ungloved ready to produce more damage. In that second of distraction, Tonis grabbed both Vicario and Toma by the necks, smashing their heads together. As they fell, Tonis pounced on Orfeo, pushing Orfeo's head sideways to sink his fangs in the unprotected throat.

Orfeo writhed, trying to reach for his knife, but he felt the punctures, signaling his end was truly close. His first thought was of Star; almost instantly her image was replaced by Droser's bionic green eyes as he started to get

woozy by the loss of blood. Tonis's lips were soft on his throat as his consciousness dissolved, and a delighted hum emerged from the vampire's throat.

“No!” someone yelled close to them.

Orfeo didn't know whom.

He was dying.

Chapter Nine

Tentatively

Droser

Orfeo opened his eyes with a start, springing to a sitting position and searching for something that wasn't there. Putting one hand softly over Orfeo's chest, Droser shushed him. "You're safe."

Droser had brought Orfeo to a room at the Monarch after lodging a dagger in Tonis's forehead with relish. He didn't stay long enough to find out what happened to the other people in the room. He was just glad he had decided to pay the freaking Supras a visit.

"Are we in Meridian?" Orfeo sounded weak but alert. He took stock of his surroundings.

"No. We're still in Mega-Vegas, at the Monarch. You had lost too much blood to drive you as far as Meridian." Droser waggled his eyebrows. "Luckily for you, we have the same blood type."

Orfeo closed his eyes and sighed. "What about the others?"

Droser shrugged. "No idea."

"My team..." Orfeo looked at him worriedly.

"The news hasn't mentioned a bloody room at the Ultra..."

"So, there is hope."

Droser shrugged again, this time adding a grimace.

"Why were you there?" asked Orfeo. "Are you following me?"

"Freaking Tonis didn't deposit the whole payment. It was a hundred grand."

"How much was missing?"

"Only got ninety-five."

"You came back for five thousand credits?"

"It's not the amount, it's the principle," Droser huffed.

"That's cute coming from a drug dealer."

“The operative word there is dealer. A deal is a deal.” Droser took his hand off Orfeo’s chest.

Rolling his eyes, Orfeo took the conversation into a different path. “How long was I out?”

“About ten hours.”

“Shit.” Orfeo tried to leave the bed. “I need to get back to Star.”

Droser grabbed Orfeo by the shoulders. “I spoke with her less than an hour ago. She is fine.”

“You don’t understand,” Orfeo insisted.

“Hush, Orfeo. She’s not helpless. She can take care of herself for a day or two.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I’m not staying here with you *for a day or two!*” Orfeo shrugged Droser off.

“That’s not what I meant. Stop being so fucking defensive.” Droser winked and smiled. “I saved your life. I deserve at least a thank-you kiss.”

Orfeo looked at him like he had just sprouted fangs, pointy ears, and fur. “There’s something seriously wrong with you.”

Droser knew that, and there was no point in saying otherwise. “So, no kissy?”

It seemed like Orfeo couldn’t stop the guffaw before it escaped him. “You’re an obnoxious jerk,” he remarked fondly as his guffawing slowed. He slumped back onto the big, fluffy pillows. “C’mere.” He made a crooking motion with his index finger, a naughty grin taking control of his amazing features.

All the tension and dread evaporated from Droser’s body, and he lunged happily into Orfeo’s open arms. Their kiss began languidly, almost in exploration, but soon became earthquake and hurricane and tsunami. Tongues mapped and collided; teeth marked and rewarded; lips traced and conquered.

A million heartbeats later, out of breath, Droser murmured, “I was so worried about you. You have no idea how much you mean to me.” He gave Orfeo a peck, staring into gorgeous iron-grey eyes. “If our blood hadn’t been compatible, I would have gone crazy.”

Orfeo pushed him at arm's length. "You are right. My blood's so rare..." He studied Droser for a moment. "Do you think this is why we are so desperate for each other?"

That thought never occurred to Droser, not even during the transfusion. Had his parents found each other because of their blood type? Was there something preternatural about the RH Null?

"I don't know, Orfeo. All I know is that I feel at home in your arms. The way you look at me is balm and nurture." He shrugged. "I have no logical way to explain it." His lips brushed Orfeo's timidly. "And I don't need an explanation."

Orfeo tensed. "But I do. I can't accept this blindly."

"Why not?"

"The world doesn't work that way. I can't forget who you are. What you are. Your part in the destruction of the last truly human place around us."

Droser looked upward for a second and sighed. "That's so much shit. It's true, I found Star because the Supras paid me to do it, but she gave the information willingly. She seemed very happy to share the way!"

"She's sick!"

"Some people might say addiction is a sickness, but I call it cowardice. It's not something that just happens to you, you put yourself there!" he growled, then shook his head. "Star is not impaired, and she was not forced!"

"You see? This is why I cannot be with you!" Orfeo pushed Droser out of the way and jumped from the bed, naked. "I'm out of here! Where are my frigging clothes?"

Leaving the bed, Droser went for Orfeo. "You don't give a flying fuck about Meridian or Star. Everything you do for her is because you feel guilty. Guilty that she took care of you when your parents abandoned you. Even I could see that the minute you told me, why can't you?"

Orfeo punched him. "You're wrong!"

Droser forgot the searing pain in his jaw and the natural instinct to retaliate. He grabbed Orfeo and shook him. "I'm seeing it in your fucking aura right now! You might lie to yourself, but your aura can't!"

"No!" Orfeo yelled, trying to break free from Droser's grip.

Droser slapped Orfeo and moved a step back, not totally out of Orfeo's punching range.

Orfeo stood there stunned for an entire minute, his iron-colored eyes scowling furiously. His hand found his cheek, and he rubbed it. "You motherfucker," he murmured.

The morning sun entered through a window behind Orfeo, its happy light giving him, for a second, a more brilliant aura as if he were a radiant otherworldly being. Droser's body reacted to the glowing nudity with absurd urgency. "You punched me first, again. I should have knocked your ass out," he said despite of all the blood rushing south.

"You could have tried." Orfeo crossed his arms over his chest.

"I want you horizontal but not unconscious."

"You are an asshole with a one-track mind." Orfeo found and pulled up a pair of underwear that weren't his. He didn't seem to care.

This was not the way the moment should be going. Droser said pleadingly, "Would you listen for a minute?"

Orfeo picked his pants up but turned to look at Droser. "Fifty-nine. Fifty-eight..."

Shaking his head and with a chuckle, Droser said, "I found a way to help Star, to make her leave the drugs behind." Droser saw Orfeo opening his mouth as if to say that rehab hadn't worked before. "I know a healer who can help her." He didn't need to add that the healer was, like Star, not completely human.

Orfeo began pulling his pants up. "If he's at an institution she won't go there."

"He is not."

"Keep talking." Done with his pants, Orfeo crossed his arms over his chest again and gave Droser his full attention.

"He's the husband of a member of my bikers club. His name is Kutra Lapin, and he's been healing in Meridian very successfully for a while now. I think it is really worth the chance." Droser smiled sheepishly.

"Why do I have the feeling you aren't telling me the whole story?"

Droser looked Orfeo straight in the eye. "There's no story to tell."

“You know, I might not have bionic enhancements in my eyes like you, but I can tell when someone is lying. Just because I want to fuck the living daylight out of you during my waking hours, doesn’t mean I cannot see that you aren’t being entirely truthful.”

“You do?”

Orfeo nodded. “You are withholding information about this healer.”

“No. I’m talking about fucking me.” Droser didn’t recognize his own voice. What was it about Orfeo that made him a green, pimply idiot?

“The fact that I think this,” Orfeo moved his hand between them, “has no logic or future doesn’t stop me from wanting you.” He let his arms fall. “This attraction is real, and I’m afraid to let it become more.”

“You don’t look like a person that easily admits to being afraid.”

“I’m not, but what’s the point of telling lies when you can see right through me, or more accurately read my traitorous aura.”

Droser moved closer to Orfeo. “This mess goes both ways.” He tentatively touched the cheek he’d slapped. “Let’s try to help Star, and we can all leave Meridian together. Start anew somewhere.”

Orfeo looked at Droser with big eyes.

His aura shone with the sweet hues of hope.

Chapter Ten

Currently

Orfeo

It was one thing to fight attraction and desire, and another to deny Star the opportunity of a sober life. Orfeo saw the enhancements in Droser's eyes adjust and turn. He knew the other was reading him, learning things about him he shouldn't, and the only weapons Orfeo had were his instincts and skills.

His instincts told him to give Droser a chance, to trust for once. His brain on the other hand wanted him to stay aloof and tell Droser to go fuck himself, even if Orfeo would rather be the one doing the fucking. It was a vicious circle he didn't have a clue how to break.

"Please," Droser said softly.

Why was this pleading such a strong command?

Orfeo put his hand over the one Droser had on his cheek. He entwined their fingers and moved their united hands to his lips, kissing one of Droser's knuckles. "Tell me the real story about this healer, and I'll follow you."

Droser nodded quietly, took a deep breath and started without hesitation. "The last time we spoke, I was in my apartment with Phillip N. Eckhart. He was interviewing some people in front of my building when a fight ensued, and I rescued him."

"Just him?"

"There was a reason for that."

"Keep talking."

"His aura has the same strange signature as Star's. I have only seen that signature in two other people before Star. One is the healer we just spoke about, and the other a bank teller. I rescued Eck to find out if he knew what it was, what it meant."

"And did he?"

"No. Just like Star, he wasn't aware of anything different about him. The only thing he could think about was that he didn't recall being sick ever. He never knew his birth mother because he was adopted when a mere baby."

“So it was a waste of time.”

“Not entirely. We went together to visit the healer.”

Orfeo’s eyebrow hiked up. “Why?”

“Is that jealousy I detect?”

“Don’t try to be cute, Droser. Why did you go with Eck to see the healer?”

“He’s an investigative reporter, and he was intrigued by their signature. He wanted to know if my friend’s husband was aware of it, and if his healing ability had anything to do with it.”

“Nothing to do with Eck being such eye candy,” Orfeo said, trying to keep his tone even.

Droser made a face. “I had the same conversation with that idiot. He thinks everybody pines for him and write sonnets in his name. I don’t think he’s all that.” He grabbed Orfeo by the hips and pulled their crotches together. “I’ve never been into big, muscle-heads, and I’m currently obsessed with a certain lean hottie with a sultry mouth and a cock thick like a wrist.”

Orfeo chuckled and felt a bit of fire on his cheeks.

“Did I mention how much I love his eyes? They are the color of iron and have branded my soul.” Droser’s hands moved to Orfeo’s ass, squeezing it. “Can’t wait for him to fuck me again.”

Body trembling, Orfeo’s boy-parts wanted to come out and play, but he focused on the task at hand. “Stop sidetracking me with your hands and your teasing words. Tell me what happened when you visited—you said Kutra was his name?”

“Tiger, my biker friend, calls him ‘Bunny.’”

Orfeo wondered what he would have called Droser as an endearment in a different life.

“Are you all right?” Droser asked, looking at him worriedly.

“Yeah. So, you and Eck went to see Bunny, and what happened then?”

“Well. I knew he was good. Not just because the other members of the club spoke about it, but with my job I have eyes and ears in many places.”

“I didn’t have a problem with you being a mercenary until Star became a bounty.”

“And I don’t have a problem with you being a Supra hunter even if it probably cost me five thousand credits last night.” Droser shrugged. “We all have to make a living.”

And Orfeo was clear about that, but it didn’t erase what could have happened to Star if she had been any random target. Would she be dead in some alley after she gave the Supras what they wanted?

Droser cocked his head. “You gain nothing with wondering what could have happened. What ifs are not worth your time. Your aura usually shines with pragmatism but sometimes you dwell on things that are out of your control or are truly unimportant.”

“You sound like a psychic, not a mercenary.”

“Aura Reading is a profound art, not easily mastered...”

Orfeo rolled his eyes. “What happened when you two got to Bunny then?”

“He was happy to meet another like him.”

“He knows what he is?”

“Yep. That’s why we need to take Star to him.” Droser took Orfeo’s hands in his. “They have extraordinary powers Star could use once we’re out of Meridian.”

Droser was right; Orfeo didn’t give a fuck about Meridian, except for the fact that it was a place not ruled by the Supras. They could always find a way out of the U.S.

The promise of a healthy Star was a powerful incentive to let this healer, strangely nicknamed Bunny, see her. But what if they could actually find a way to save the city from the attack with these extraordinary powers Star, Eck, and Bunny supposedly possessed? He wouldn’t have to uproot Star and complicate her life with a new place. She told him they moved to Meridian to start afresh, but what if the true reason was that she didn’t want to be around Supras. Saving Meridian, just to keep his mother from a situation that would make her relapse into drugs seemed like a good idea all of a sudden, if the healer could really help her.

“We need to go back to Meridian,” Orfeo said.

“Hey, slow down, hunter.” Droser pulled their bodies together. “Give us a chance to reconnect before all the adventures awaiting us begin.”

Did he have the right to be selfish in the middle of this crossroads? His body, his instincts yelled “Yes!” Orfeo’s pragmatic side was strangely mute, almost as if carefully withdrawing from its usual spotlight, giving silent consent. Should he dare?

Guilt tried to push him into action, find his clothes and leave Mega-Vegas in search of answers.

But Droser held Orfeo in place. “Stop being guilty for a couple of hours. Give me the opportunity to be with you. Be selfish for a change.”

“I can’t forget what you did,” Orfeo murmured.

“I’m not going to say I regret what I did, because I don’t. I regret that it happened with you and that it complicated our lives—this growing thing between us. But remorse is not in my nature. I face the consequences of my actions. I’m not asking for forgiveness. I’m asking for a chance to make it up to you, to give you something else to remember me by and accept me.”

Orfeo was glad Droser didn’t ask to be forgiven. He would have lost any respect Orfeo could have for him. It would have seemed a lie.

“I promised I would follow you if you didn’t lie.”

“I did not lie, and I’m not lying.”

“I know.” Orfeo grinned. “Right now, I’m going to follow you to that bed.”

~ Bad Guys Facts – Mike Hardy (b. 1952 – d.)

Mike was born in New York City, and wanted to eat the Big Apple since a very early age. He comes from a wealthy Werewolf family with its monetary roots in the mines of Scotland. Forced to become a lawyer by his parents, he passed the bar at age twenty-seven but never worked a day as one. He worked as a successful stuntman in Hollywood during the late 1980s and the whole 90s decade of that century.

A hedonist at heart, he’s what’s called in the East (Werewolf) area a Trust Fund Pup. He has his kinky headquarters at the Great Yago Hotel in Mega-Vegas. Not really looking for a mate, but he has a big hard-on for a certain mercenary we all know.

~ Bad Guys Facts – Tonis Clark (b. 1832 – d.)

He became a vampire the last day of 1853 after his creator watched him perform with the (at the time) recently founded *Orphei Drängar*, a Swedish

male choir and singing society. He sang and toured with the group until his blood thirst and unchanging physical appearance made him search for a new place to thrive. His exotic looks opened many doors for him, and he traveled extensively through the Old World for the most part of the following century.

He moved to the U.S. in 1975, and was one of the main instigators of the Suprabeing Mainstreaming, but was pushed out of the Vampire Council for his radical ideas.

Chapter Eleven

Languidly

Droser

“Can we start somewhere else?” Droser’s grin was so wide his cheeks hurt.

Orfeo looked at him suspiciously for a heartbeat, then a wicked gleam took hold of his eyes. “What do you have in mind?”

Droser shrugged nonchalantly, trying to appear a lot cooler than he felt. “This suite has stairs, and I thought it will be kind of sexy to reconnect there...”

“Oh.” Orfeo’s eyes circled the mezzanine where they stood, settling on Droser after a moment with frank enthusiasm. He moved a hand up and down to encompass Droser’s body. “You have way too many clothes on.”

Droser practically tore his clothes apart in his haste to remove them. His cock jutted proudly as the last garment flew away.

Orfeo made an approving sound, swallowing hard, and took Droser’s cock like a handle to guide him toward the stairs. It was a comfortably narrow path, a beautifully designed rail of wood and metal cords that for some reason reminded Droser of a ship’s gangway ladder. They descended until about the middle of it, where Orfeo turned and pushed Droser to sit on a step with his legs apart. Kneeling a couple of steps lower, Orfeo leaned forward and inhaled along the length of Droser’s cock. A satisfied hum emerged from his throat.

Droser trembled, unable to close his eyes, afraid of missing this beautiful image. Heat and glory enveloped his cock head, and Droser bit his lower lip as Orfeo’s cheeks hollowed. Iron-grey eyes peered at him from underneath abundant chestnut-colored lashes. Droser wanted to say something clever, something sexy, but every swirl of Orfeo’s tongue around his glans destroyed another neuron, leaving him speechless, dumber by the second.

A hand commanded his shaft; the other cupped his balls, languidly teasing, sinfully threatening. Droser wanted to reciprocate, but the narrow (even if naughty) confines of the stairs weren’t appropriate for a sixty-nine maneuver.

“If you don’t stop I’m going to cum,” Droser hissed.

“And what’s wrong with that?” Orfeo asked, his moist lips swollen and delicious. “Aren’t we supposed to *not* be in a hurry?”

“It’s not that.” Droser hesitated. “I want to taste you. No. I *need* to taste you.”

Orfeo nodded, releasing Droser’s cock and standing up. His hard cock swung heavily in Droser’s face—a snake enthralling its prey before attacking.

It was difficult to even breathe, but Droser wrangled the few cells still working in his brain and found enough coordination to kiss the leaking tip of Orfeo’s beautiful cock. Sticky and almost sweet, the proof of Orfeo’s desire blasted Droser’s taste buds, making his entire body tremble with anticipation.

Ready, Droser let Orfeo inch forward, savoring girth and length. He gripped Orfeo’s ass to pull that last quarter in, where his lips clashed against silk hair and a furry sac, and his throat met its match. His eyes wetted a little, and he used those solid glutes to control the pendulum Orfeo’s lower body had just become.

A trillion pleasure signals hurried from his mouth to every cell of his body, hardening, reddening, squeezing.

Orfeo put his hands on either side of Droser’s head, becoming co-pilot of the steering of the amazing blow job. “So good, baby. So good,” he hissed from above, from afar.

Droser looked upward and saw hanks of chestnut-colored hair covering half of Orfeo’s face, like a fallen angel who would never regain his heavenly composure again.

Erratic hip motions signaled an upcoming climax, but Droser wanted more, and, summoning a will that was beyond the capacity of his inflamed body, he released Orfeo’s cock. The question mark on Orfeo’s face rapidly changed as Droser turned him around and pushed him upward to balance himself on the rails of the narrow stairs.

“Crazy motherfucker,” came out of Orfeo, full of mirth and mischief as he suspended his body with his hands and feet over both rails, leaving his ass floating at the mercy of Droser’s tongue, teeth, and fingers.

Every lick, every nibble brought out a cheer and a curse. Soon, Orfeo was bobbing and gyrating, meeting Droser’s efforts with equal fervor, until he growled like a wounded beast, “You have two seconds to fuck me or you aren’t leaving this room alive.”

Drunk with power and need and something he was afraid to name, Droser went to his feet and swept his tip over the well-prepared entrance, his fluids

more than willing to be lubricant and viaticum. With the first breach, Droser let instinct and Lady Lust guide his weapon and wrapped his arms around Orfeo's torso. "You drive me crazy. You make me want to be more than what I am," he whispered breathlessly into Orfeo's ear.

Orfeo groaned and pushed his body down to receive more till Droser was completely sheathed inside him, both paralyzed in that infinite and intimate first instant of the deepest connection. Locked as one, Droser almost died as he felt powerful muscles tighten around his cock; the sublime squeeze torture and liberation, doom and redemption, agony and salvation.

Their auras mingled and entwined, and thus began the most private of battles, between their bodies, minds, and the urgency of this growing craving that was beyond their understanding.

The stairs were just the first stop of their consummation journey. By the time their forms were able to recover their individuality, there was no surface of the suite without a trace of the fracas. Covered in sweat, sperm, and happiness, both, Orfeo and Droser, panted heavily, staring at the ornate ceiling of the suite and holding hands, their fingers firmly intertwined.

Orfeo moved Droser's hand to his lips and kissed the back of it, chuckling. "Are we cursed with a stairs fetish now?"

"If that's our only curse we must consider ourselves blessed."

Propping himself on an elbow, Orfeo stared at Droser. "What if we could extend that blessing to Meridian?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said this Bunny guy has powers, and if cured from her addiction Star could have them too."

"Uh-huh." Droser tried to focus, but he was utterly sated and still floated in a cloud of bliss.

"Well, Star, Bunny, and Eck have powers that could deal with the Supras."

"I don't know about that. You know they're gonna send armies to conquer the city."

Orfeo's face fell, and that sight was painful to Droser.

"There's a fourth person with that signature. Four is better than three, right? Do you think we have enough time to plan something?" Droser would do his best to give Orfeo at least a gleam of hope.

“Thank you.” Orfeo brushed his lips over Droser’s. “I think we have some time yet. Something that has been up for a hundred years like the boundaries cannot be weakening so easily. We need to go back to Meridian, pick Star up, take her to Bunny, and find this fourth person.”

“Whoa, what’s with the bullet list?”

“And that’s the short version.” Orfeo snorted.

Droser pasted on a feigned sad face. “I thought we’ll get at least another round of...” He turned his forefinger and thumb into a circle and used his other forefinger to make a back and forward motion inside the circle. “...you know.”

Orfeo narrowed his eyes and scrunched his brow as if he didn’t understand what Droser meant. “Huh?”

Droser blew a hank of sweaty hair from his own brow. He huffed, “Seriously?”

“You need to be more specific.” Orfeo tried to keep a straight face, but couldn’t, and sniggered unapologetically. “The guy I met in some stairs back in Meridian was pretty graphic with his words.”

With a swift movement, Droser was on top of Orfeo, pinning him to the fluffy carpet. “We’re not leaving Mega-Vegas without another round of ass pounding.”

“That’s more like it.” Orfeo arched an eyebrow, but the spark in his eyes was wicked and lustful. “Wait a second. Is that an order?”

“No.” Droser shook his head quietly. “But I have a groveling technique that may sway you easily.” He grinned.

“Really?”

Droser nodded in silence and lowered his face toward Orfeo’s cock, which seemed pretty enthusiastic to aid and abet him.

They left Mega-Vegas the next day.

Chapter Twelve

Irreparably

Orfeo

Tiger opened the door, and they found Bunny shimmying and belting out:

Witches are bitches

No time to pray

Witches are bitches

Find fault on May Day

With a swirl and a flourish

Your heart will be dust

Refuse to be astonished

Your end's but a bust

“Ahem.” Tiger cleared his throat.

Bunny turned around and genuinely smiled at them. “Hi! The house computer didn’t say you were here.”

“I wanted to surprise you. Droser brought another Nephilim.”

Even if Orfeo had just been around Tiger for less than an hour, the grin on his face and the sparkle in his eyes as he stared at Bunny spoke of a love that was powerful and selfless. Now he understood what he had seen in Droser’s bionic eyes, and his resolution to find a way to make their situation work out (not just for Star but perhaps for his and Droser’s sake) became stronger.

The healer walked toward them, extending his hand to Star first. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sister. I’m Bunny.”

Tiger chuckled. “How do you know it ain’t the boy?”

It was funny that Tiger called Orfeo ‘boy’ when he and Bunny were probably the same age, even if Bunny was more muscular and wore glasses (something that was becoming fashionable again).

Bunny and Orfeo studied each other silently for several heartbeats. Bunny said confidently, “There’s power in him. A strength that comes from surviving adversity, but he’s not one of the Nephilim.”

“I’m Orfeo.” He offered his hand to Bunny. Bunny took it with a nod.

Orfeo knew he was a survivor but never thought he was anything but ordinary in the power department.

“Fate is a very strange thing.” Bunny gestured for them to sit. The three sat together in a comfortable sky-blue colored sofa. “Tiger and I have been in Meridian for almost three years and only recently other Nephilim have surfaced. I’m afraid this is related to the general chaos drowning our home.” He sat on the arm of the chair occupied by Tiger. “Oh, but you are the woman the Supras keep broadcasting saying ‘the boundaries will fall.’”

“You know it’s the Supras?” Droser asked.

It surprised Orfeo that they hadn’t spoken of this before.

“Who else would do something like that?” Bunny answered with a verbal shrug.

“You’re right, baby. Them fuckers would resort to anythin’ to destroy Meridian,” Tiger said with a huff.

“The question is, could you do something with your powers to save it?” Orfeo looked straight at Bunny.

The healer nodded. “I discovered what I was when the power burst out of me to destroy a bunch of Vampire hovercrafts to defend innocent people. It was raw and unfocused, but now I have great control over what I can do. Still, we don’t know exactly what we’ll face yet. The more of us able to protect the city the better.”

“That’s why we brought Star, so Eck, her and you could try to do something together,” Droser offered. “There’s a fourth person with your same signature. We will figure out a way to involve her after Star is cured.”

“I know she came voluntarily, but does she want to be helped?” Tiger intertwined his fingers with Bunny’s.

“I want you to exorcise the demons haunting me,” Star said unexpectedly. “I don’t know how to do it on my own.”

Releasing his husband’s hold, Bunny stood up and offered his hand once more to Star. “We’ll cast them away together.”

Star put her hand in his and went to her feet. “Thank you.”

“I don’t know how long this might take, so I recommend you make yourselves comfortable.” Bunny said this looking at Droser and Orfeo, and then turned to Tiger. “You were planning to make ribs today, weren’t you?”

“Yep, and finger lickin’ Southern style mash potatoes.”

“Keep those two,” Bunny gestured with his forefinger, “busy then.” He left the room with his arm around Star’s shoulders, whispering things in her ear.

Orfeo was concerned, but he didn’t have time to fret because Tiger was saying in his booming Dixie accent, “Alright, kittens, there ain’t magic in this house, so let’s get crackin’.”

While Orfeo simmered a very interesting sauce, Tiger basted ribs, and Droser mashed potatoes, a loud crash came from the room where Bunny was working with Star.

Orfeo sought Tiger’s eyes. Tiger shrugged. “Ain’t nothin’ to worry about. I’d say Bunny is havin’ it pretty easy in there. Other times you hear commotion from the beginnin’.”

This didn’t assuage Orfeo’s concerns one bit. He found Droser staring at him with an undefined expression on his face. Droser offered, “I’m sure he knows what he’s doing.”

“I hope so.”

“Huh, y’all need to chill out. Even if she’s a Nephilim too, Bunny knows how to neutralize her. No need to make a fuss.”

Orfeo turned the burner off. “It’s done.”

“And so are we,” said Bunny as he opened the door and pushed Star out softly.

It was absurd, but Star looked as if she had gained twenty pounds. Her hair was vibrant, her cheeks were rosy. There was a pale luminescence to her skin as if she had been scrubbed with diamonds. Even her white dress that had reminded Orfeo of a hospital gown before now seemed like a white summer cloud. He ran and swept her up, happily twirling both of them around and laughing. “You look exactly like you did in my childhood memories!”

“I feel brand new.” Star giggled.

“How will I ever be able to repay you?” Orfeo told Bunny. His heart was bursting with emotions: happiness, relief, gratefulness. He couldn’t believe his eyes.

“With understanding,” Bunny uttered gravely.

Orfeo stopped and put Star on the floor. There was something odd in the way Bunny peered at him. He felt Droser’s eyes on him, and what he saw in those green bionic eyes was support and comfort. Still Orfeo felt that something ugly was about to damage this joyous moment. “What do you mean with understanding?”

“Come with me, and I’ll explain.” Bunny gestured back to the working room.

Orfeo sensed Droser moving in their direction.

“Stay where you are, Droser. He might need you after, not now,” Tiger barked.

“No,” Droser said, grabbing Orfeo’s arm.

The grip felt fine, even if it had been rough, it was a confirmation. Orfeo gave Droser a shy smile. “I’ll be okay.” Droser let go, and Orfeo entered the room. Bunny closed the door behind him.

The room was a run of the mill office, and Orfeo couldn’t find anything broken to account for the crash they heard.

“I think you need to sit down.”

Orfeo plopped into a two-seat sofa.

“Your parents didn’t abandon you. They were killed,” Bunny said in that grave tone that was at odds with his youthful appearance. “But it’s a complicated situation. I could show you, but I think it’s better if I just explain it to you.”

“What do you mean by *show me*?”

“I can let you see what happened.”

“Then why waste time talking about it?”

“You’re right. I could always snap you out of it.” Bunny loomed over Orfeo. He put his left palm over Orfeo’s forehead. “Do not close your eyes.”

The room started to spin, quicker by the second, until everything inside it was a sickening blur. By the time it stopped, Orfeo was ready to throw up when he realized they were in a different place. It was unknown but vaguely familiar.

A man had a younger version of Star by the arm and was shaking her. “You’d do as I say. You are mine!”

Orfeo didn’t have any pictures of his parents, but he recognized the man as his father because he was a tall, muscular version of him.

“No. I can’t be with you anymore,” sobbed Star. “Mirna isn’t right. She’ll kill us if she discovers us.”

“Exactly. If you refuse to be with me, I’ll tell her everything, and then we’re all fucked.” He flung her to the floor. “Tonight, at midnight. Like always.” He walked out of the living room.

Star was left sniffing and hiccupping, folded in an almost fetal position.

Orfeo entered the room, small and with big eyes, dragging a teddy bear, big enough to be his double and with a red bow on its head. “Starch?”

Grown-up Orfeo choked up a little. He had forgotten he used to call Star “Starch.” Then he remembered the name of his bear: Jenn.

Star unfolded herself, cleaning snot and tears with the back of her hand. She smiled weakly. “I’m here, sweetie.”

“Why you crying?” Orfeo asked in a tiny, wavering voice.

“I fell asleep and had a bad dream.” She caressed Orfeo’s plump cheek.

“With monsters?”

“Just one, sweetie. A beautiful angel that turned into an ugly monster.” She hugged Orfeo and the bear. “But I’m awake now and everything is going to be all right.”

“We pray to guardian angel before night-night.” Orfeo stared at her, confused. “Angel protect little children.”

“Yes, love. Angels are good. It was just a bad dream. Bad dreams always end.”

Orfeo swept a tear from under Star’s eye with his chubby finger. “I’m hungry.”

Star chuckled. “How about some nuggets?”

“Yay!” Orfeo and the bear jumped happily.

Star went to her feet, carrying Orfeo and the bear in her arms. They exited the living room, and it began to spin again.

When it stopped, they were in a bedroom that looked like a hurricane had just passed through it. Star was on the bed huddled protectively around Orfeo, who was crying and screaming and squeezing Jenn the bear in horror.

Star, Jenn, and he were against the headboard, and a woman, cursing like a minion from Hades, tried to jump onto the bed, a giant cleaver in her hand. Orfeo’s father was holding the woman back, but he was laughing manically—equal to a person taunting you with a rabid dog, ready to unleash it at any second.

“Mirna no, Orfeo is your son. You carried him inside you!” Star yelled.

“Nah,” the woman thrashed, “he’s the product of your unholy congress with my husband. And you both shall pay with your filthy lives.”

“Yes, darling,” Orfeo’s father cackled, “they must pay. They have offended God.” He released Orfeo’s mother, triumphantly pushing her onto the large bed. “Be the messenger of His wrath!”

“No!” screamed Star, and Orfeo cried, “Mamma!”

Something like a solar flare burst out of Star. Time seemed to slow down, and Orfeo saw how the tongue of fire expanded forward, disintegrating first his mother and then his father. Both sets of ashes floated upward and then vanished. The fire recoiled into Star with a swooshing sound as if it had been sucked by a powerful vacuum.

Star and Orfeo were paralyzed, gawking at the place where Orfeo’s parents had been a minute before.

Orfeo was the first to react; he tilted his head and looked at Star, his eyes watery but somehow calm. “Angel took them?”

Her body trembling, Star giggled softly. “I think so, sweetie.” She hugged him fiercely. “I think so.”

Once again the scene spun until Orfeo sat back in Bunny’s office.

Everything Orfeo had eaten for the past month came flying out of his mouth. He threw up within an inch of his life. When there was nothing else, just the contractions of his abdomen trying to push out something that wasn’t there,

Orfeo cleaned his mouth, with the back of his hand, and sighed, “She killed my parents.”

Bunny’s eyes moved from the mess on the floor to Orfeo; he didn’t say a word, just stared.

Orfeo pulled his hair with both hands. “She killed my parents.” All sorts of emotions warred inside him. Many were things he didn’t even know were possible.

Bunny leaned on his desk wordlessly, his face unreadable.

“She saved me. If she hadn’t killed them I would not be here.”

Silently, Bunny nodded. After a heartbeat he added, “She began to do drugs because one day she woke up and saw that you looked so much like your father that all she could feel was pain and guilt and insane remorse, not for killing them but for being weak and not having the strength to withstand his seduction.”

“I have damaged that poor woman irreparably.”

“She’s not damaged anymore.” Bunny moved from the desk and put his hand on Orfeo’s head, slowly ruffling his hair. “There’s no need for guilt. I helped her to move beyond that moment. You should be beyond it too.”

“She’s the only mother I know,” Orfeo confessed.

“And you’re her son. Revere her for what she is and forget how your union came to be. You saved each other.”

Orfeo agreed; he couldn’t feel anything but love for Star, and love surely was stronger than guilt. He peered at Bunny. “I must go to her.”

Bunny took his hand from Orfeo’s head and chuckled amicably. “You need to clean your mess first.”

Ouch.

Chapter Thirteen

Stoically

Droser

“So what’s your plan?” Tiger asked.

“We invite her to lunch and dump the truth on her.”

Tiger snickered. “Sweet *Fanaqua*, I know subtlety ain’t your forte but geesh.”

“It’s not like I’m meeting her brandishing weapons,” Droser grumbled.

“You know, Bunny used to be a Vampire companion back in LA, and one of the first things he taught me was that there was a time to be blunt and a time to be charmin’. Blandishin’ not brandishin’.”

“Then we should have brought Orfeo. He’s the charmingly cute one.”

“Man, you’re in deep,” Tiger said, shaking his head. His grin was seriously annoying.

“I didn’t need back up for this. Why didn’t you go with them to practice in the desert?”

“Cause I’m the cute one in *this* relationship. There might be need for winkin’ and smilin’, and you’re as charmin’ as the petroglyph in Central Fountain.”

Tiger was bigger and at least a head taller than Droser, and they both had *bardagamaður*. It would not be an easy feat to smack the shit out of the transporter, so Droser just pursed his lips and entered the bank.

Things were always busy in Petrarch, so they waited in line for twenty minutes until their turn finally arrived. Droser gave his credit chip to the teller, who was all creamy cocoa skin, wheat-colored wavy hair in a dignified bun, and big smoky-shadowed hazel eyes. He smiled, hoping it had been gallantly, and Tiger snorted beside him.

She gave both a winning smile. “Welcome to First Meridian, Mister Sundew. What can I do for you today?”

Droser looked at the holo-board above her head. Her name was Joy De Souza. It wasn’t a common name so Droser wondered why he couldn’t

remember it before. “Hi, Joy. I need to make a withdrawal. Five thousand in gold.”

“Excellent. Give me a moment to make the request.” She typed on her holo-keyboard, her long manicured nails making rhythmic clicking sounds.

“Thanks.”

After a minute or two (where Joy small talked them), they heard whirring behind Joy and a little door opened, a mechanical hand pushing a box forward. Joy took the box and put it on the counter; she opened it to show the contents to Tiger and Droser, twenty gold bars—middle finger long and flat like crackers. Each bar engraved with the number two hundred and fifty, announcing their market value in credits. “Here you go, Mister Sundew.” Her smile was radiant even if it was supposed to be business-like.

Tiger pushed Droser away from her window with his hip. “Say, Miss Joy, any plans for lunch?” His teeth were blinding and his eyes flashed in a way that if they weren’t in Meridian one would think he was casting a spell on her. His blond hair shone in a way that would make the gold on the counter feel like mud (if it could actually have feelings), and it was styled in a very Fae fashion. His rocking hunter’s green jacket made him look powerful but accessible.

Droser forced himself to not roll his eyes and blow the whole thing up.

“Oh my,” Joy said, in a husky voice that didn’t have anything to do with bank transactions. “Violet eyes like those are not a daily occurrence.”

With a wink, Tiger offered his stupidly big hand. “I’m Tiger Jansen, Mister Sundew’s associate.” His grin was rakish and demolishing.

Good thing Droser didn’t like big guys and was already in love with Orfeo.

Joy took his hand, and Tiger pulled hers out of the window and kissed the back of it.

Subtle my ass.

“It would be very nice if you have lunch with us.” Tiger’s drawl was getting thicker by the second; the only thing missing was the Confederate flag waving behind him.

Her syrupy giggle was simply delicious. “I’d be delighted,” Joy offered a tad breathlessly.

“We’ve got a table at Randy’s.”

“Twelve thirty hours okay?”

“Your time’s our pleasure,” Tiger drawled, his Southern allure reaching critical mass. He again kissed the hand he hadn’t released and then let go.

Joy fanned herself. She turned to Droser and dismissed him with a “Thank you for your business, Mister Sundew” after she put his credit chip on top of the box with the gold bars.

Droser pick up his things and nodded politely. He didn’t speak any other language than English, but he knew curse words in about twenty tongues; he was ready to use them all on Tiger.

Tiger nodded too in a way that looked as if he was tipping his hat in a Civil War movie. A weird noise escaped Joy, and Tiger and Droser turned around, exiting the bank.

They crossed the street to Randy’s. “She’s probably expecting you to fuck her blind in the restroom.” Droser gave Tiger a sideways look.

The transporter’s grin was diabolical.

“You wouldn’t.” Droser scowled at Tiger.

“Oh, hell no. I love my Bunny and cock too much.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

Droser had been through this with Eck. Bunny should be the one sitting here with them to give her tangible proofs. “There is no real reason for anyone to mention it. It’s not an anomaly within the boundaries of Meridian because it’s not Supra related. Have you ever been to any of the Supra controlled areas?”

“Yes. I’ve been to all actually. I do business on behalf of the bank outside Meridian,” Joy offered succinctly.

Tiger and Droser looked at each other. “That sounds like somethin’ someone higher than a teller should do,” Tiger commented, grinning.

They were past the flirting, and Joy had been a bit disappointed learning that Tiger had a husband (she probably wouldn’t have given a fuck if it was a woman), but they were all business now.

“I have special skills that you might say are very *convincing*.” She gave them one of her radiant smiles, but this one was somehow wicked as she cocked her head a little.

Apparently there was more to her than met the eye, which made Droser like her more.

“We’re tellin’ you this because we want you to join us and help in defendin’ the city.” Tiger took a bite of his steak.

“What’s in it for me?” Joy asked after swallowing and dabbing her mouth with her linen napkin.

“Imagine your status as heroine if we save the city,” Droser offered.

Joy arched an eyebrow. “And if we don’t?”

“We all die. What difference does the date make?” Droser wasn’t one for suicidal missions, but what he felt for Orfeo gave a new meaning to the word “survival.”

“Y’all need to stop talkin’ about dyin’ like it is a silly thing.” Tiger took a swig of his beer. He continued, “Miss Joy, you know you’re special, even if you ain’t aware of how special. Those convincin’ skills of yours are most probably merely tappin’ a fraction of your entire power. Join us and learn how to reach your full potential.”

Tiger sounded like one of those self-improvement gurus that were proliferating over the East area. The Werewolves were the most respectful lot of the Supras, but the humans around them still thought they had something to achieve in their lifetime.

Become your best self! It’s possible!

Their mistake was to think that best was equal to good—the biggest freaking misconception ever.

“Hmm, famous or fucked,” Joy uttered in a debating tone.

“There’s always room for being *famously fucked*,” Droser grumbled.

Tiger kicked him under the table. Droser didn’t yelp or jump or move at all; he stoically absorbed the pain radiating from his shin.

“Well, that has implications neither one of you is going to resolve.” Joy giggled in that smoky way of hers.

Both Tiger and Droser grinned agreeably. At least she had understood there would be no sexual gratification from this side of the arrangement. They could always throw her in Eck’s arms; he seemed eager enough to be adored by any living thing, including animals, plants, and, why not, artificial intelligence.

“Miss Joy, it’d be nice if you meet my Bunny before you make any final decision.”

Before Joy could respond, a waiter with a tray full of steamy dishes slipped close to them. Smoking meats, rice, potatoes, and other unidentifiable things flew in a short arc to the tune of the waiter’s embarrassed “Ack!” The guy landed on the mosaic floor, and his pants tore apart—his cock, balls, and ass blooming out of them like some magical creature’s birth as his legs were in the air. And (to add insult to injury) a great percentage of the steamy food alighted on the humiliatingly exposed area, wrenching out a real scream from him. Other waiters and waitresses ran to help their fallen comrade. Most patrons were visibly concerned: women with their hands over their chests and sorry looks on their faces, men peering out to see if they could be of assistance.

Droser was holding back his laughter; the show had been amazing. Usually he wouldn’t have given a sloppy fuck and laughed out loud, but he reined it in for Joy since he didn’t know how his reaction could affect the deal they were trying to seal with her. Tiger had seen him in action so it was moot point with him.

Then he heard and felt it, the snicker-snort, the trembling of the table. He turned to Joy. She was holding the table as if it were a lifeline, her lips pressed in a tight line, her cheeks puffed, and her eyes all watery. She was holding back her own laughter really hard, but she looked almost swollen and purple with the effort. It was worse than when you saw another person yawning because instinctively you wanted to yawn too.

Their eyes locked, and Joy and Droser exploded in gales of cackle and snort, smacking their knees and making their chairs swing ungraciously.

“You two are sick,” Tiger blurted, seemingly disgusted.

There was a word for people like them that wasn’t “jerk” or “asshole,” but in the middle of his enjoyment of the waiter’s mortifying faux pas he couldn’t remember it.

Droser only knew he absolutely loved Joy De Souza.

~ Red Vanes Facts

The R.V. are a Supra Hunting Agency, created in 2077 by a group of *Furia* Masters to eliminate those outlaw Supras who have been convicted of crimes against humans and escaped Suprabeing jurisdiction. There is no extradition

between Suprabeing Areas. This is a private agency, and they might appear guns-for-hire, but they do not accept jobs unless there is proof that the Supras to be hunted had committed a crime.

~ Red Vanes Facts – Arthur Flax (b.2082 – d.)

Five-foot-eight. Beard, Pints, and Flannel enthusiast. He comes from the Hardihood Borough (colloquially known as New East End). Legend says he was the first newborn to cry as the (at the time) recently erected Cathedral of St. Mary-le-Bow's bells announced its first mass. He became leader of the Red Vanes when his uncle William Flax was killed by a rogue Fae near Inspection Point 167 in 2122. Trained in martial arts and black ops by the Lithuanian Secret Police, he's also a Great Master in *Furia*, the ancient defense techniques that allow humans to fight at Suprabeing speed.

~ Red Vanes Facts – Toma Vuls (b.2100 – d.)

Six feet tall. His family came to the U.S. in the middle of the Suprabeing Reform from Eastern Europe. He was born in the Pontus borough. At a very early age, he demonstrated excellent martial arts abilities and was sent by his parents to study *Furia* in Quebec, where he became a master with surprising speed. His day job is modeling, and he is one of the few humans who have been on the cover of Wizardry Moda, the biggest fashion magazine not just in the North (Warlock) area but in the entire Suprabeing U.S.A.

A member of the Red Vanes since 2122. He's pansexual, so watch out.

Chapter Fourteen

Cheerfully

Droser

By the time First Meridian closed that day, Bunny, Orfeo, Star, and Eck had returned from the desert and waited to meet Joy, chatting excitedly with Tiger and Droser in a green area of the bank's plaza.

There was a moment in old movies when the mousy girl with glasses and the hair bun and the unflattering clothes discarded all that clumsiness away as she walked in slow motion with a rock guitar riff in the background and probably a screamed "YEEAHHHH." Imagine that times ten as Joy sauntered toward the group because there was nothing mousy or unflattering about her. She unfastened her tucked up hair, shaking her head to unleash that leonine mane, and unbuttoned her white blouse, letting her rocking ta tas breathe better. A bike vroomed not far from them, and it was the perfect score for her introduction. "Hello, I'm Joy."

"Damn you're hot!"

That came from the last person Droser would have expected to blurt such words. Star.

Joy winked. "And you're seriously cute." They both laughed.

Droser introduced all to Joy.

Eck's hand lingered a bit longer than necessary in Joy's hand, and they looked at each other as if there was some kind of history between them. This was confirmed by the anger flashing in their auras for a second, even the golden snakes around them had a strange tinge in that moment; both went dutifully neutral after that.

Apparently, Bunny noticed this too. He cleared his throat, then said, "Joy, are you down for business or prefer some drinks first?"

"It was a long day. Drinks would be fabulous."

"First round of shots is on me," said Orfeo cheerfully.

The group moved to Íñigo Montoya Sports Bar not far from the green area of the bank's plaza. Once inside, a hostess ushered them to a comfortable table

in the middle of the raucous place. The décor was Andre the Giant does Broadway with some sports paraphernalia thrown in to make the ample bar sporty-looking. The Golden Siroccos, the most popular Fae soccer team, were playing against the Four Winds, the champions of the Lupine League. Just because they were in a sanctuary for humans it didn't mean the citizens of Meridian were incapable of appreciating the sportsmanship of the freaking Supras. And the people inside the bar seemed as remote to the panic drowning the city as the far away mountains.

"I wonder how much time we have before them boundaries' fearmongers try to shut down places like this." Tiger commented after the perky waitress left to bring their shots and fries.

"That would depend on the outcome of this meeting." Joy adjusted her ta tas and sighed. "I'm ready to bail, but I will hear you first. There's something intriguing about this *supposed* nonhuman part of me."

"I'm going to show you that I have powers," said Bunny. "But I'm not going to teach you how to use yours unless I have your word that you will stay and help us." He tilted his head and pushed his glasses up.

"It ain't distrust. It's just a matter of knowin' the boundaries of a relationship." Tiger winked.

"Yep, It'd be a bother to have to hunt you down after we are done with Meridian." Droser grimaced. Joy cocked her head at him.

"We all can see that there is strength in you. Sometimes it's okay to not be selfish." Star put her hand on Joy's shoulder.

Joy gave her a soft smile. "Most survivors are egotistical. They seem to think they earned that right."

"You are removing yourself in that statement, why?" Eck asked, just missing his microphone for the interview.

"You should know better than to ask such a silly question." Joy's face turned to granite, and her eyes narrowed menacingly. Her aura exploded with rage.

"If there's a beef between the two of you, y'all need to sort it out before we can work as a unit." Tiger helped the waitress to distribute the shot glasses and to place the trays of fries. "Now behave and drink up."

They all picked up their drinks, and Orfeo, who had been silent since they entered the bar, toasted, "To success!"

“Success!” was the group response since it seemed ambiguous enough.

Droser had known how good of a healer Bunny was, but Star’s recuperation still amazed him. After only a few days, she looked as if she had never been ravaged by drug abuse. She had gained some weight, was radiant, and in control. She wasn’t hot like Joy, but there was a natural beauty to her that made Droser understand the whole debacle with Orfeo’s father.

Orfeo had been younger than Droser when he lost his parents, but that was another thing they shared, and it made them relate to each other even more.

As the alcohol level in their blood increased, they all were more relaxed, not only enjoying the match on the holo-screens and talking about their livelihoods but starting to form a bond that was clearly visible in their auras.

Droser took Orfeo’s hand. “You look very nice in white.” The white outfit was the sleeveless fashion version of a pilot’s jumpsuit, and it accentuated all Orfeo’s assets deliciously.

“Virginal?” Orfeo teased.

“Edible,” Droser hissed in his ear. He felt Orfeo’s body tremble. His free hand moved to the front zipper of Orfeo’s jumpsuit, and he was about to lower it a bit when a smack startled him.

“Y’all can go and have your private fun,” said Tiger booming. He had smacked Orfeo on the back too. “Bunny and I can handle Miss Joy.”

“What about Star?” Orfeo squeezed Droser’s hand.

“Oh, she’s having fun. I can take her home later,” Eck offered; his face unnecessarily close to Orfeo’s as he had tilted himself forward to speak.

“Yes, mercenary. Go with your boyfriend.” Joy swatted Droser’s ass. “At least someone is getting some tonight.” She giggled. Eck was about to say something, and she pointed at him with her forefinger. “You keep your mouth shut.” Eck put both hands up in surrender. Joy patted his cheek. “That’s how you look your best, with your pretty lips together.” She tapped Eck’s closed mouth with the previously accusing finger.

There was definitely a story between these two, but Droser had more interesting things to concentrate on. “We get a cab and go to my place,” he told Orfeo.

“And your bike?”

“The parking space is paid until tomorrow at fifteen hundred hours.”

Orfeo sought Star’s eyes, and she gave him a grinning nod. “All right,” he said. Then his communicator beeped, and he drew his wrist up. The word LEO appeared on the screen. “I should take this.” He untangled his fingers from Droser’s and walked away from the group.

A few minutes later, Orfeo returned—his face grave and his eyes shiny. “Jove just died in the hospital. They couldn’t do enough to save him after Mike almost chewed him alive.”

Fuck. Dead guy tromps horny guy.

~ Red Vanes Facts – Leo Arenas (b.2077 – d.)

Five-foot-seven. Stubborn but loyal, he can be your best friend and the worst enemy of your enemies. He was born in the East (Werewolf) area and his parents brought him to Meridian at the tender age of four. He’s descendant of a long line of Supra Fighters in both paternal and maternal sides. He has a bit of Brazilian, Peruvian, Venezuelan, and of every other country of the South American region in him. A rumor states that he might be of Inca Royal lineage. He became a *Furia* instructor after studying it for seven years in the Aztec Alliance. He is a member of the Red Vanes since 2120. He has bionic optical enhancements.

~ Red Vanes Facts – Vicario Hense (b. 2103 – d.)

Six-foot-one. Although his mother was a New Orleans Voodoo Queen and his father from Nigerian Royalty, he calls himself a Nubian Prince. He was brought to Meridian from the South (Fae) area at age six. A scientist at heart, he received his doctorate from the University of Meridian when he was fifteen years old. At seventeen he became a *Furia* Master and joined the Red Vanes a year later. When he’s not hunting outlaw Supras, he assists at the Research Department of the Merovingian Institute. He also has bionic optical enhancements.

Chapter Fifteen

Stupidly

Orfeo

“How are you holding up, Leo?”

“Fucking Werewolves,” spat Leo.

“We knew this was an option. We signed for a risky job,” Orfeo stated matter-of-factly. It was sad that Jove and Nat had died, but as insensitive as it sounded it was an occupational hazard when hunting Supras.

“Did you know his real name was Giovanni?” Leo stared at Orfeo, his voice had a distant whine in it and his bionic eyes (so different from Droser’s) were a little watery.

“In all honesty, I always felt Jove was kind of a contrived coincidence. You know, like a stupidly handsome man named Adonis.” Orfeo chuckled softly.

“He was my friend, Orfeo.”

“I know. I’m sorry this happened.” Orfeo patted Leo’s back, but Leo hugged him. He froze for a moment, then hugged him back. It was awkward for Orfeo to give condolences, especially when it was something that hit them as a group, even if some members were closer than others.

Nat’s death had been instantaneous. Orfeo learned after he returned to Meridian that Ashley had touched him with her blood hand and Nat exploded like an overinflated balloon. Vicario had been devastated; compared to him, Leo was acting like a distant relative.

Droser was at a respectful distance from them, and Leo sent a murderous glance his way. “What is he doing here?”

“He’s with me.” Orfeo hadn’t meant to sound miffed, but he did.

“You’d better be alert with that fucker.”

“He saved my life.”

“And he started this fuckfest. If he hadn’t taken Star to the Supras, Jove and Nat would still be alive.”

“That’s not fair.” Orfeo didn’t want to get angry with Leo, but he was being unreasonable. “We cannot blame people based on ‘what if they haven’t done this thing or the other.’ That’s utter bullshit, and you know it.”

Leo didn’t answer, just growled and crooked his index finger at Droser, calling his attention. Droser moved from the wall where he had been leaning. Before Droser could take the last step to reach them, Leo spoke—his voice a murderous thunder. “Two of my friends have died because of you. If you hurt Orfeo in any way, shape, or form I’m going to make you suffer. There’s no place on Earth where you’ll be safe.”

“Love might be blind, but its nose works perfectly fine, and it smells fish.” Droser tossed those words at Leo with a contempt Orfeo had never heard from his lips before, his face an impassive mask.

Wait a second—is he saying what I think he’s saying?

What an underhanded way to imply that he loved Orfeo. Did the drinks make him say something like that?

Both sets of bionic eyes scrutinized and assessed. Orfeo knew they were reading one another’s auras; he was sure he was about to be in the middle of a fist fight. This wasn’t the time nor the place for that. “I’m going to kick the living daylight out of the first one to throw a punch,” he barked.

A passing nurse gave Orfeo a scowl. It wasn’t like they were in a patient’s room; they were in the hospital lobby, waiting for Arthur to come with the papers to claim Jove’s body and take him to the cremation facility.

The two snorting bulls grimaced and put their hands up in silent surrender; their physical resemblance was disconcerting to Orfeo, who hadn’t noticed that before. Droser and Leo had similar caramel complexions, although Leo’s evoked Amazonian lost tribes while Droser’s screamed Caribbean resort genes.

A commotion at the entrance made all three turn in that direction. Star, Bunny, Tiger, Joy, and Eck had just entered surrounded by people trying to get Eck’s autographs. Orfeo was surprised Eck’s subjects hadn’t pushed the others out of the way in their frenzy to worship their master.

This made Orfeo wonder what kind of people were at the sports bar that they didn’t notice Eck, or at least as visibly and loudly as those congregated at St. Cyprian of Antioch Hospital. He locked eyes with Star, who giggled as a woman asked her (shouting) if she was Eck’s girlfriend. Her outer appearance had changed so much that people couldn’t match her with the woman the Supras had been broadcasting to promote the weakening of the boundaries.

“Why is Star with that idiot?” Leo’s dislike of Droser seemed to shift toward Eck.

“We are working on a project together.” Orfeo said succinctly.

“You hate all good-looking guys as a general rule or just those around Orfeo?” Droser cocked his head with a defiant grin pasted on his face.

Leo gave Droser a once over and scoffed. Luckily, Arthur chose that moment to appear beside them. “I don’t think ’e’s all that,” Arthur said with a chuckle.

“Exactly my thoughts,” agreed Droser.

Arthur stared at Droser strangely for a moment then nodded. “The ’ospital’s sending the remains to the Crematorium. Jove’s scheduled for twenty-two hundred hours. If we go now we could say a few words before he’s disposed. You coming with us, Orfeo?”

“Yes,” Orfeo said quietly. “What are we doing with the ashes?”

“We should find that fucking Werewolf and make him swallow them,” Leo grumbled.

“So your *friend* could become Supra poop later. You’re a moron.” Droser shook his head. “If you wanna die I have a thousand quicker ways to help you with that, out of the kindness of my dark heart.”

“Apparently you’re the suicidal one,” Leo lashed out and moved forward, chest first.

“Would you two cut it out!?” Orfeo smacked both on the back of their heads.

“‘Oo wants ter fuck ’oom ’ere?” Arthur sneered, rolling his eyes. “You *ladies* need ter retract your claws, adjust your tiaras, and behave. I don’t ’ave Orfeo’s patience.”

Toma sidestepped the mob clamoring for Eck’s attention and reached Arthur, Leo, Droser, and Orfeo. “Effing Eck is a hunk!” he blurted, laughing. “I was ready to elbow some bitches to grab his ass taking advantage of the disturbance, ha ha ha ha. Then I saw you guys.”

Droser guffawed. “At least one Vane is team Eck.”

“What’s this intruder talking about?” Toma pointed at Droser with a flick of his thumb.

“The girls ’ere were discussing Eck’s level of ’otness,” Arthur offered.

“You’re including yourself in that statement, right?” Droser crossed his arms.

Orfeo didn’t know if Droser was amused or offended. Sometimes it was hard to tell with him. “Jove is scheduled at twenty-two hundred hours at the Crematorium. You are coming, right?” he asked Toma.

“Of course. Let me call Vicario so he can meet us there.” Toma moved away from them and the noisy agglomeration to make the call.

Hospital security magically appeared to disperse Eck’s adoring acolytes. The Nephilim and Tiger finally reached Orfeo’s group.

Joy had her arm hooked on Star’s, and both were giggling. “So cliché of them to think he has two girlfriends,” Joy huffed.

“I’m just happy that they thought I was pretty enough to be in the same league with you.” Star’s voice was full of mirth and mischief. It made Orfeo really happy to see her so lively.

“Aww, hun. You’re the cute girl-next-door. I’m the buxom bitch. Life would be so boring if we all looked the same.” Joy pinched Leo’s cheek. “Don’t you agree, cutie?” In her heels, she was about a half head taller than him.

Uncharacteristically, Leo sniggered and patted her hand, saying, “Yeah.” Joy had been totally handsy since the bar, and he probably saw in her aura that she was in a harmlessly drunken state of happiness.

Toma was coming back from his conversation with Vicario when all the holo-screens around the lobby changed their different shows at once. The coat of arms of Meridian preceded a grave-looking Mayor. “Fellow citizens of our great city, I am here to inform you that there is no need for concern about your security. These rumors of Suprabeing armies approaching the boundaries of Meridian are nothing but the sick and twisted perversions of perfidious minds hell-bent on creating chaos for their own benefit.”

“What is she trying to do? We know the Supras are coming. Shouldn’t she be looking for ways to protect the city instead of keep telling us that everything is all right?” Bunny asked to no one in particular. The silence around them made his almost whispered comment seem like a shout. Tiger shushed him.

“I want you to be certain,” continued Mayor Kurosawa, “that we are moving all our resources to keep the peace and quench all acts of violence that are attempted against the lives and properties of the citizens.”

“I think she’s full of shit. Instead of protecting shops what they need to do is send the guards to the boundaries and be fucking ready.” Joy sounded more pissed off than worried. Star patted her arm.

“This office will not tolerate any disorder that disturbs the harmonious day-to-day activities of our great city.”

“Mayor KK seems ter ’ave a severe case orf the denials,” concluded Arthur.

“More like explodin’ mendacities,” huffed Tiger.

“I’m pretty sure she has a hovercraft ready to cart her ass away from Meridian at the first sight of an invading army.” Droser grab Orfeo’s hand and squeezed it. “We need to do something.”

“Trust this office and be calm. Have a good night.” Mayor Kurosawa finalized her little speech with a forced smile. The coat of arms of the city appeared once more.

“*Sed Non Solus Separari*,” said Orfeo under his breath.

“What?” Droser’s eyes found his.

“Separated but not alone! The motto of the city,” Orfeo told Droser, an idea forming in his mind. “Eck, you’re cozy with the Mayor. You think you could get us an audience?” Orfeo asked Eck but was looking at Bunny. Bunny nodded, understanding.

“What is she, a freaking queen?” Leo grumbled, and Arthur looped his arm around Leo’s neck with a soft, “Easy, Tiger.”

“There’s only one Tiger here and that’s me.” Tiger chuckled, and Bunny elbowed him.

“Eck?” Orfeo focused on Eckhart; all the others did the same.

Basking on the attention, Eck said with a rakish grin. “Of course I can get us a date with the Mayor.”

Joy rolled her eyes.

With Jove’s ashes in tow (Leo seemed unable to part with the ashes until they had decided on a final destination), Droser, the Nephilim, the remnants of the Red Vanes, and Orfeo were finally facing Mayor Kira Kurosawa, a bit after midnight. In contrast with the put-together, in control persona she had portrayed in her broadcast, she looked tired and disheveled, and her frown wasn’t welcoming.

“You are certain the Suprabeings are determined to invade the city? What proof do you have?” the Mayor asked.

“She’s the one who gave them the way to destroy the boundaries,” Bunny, their de facto leader, pointed at Star.

“I should have you arrested.” The Mayor scowled at Star, which with her slanted eyes turned them into mere slits. A hank of her black hair fell over the almost shut windows.

“Dear Mrs. Mayor,” Eck oozed charm, “I think you can find forgiveness in your heart for our friend Star. The Supras would have found a way with or without her. You’re a woman of action, let’s find a way to save the city and forget how this all began.”

Orfeo couldn’t believe the Mayor was falling for Eck’s dulcet bass.

A giant white Persian cat jumped onto the Mayor’s desk. Now Orfeo hoped he hadn’t come up with this idea.

The Mayor nodded (somewhat starry-eyed) as she longingly focused all her attention on Eck. The man did have a corny effect on people since even the bodyguard behind her looked like they would rather be employed by Eck instead of her.

“We came to offer you our services, not to discuss the probabilities of an attack because we are certain it’s going to happen,” Bunny intervened. “Four of us have a power that can keep the city safe, but we also need the citizens to feel secure, and we think it would be a good idea to ask for help from our neighbors.”

Well, at least three of them knew how to handle that power, they had just met Joy. Orfeo was sure that whatever training she had wasn’t in Nephilim Power Handling.

“What power is this you’re talking about?” Mayor Kurosawa asked while she petted the ugly, white fuzzy monster.

“Direct me to something you’re not truly fond of within this office,” Bunny told her, his face impassive.

She thought for a moment, then said, “That bust of the previous Mayor near the door.”

The office was long and rectangular, so the entrance was at least forty feet away from where the group stood close to a floor-to-ceiling bullet proof window.

All heads shifted toward the bronze bust, and Bunny's hand flung in that direction like someone throwing a dart, and the bust blew into smithereens. The Red Vanes, Joy, the Mayor, her bodyguards, and Droser gasped. Now the most disturbing thing about those thirty seconds was the fact that the explosion had been contained in a translucent ball of power, so the fragments didn't scatter around the office.

Orfeo had seen Bunny in action, teaching Star and Eck to control their thoughts to pulverize specific things within a group and other such things, but he had never seen this display of control.

The Mayor punched commands on the holo-keyboard over her desk. A holo-screen appeared and information moved quickly over it. "It says here that you're a healer. What is this destructive power, and can you use it against bigger things?"

"Ha, that ain't nothin'. He destroyed about five Vampire hovercrafts two years ago, and at the time he didn't even know he had the power. Now it would be like this." Tiger snapped his fingers.

"What we are doesn't matter. We can help you protect the city, but it is important that humans are involved to maintain order and a sound collective consciousness." Bunny arched an eyebrow without giving her more explanations.

"And why is that?" Mayor Kurosawa asked.

"Because the boundaries can only be breached if people stop believing in them. The power of the boundaries comes from the faith the citizens of Meridian have in them. They were created to sustain from that certainty and the Supra's fear. The chaos and the massive exodus have already begun to weaken them." Bunny pushed his glasses upward.

"In other words, Lady Mayor, *the shite's 'bout ter 'it the fan,*" said Arthur with a grimace.

~ Red Vanes Facts – Giovanni "Jove" Pirelli. (b. 2087 – d. 2127)

Six-foot-four. Born in the Scarpia borough, he worked as Head of the *Furia* Learning Center of Meridian. He was a *Furia* master since 2107. He was in charge of recruiting new members for the Red Vanes.

Formidable in battle, he was usually called to give lectures and do demonstrations outside the U. S. He was in charge of training masters to

promote and extend the knowledge of *Furia* throughout the continents. His disciples had opened *Furia* centers around Europe, Africa and many parts of Asia. His legend is known in Japan as Biggu Kyoreki, the Big Boulder.

~ Red Vanes Facts – Nat Natsei (b. 2098 – d. 2127)

Five-foot-two. A Nenet (Samoyed) descendant, he was born in the Mongoose borough. Fifth son of the fifth son, Nat was destined to great things. He became a *Furia* Master at age seventeen, and assisted Jove Pirelli to run the *Furia* Learning Center of Meridian since 2117, when he also became a member of the Red Vanes.

His sassy and sarcastic demeanor always landed him in trouble. His physical appearance was his biggest advantage to get out of trouble because his opponents underestimated him by his size and thin, anime-looking frame.

Chapter Sixteen

Unabashedly

Droser

Five days later, Supra armies headed toward the four cardinal directions of Meridian. The Warlock army was coming from the north, the Fae army from the south, the Werewolves from the east, and the Vampires from the west. They were invading together, but they didn't trust each other enough to engage side by side.

Each Nephilim had been dispatched to deal with a Supra army. Bunny and Tiger had their own scores to settle with both Vampires and Fae, so Bunny went west to take care of the fangs, while Tiger journeyed south to face the people of the green with Joy and Vicario.

Droser wasn't happy that he was stuck with Eck; he should have been with Orfeo and Star, who had gone north to stop the Warlocks accompanied by Arthur. Luckily for Droser, freaking Leo had gone with Bunny. Still, the Vanes' Raffle had left him with Toma, and he and Eck were flirting so much Droser didn't know if he wanted to shoot them or vomit, or shoot them *while* vomiting because he was already nauseated.

"You know, when we become heroes of the city, some restaurant is going to make a sandwich in our honor: the Eck-Toma Club Sandwich." Eck chuckled.

Of course Eck's would be the first name in that culinary aberration. Good thing Eck didn't say the Eck-Toma-Dro Club because then Droser would become Public Enemy Numero Uno after killing Meridian's Beau.

"Hmm, and what's gonna be in that club, sugar pecs?" asked Toma with a *chuffle* that would make tigers feel like pussies.

"A bit of this," Eck grabbed Toma's forearm and squeezed, "and a dash of this," he laughed, moving his other hand to pinch Toma's ass.

Toma jumped minutely, but his grin was huge and saucy. With a swift movement he cupped Eck's balls over the very expensive bottle-green trousers the reporter was wearing. "And a whole lot of this." He moved closer to Eck, a hairsbreadth separating their lips. "I always thought you only liked girls."

"I like all genders," said Eck, with a wicked wink that was almost a caress.

“Ahem,” coughed Droser. “You two can get a room *later*. Right now it’s about saving the city and holding the Werewolves back until help arrives.”

Toma let go of Eck’s balls and straightened his red camouflage vest, and Eck rolled his shoulders backward inside his pink designer shirt like someone untangling from an unwelcome physical restraint even if desire and mischief mingled in his aura unabashedly. There was desire in Toma’s aura too, but it was mixed with a weird self-pride Droser couldn’t quiet decipher.

“Please turn your com-devs on,” Droser said, hoping that if the others could hear them, these two would stop their foreplay. He tapped the little gadget in his ear.

“Do you see them?” Orfeo’s voice came through the link, quick but serene.

Separating Meridian and its boundaries, desert spread, and Toma, Eck, and Droser awaited the Werewolves there, between inspection points forty-four and forty-five. It was the first night of a new moon and very dark, but Droser could see a faint dust cloud moving toward them in the distance. The group was about a hundred feet from the magical border that thanks to Droser’s bionic eyes had a faint golden glow. “Nope. Just the dust they’re creating as they shuffle toward us.”

“Wolf-shuffling!” Vicario guffawed from the south side of the boundaries.

“Oh, hun, we’re going to have fun with our pointy ears.” Joy giggled from the same area.

“Tiger, don’t do anything reckless. Stay close to Joy,” Bunny warned his husband from the east side.

“C’mon, baby. You know I ain’t gonna do nothin’ stupid. If them fairies cross the boundaries it’s gonna be hexes and spells and shit sproutin’ from the ground.” But instead of concerned, Tiger sounded like he was rubbing his hands in expectation of an entertaining battle.

“I’m going to devour some Fae stew. I owe it to Nat,” Vicario rumbled his statement like a vengeance oath.

“Yeah, I’m ready to fuck up some Were-mutts on Jove’s behalf,” Toma said, leering at Eck. Eck blew a kiss at him.

Apparently, Tweedledum and Tweedledee were determined to make Droser sick with their nonsense.

“I’m the one who should be there,” protested Leo.

“Where, Leo? We’re all over the place,” teased Arthur in his dense Hardihood accent.

Leo’s answer was a wordless scoff slash huff slash growl.

“How eloquent,” taunted Droser. A message flashed on his wrist communicator two heartbeats afterward: DON’T. It was from Orfeo. Before Leo could riposte, Droser said, “I promise I’ll kick some Were-ass in your name and Jove’s, Leo. Be sure of that.” The words had come sweetly with just a tad of I-don’t-really-give-a-fuck that only trained people could have noticed. Leo would have seen it in Droser’s aura if they had been face to face.

“Thank you,” said Leo, not just plainly reluctantly but as if Bunny had just made him thank Droser using a well-aimed elbow.

Droser heard Tiger snort from the south. That was the clue that Bunny had actually elbowed Leo.

“Star, hun? Are you all right? You’re awfully quiet.” asked Joy.

“She seems ’kay to me, but she’s using a stick ter write symbols on the ground. I just ’ope it’s not a spell ’cos that would blow us ter bits within the boundaries,” Arthur commented casually enough.

“Let’s not forget that Star had visions before she knew how to wield the Nephilim power. She knows what she’s doing,” clarified Bunny.

“We’re seeing lights. Our pointies are getting closer,” announced Vicario.

“And now we ’ear galloping,” Arthur said, not too thrilled.

Droser hated horse-riding warlocks.

“Vampire hovercraft are silent but—,” said Bunny.

“I have a reading,” Leo finished Bunny’s sentence.

“We hear something too.” Eck tapped Droser’s shoulder and pointed toward their left.

“It sounds like effing tanks,” singsonged Toma.

“The fuck?!” said Arthur, Vicario, and Leo at the same time.

“Do not fear,” said Eck, “Bunny trained us well. We know what to do. Remember what he did to that bust at the Mayor’s office. Works for tanks too!”

His enhancements adjusted, and Droser saw the tanks. Twenty tanks and about three hundred Werewolves approached them. “This is it,” he said to the

others. "When we are done, first round is on me." He turned his com-dev off and walked away from Toma and Eck. He voiced a message to Orfeo's communicator, "I don't know if the L word is appropriate between us already, but if we survive this shit, I'm going to say it so many times, you're gonna regret meeting me in those fucking stairs."

"Aww you're a softie," said Eck, startling Droser.

Droser scowled, pointing at Eck. "Shut the hell up."

"Guys?" Toma called.

Eck and Droser turned to look at the boundaries; the werewolves were about to reach the limits, using their quick shimmering motion, leaving their tanks behind. They stopped perhaps fifteen feet before the danger zone. If the boundaries were truly weakened and they could cross, they would be at the city proper in less than twenty minutes at their Supra speed.

"Wolves, you know our mission," shouted a man in the guttural voice of the Werewolves (after he moved from the ranks), pacing in front of the invaders. "Have faith that Meridian's boundaries are getting weaker by the second, enough for us to cross it. Do not worry about that humming you're hearing. It's the final throes of dying magic!" He wore light clothes, almost as if he were about to sit in some sunny resort close to a glistening pool and sip a colorful drink. That outfit was about to be torn apart with his transformation. "Have faith in our power, and we will succeed! Charge!" he cried, raising his left fist.

Deafening snarls rose as three hundred Werewolves changed simultaneously. The ripping of so many clothes added a macabre peal to the animal sounds.

"Fuck!" said Toma.

"That doesn't begin to describe it, handsome," agreed Eck.

"Well, Eckhart, you're a show off. This is the time to truly shine." Droser cocked his shotgun. The other two did likewise.

The first ten or fifteen Werewolves that tried to cross the boundaries were disintegrated, their bodies turning to ashes in a silent flash of lightning. The following took longer to char and be pulverized, but Droser was impervious to their agonizing whimpers. As the seconds turned into minutes the destruction was slower until one wolf finally limped badly burnt but whole, little yips of pain emerging pitifully from him; the ones after that were less and less hurt.

Eck, Toma, and Droser killed those able to cross before they could get too close to them. It was probably by the hundredth wolf that the boundary became completely ineffective. Droser saw how the hole in the faint golden barrier became bigger and bigger as its fabric curled up as if consumed by fire.

Snarling and snapping and growling, the multicolored mass of fur frantically raced toward them.

“Arghhhh!” came out of Eck, as he expulsed energy out of him in an explosion of power that felt like a scorching wind as it rushed past Droser. The Werewolves burst into flames in a massive conflagration of firecrackers.

It was different from the silent, odorless magic of Meridian’s boundaries because the smell of burning flesh and fur was soon overwhelming. Before they could think too deeply about the stink, more Werewolves rushed at them, too many to aim accurately. Eck sent another flare of power to the closing Supras, all combusted except two that launched themselves upward, evading the energy touching the line. They landed, ashes floating unhurriedly behind them, and before Droser could blink twice were pouncing at them, their growls demonic and brutal.

The bigger of the two, a silver-furred beast was descending upon them; Toma surged forward and met him almost in the air, grabbing him by the front paws, twirling with furious grace, and flinging the monster away. “Take that sucker!” His elbow met the next wolf’s snout, stopping his flying advance and giving Droser a chance to shoot the beast in the neck; blood showered him. The Supra didn’t reach the floor, because Eck touched him and the Werewolf shrank into grey ashes instantly.

“Fuck,” panted Eck, “there are still like fifty left.”

“Don’t forget the effing tanks!” added Toma.

“Now they know we’re here. See? They are circling back to regroup.” And probably using their mysterious Supra powers to communicate among them; Droser’s team was running out of time. He changed the magazine of his rifle. The others did the same.

“You know what? Let’s attack the suckers before they pull themselves together!” Toma shouted with an exhilaration that was contagious.

“Are you sure?” asked Droser. It actually seemed a better idea than waiting for the tanks to get closer and back the Werewolves up.

“Fucking A!” Toma burst.

“Let’s do it then!” yelled Eck. “One. Two. Three!”

With demented war cries, the three started to run toward the Supras, Toma and Droser shooting their rifles and Eck throwing incandescent balls of power that whooshed dangerously. Yelps, snarls, and howls met their cries.

As both forces clashed, claws found Droser’s leg before he could shoot the Werewolf attacking him. The pain was blinding, but Droser couldn’t let it slow him, and then he saw it; the tanks were crossing the boundaries and firing.

Toma finished the last wolf; he was covered in blood and Droser didn’t know if all of it was Supra. A missile was about to reach them when Eck conjured a translucent dome around them, the missile turning into a grainy substance similar to sand but glittery as broken glass. Droser didn’t know why but the boom of the cannons moved the situation to another level of reality and desperation.

“That was effing close!” yelled Toma. “Where are the motherfucking Mexicans?”

The Aztec Alliance had supposedly been dispatched to help the south and east borders the moment Meridian’s satellites had spotted the Supras’ mobilization toward the city. They should have been there already. In that moment, Droser remembered he had his com-dev off and turned it on.

“—their way. Y’all need to keep it together a bit more!” Droser heard Tiger shout as the communication was reestablished.

“Orfeo, Star, are you all right?” Droser asked, yelling desperately.

“Hell, yeah!” Orfeo whooped his answer. “Star blew their first contingent to smithereens! You should have seen it, it was a frigging nuclear bomb!”

“I’m not sure what the fuck a Nephilim is but this woman was crushing them Warlocks before they threw the first ’ex after breaching the boundaries.” Arthur sounded agitated and amazed.

Droser spat the grainy stuff out as more missiles were disintegrated since the tanks were all aiming directly at them now. “Are the Canadians there?” he asked Orfeo.

“Yes! They are bombarding the Warlocks, and Star is counteracting the spells the Supras are sending toward the hovercrafts. She’s amazing. I wish you were here to see her.” Orfeo said the last part in a tone that was intimate, almost a caress. Catcalls and wolf whistles emerged from three cardinal directions.

Droser chuckled, not embarrassed at all.

“Woohoo, go Mexicans!” exclaimed Joy

“What’s going on?” asked Bunny from the west.

“Their hovercrafts are pulverizing the Supras!” Vicario was the one to answer.

That meant an Aztec Alliance group shouldn’t be that far from the east boundaries, where Toma, Eck and Droser were still crouched under Eck’s power dome.

“Miss Joy kept the fuckin’ Fae at bay like a pro. Damn, they didn’t know what hit them!”

“Didn’t have the chance to kick some Fae ass?” Incredibly, that was Star, asking no one in particular at the south boundaries.

“Heck yeah,” Tiger said. “Vicario and I used several as punching bags before Miss Joy turned them into Fae dust.” He laughed riotously. Vicario and Joy joined the commotion with their own exuberant laughter.

Droser’s leg was bleeding profusely and hurting like a bitch; he couldn’t ask Eck to heal him because they needed the dome around them to save their lives.

“Are you done, Bunny baby?”

“Hunky-dory, love.”

“I didn’t have a chance to use my sword,” grumbled Leo. “The moment we saw the hovercrafts, Bunny grabbed them with something I can only call a controlling ray and smashed them to the ground on the Vampire army. It was as if he was playing Whac-A-Mole and the hovercrafts were the mallet. By the time the Canuk Coaliton showed its nose, we were sitting on the jeep drinking beer and waving at them.” Leo huffed the last part.

A Werewolf missile finally found their vehicle; all that was left were flaming pieces falling like a minute meteor rain over the desert, adding little to the cannon explosions lighting the dark sky.

“There goes our transport,” Droser snorted just to say something, trying to keep his mind away from the excruciating pain in his leg.

“Hold on, Droser. I’m sure help is close,” Orfeo offered, his hopeful tone touching something fragile Droser didn’t know he had in him. A chorus of optimistic agreements from the others accompanied Orfeo’s words.

His team was the only one left with Supras attacking them. If help didn't come fast they might need to think about an alternative because things weren't looking bright for them. This was one of those moments when people were not supposed to be selfish, but for fuck's sake if Droser wasn't wishing someone else was in his place.

"Look! Hovercrafts," Toma shouted, pointing to their right.

"Are they friend or foe?" asked Bunny, concern clear in his voice.

"We'll know in a second," Droser said, looking at Eck, who was turning a sickly shade of purple. He didn't know what made him do it but, he hugged Eck tightly. "You can do it, Eck. Keep focused," he said in a frantic whisper.

"Yeah, sugar pecs. The minute this is done, my body is a party for you." Toma laughed as he embraced Eck from the opposite side. He and Droser were now holding Eck really hard as if trying to squeeze the power out of him.

Droser adjusted his enhancements as the hovercrafts neared, blinking and spitting the grainy stuff away. Soon the golden eagle devouring a snake was clear on the hovercrafts' flanks. Alas, those belonging to their allies weren't the only flying monsters fast approaching.

Before help could reach them, the chromed hovercrafts of the East area were firing at the Aztec Alliance, turning their attention from the tanks on the ground. One Supra hovercraft moved directly above Toma, Eck, and Droser, and pooped a big freaking bomb.

"NOOOOO," was all Droser heard before an explosive surge of energy burst from Eck, flinging Toma and him away, through the air in an arc.

Night swallowed Droser as his head met what must have been a huge desert rock.

Chapter Seventeen

Romantically

Orfeo

“Are you an angel?” Droser said as he opened his eyes.

“Since you aren’t usually that corny, I’m going to chalk it up to the fact that you almost cracked your head open.” Orfeo felt relieved that Droser had finally awoken.

They were in Bunny and Tiger’s loft, and the Nephilim, the Red Vanes, and Tiger were getting ready to meet Mayor Kurosawa and other dignitaries for a formal, public commendation.

“Would you believe me if I said I was worried about you?” Droser asked, trying to move to a sitting position.

Orfeo was ready to believe and trust Droser after that desperate message he received before the battle began. “I’ll have to think about it.” He smiled, then asked, “How do you feel?”

Droser finally sat upright and winced as his head touched the headboard. “Like I have a lump the size of Meridian on the back of my head.”

“That’s because you do have one.” Orfeo chuckled. “Bunny fixed your leg, but left a nice scar, so you have a memento of the Battle of the East. He hinted that you will survive if you aren’t as shallow as you look.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll have to go around with that lump deforming your head for a couple of days.” Orfeo grimaced. “We were quite sure a mercenary like you wouldn’t mind a battle scar.”

Droser arched an eyebrow. “Of course I don’t mind a scar, but that doesn’t sound like something Bunny would say, Tiger perhaps, but Bunny...”

“Oh, I said it.” Bunny entered the guest room with a broad smile on his face. He was dressed in a very expensive tuxedo and looked like a movie star ready for the red carpet. He carried a long travel bag.

“Where are you guys going?” Droser eyed Bunny and Orfeo, moving his head side to side several times.

Orfeo didn't have his bow tie or jacket on since he was waiting for Droser to come to his senses before getting completely ready.

"We—" said Bunny, making a circling movement with the forefinger of his free hand to encompass all three "—are going to attend some business together. Eck got you this."

"If it is what I think it is, I don't wear suits," grumbled Droser.

"Aww, kitten, you don't wanna be the odd man out," boomed Tiger entering the room. "Now be a good soldier and get dressed, 'cause I'm hungry and it ain't gonna be no food until the big shots have their say."

"You mean speeches?" Droser asked with big eyes.

Orfeo held his snigger back. Droser didn't look happy.

"Now Tiger, if you're that hungry you can eat before we leave. I don't see anybody stopping you," said Joy, entering the room with Star in tow.

Tiger snorted and punched her softly on her bare shoulder. Her dress was a Mega-Vegas-escort-meets-Hollywood-starlet in golden tones number that was marvelous on her mocha skin.

The room was becoming crowded, and Droser's eyes were getting narrower by the second. "What if I don't want to go?"

"That's a rocking cashmere-leather blend tuxedo I bought for you." Eck pushed Arthur into the room and made a beeline to the bed. "It's expensive. Don't be a sourpuss and enjoy the attention."

"Hey, if he doesn't wanna go, don't force him. That's his prerogative." Leo rested on the threshold with his arms crossed over his chest. More than supportive, his tone had been "I'd be glad if we left him here."

Orfeo was pissed off for a moment, then resolved to have words with Leo later. In the meantime, he took Droser's hand and kissed it. He leaned forward and whispered in Droser's ear, "You come with us and afterwards we could go to a place with a very nice set of stairs." He didn't miss the tremble his words produced in Droser.

"All right!" exclaimed Droser. "Everybody out. I need to get dressed and this is not a stripper show." He waved the group away.

Orfeo left the bed and nudged the others toward the door with a wide grin. If they weren't almost late he would totally give Droser a preview. He gave Droser a longing stare before closing the door behind him.

The limousine crossed the regenerated boundaries through Inspection Point 133 toward a brightly illuminated area with a stage. From the top of the stage hung banners, with the symbols of the four Supra areas and the coat of arms of Meridian in the center. The Trihowl, the Pentastar, the Serpent Sun, and the Fanged-daggers waved inconspicuously in an event that was rarely seen since the Supras usually did any kind of gathering among them on the down low.

And as public spectacles went, this was the show of the century. Supra representatives would be here to sign a new pact with the city of Meridian to legally reinforce the mystical laws that protected it. News crews from all over the world mingled with those of the Supra areas.

Orfeo plugged the program chip to his communicator and as the hologram with the details emerged, saw that even delegates of the Aztec Alliance and the Canuk Coalition had been invited and would receive some kind of commendation from the Supra governments.

“Mayor Kurosawa asked us to be there when the new spells and enchantments were done,” Bunny told Droser. “You missed that one.”

“How long was I out?” Droser asked in comical surprise.

“Seventy-two hours, hun.” Joy winked. “You were starting to smell, but there was Orfeo to take care of that skinny body of yours.”

For a reason he couldn't quite fathom, Orfeo felt heat rose to his cheeks. It wasn't like the group didn't know they were lovers. Mistakenly, he chose that moment to set eyes on Leo, and his teammate narrowed his eyes, not in a complete scowl but in something vaguely resembling an animal ready to pounce. He had enough, and since Leo kept doing this in front of the others, in front of them was where Orfeo was going to call him out. “What is your problem, Leo?”

“I don't like him,” Leo growled unapologetically.

“And that's your prerogative,” Orfeo said, using Leo's favorite word, “but your open animosity is unnecessary.”

“It's plain, run of the mill jealousy.” Droser grinned malevolently.

All eyes moved toward Leo; he crossed his arms over his tux, a scowl in full force now.

Orfeo had never given Leo a reason to think he was romantically interested in him. He had always maintained a certain distance from the team because he knew things got messy when you got involved with the members of a group

like theirs. Vicario didn't mention his attraction to Nat, and now he was trying to fake it, but it was clear that he was devastated far more than any normal friend should be. And if Droser was saying that it was jealousy, he was probably reading it in Leo's aura.

"It's your right to not like Droser, but you don't have the right to rain on their parade. We're a team and you cannot have his back if you hate the man he loves." Vicario patted Leo's leg. "If you had feelings, you should have said something. Now your window of opportunity is gone. Be a good sport."

"You were in love with Nat, weren't you?" Leo asked, contrite.

"Of all people, you should know how I felt since you can read my aura as much as I can read yours. We didn't speak of these things and now we both lost what we love." He sighed, an action that was really odd in bulky Vicario. "We can see what Droser feels for Orfeo and what Orfeo feels for him. Let's honor our commitment as team members and friends and be happy for them."

Orfeo wasn't sure if it was right for all the people in the limo to know how Droser and he felt for each other before they had discussed it clearly between them. Although it was good that Vicario and Leo had disclosed how Droser felt since Orfeo was at a disadvantage there without bionic enhancements to read the mercenary's aura.

"Well said," boomed Arthur, patting Vicario on the back loudly.

Star, who looked ethereal in her pink gauzy dress, leaned forward and took both Leo's and Vicario's hands. "True love is not far. Just keep your hearts open to the possibilities that lie beyond your comfort zones."

"And while you decide to cross the comfort lines there's plenty of tail to nail!"

"Toma!" said more than one person inside the limo.

"What?" Toma grinned, with a touch of innocence not even remotely possible on his handsome face. His eyes rested on Eck and both waggled their eyebrows.

"For fuck's sake. If I slept for three days those two should have been done by now," Droser murmured.

"You really missed a lot," said Orfeo, smiling. "Toma was also out for a long time after Eck destroyed the Werewolf hovercrafts, and the Nephilim had been really busy after the battle ended."

“I can’t say that I’m sorry... yet,” said Leo, looking at Orfeo and Droser sideways, sour-faced.

“I don’t want you to be sorry. I want you to accept reality and move on.” Orfeo didn’t smile and his tone was severe.

“I’ll try.”

“That’s enough... for now,” Droser said as the limo stopped.

“Alright, we’re here, kittens. Game faces on, y’all are about to be photographed and recorded and that lasts for eternity!” Tiger laughed and hoisted the door up, taking Star’s hand after he stepped out. Bunny exited after them and offered his hand to Joy to help her out.

“Am I your arm-candy tonight, sugar pecs?” Toma asked Eck, mischief couldn’t begin to describe all the things written on his face and the sparkle of his hazel eyes.

“I’d be offended if you weren’t.” Eck exited the limo and kissed Toma’s hand as he pulled him out.

Orfeo didn’t understand what Droser half hissed, half huffed under his breath.

“Do I ’ave ter ’old your ’and as we walk the carpet?” Arthur asked Vicario, fluttering his eyelashes. His blond beard sparkled in the limo’s low lights.

Orfeo couldn’t help it and snicker-snorted before being able to cover his mouth.

“Punching you in the face would be a nice headline for the tabloids, don’t you think?” Vicario growled, but his eyes were tinkling with humor. They exited the limo together and waved for the recording devices floating outside.

“Shall we?” Orfeo put his hand on Droser’s.

“I love you,” Droser whispered and leaned in for a kiss.

It was nice to hear the words coming out of him. “I love you too,” Orfeo said before their lips brushed. He pulled the limo door down and closed it. “I think we can spare a couple of minutes before going out.”

~ Nephilim Facts – Star Danzig (b. 2092 – d.)

Born in the Warlock-controlled seaport city of Duluth, Minnesota (Lake Superior’s shores), she raised Orfeo after the death of his parents. She was his

live-in nanny and loved him from the beginning as if he were her own child. She was nineteen when they moved to Meridian.

Both live together in Old Dodge City borough after they moved from Scarpia, following Star's first visions when Orfeo was about fifteen years old. Also, around this time, Star started to use recreational drugs, which ultimately turned her into a drug abuser. The moment *Deus* hit the streets it became her drug of choice.

Chapter Eighteen

Instinctually

Droser

The speeches were said.

Courage was extolled.

The pact was sealed.

Commendations were given.

The interviews were over.

Mayor Kurosawa and her bodyguards, the four head representatives of the Supras, the Nephilim, the Red Vanes, Tiger, Orfeo, and Droser retired to a heavily guarded navy blue tent behind the humongous stage.

There were *hors d'oeuvres* and drinks tastefully displayed for their enjoyment; the illumination was between cozy and business-meeting-like. Soft music played from somewhere within the tent; Droser couldn't fathom from where exactly. Maybe it was a Supra thing, even if the event seemed mostly handled by the Mayor's Office.

"Nice to see you're good and settled. I always wondered what happened to you." Raz Degan, one of the High Commanders of the Vampire Army and West area representative for the ceremony, said to Bunny. "I always felt there was something special about you."

Droser already knew Bunny had been a Vampire Courtesan back in Los Angeles; perhaps Degan had been his client by the intimate tone of his words. This was confirmed by the familiarity of Bunny's response.

"Thank you, Raz. I'm very happy in Meridian, and my husband can testify how especial I am." Bunny's grin was sedated but welcoming.

Degan nodded. His tall, broad frame was imposing, almost brutal even in his formal wear. Without seeing his red eyes, anyone would think he was Werewolf instead of Vampire. His shoulder-length, auburn hair shifted as he cocked his head, openly assessing Tiger.

Tiger never broke eye contact, one eyebrow arched and a defiant smirk, which was a clear challenge. He and Droser had been in enough situations together for Droser to know how little afraid of the Supras Tiger was.

With a minute, polite smile, Degan took Bunny's hand and kissed the back of it. "I am happy that you are happy." His red aura had darkened, but he languidly inclined his head in lieu of a bow and moved away from them.

"Awkward cannot begin to describe that little exchange," said Orfeo, coming beside Droser.

Tiger snorted. "It ain't all the time you see bulky vampires like that. What a waste of a moment for a good fight."

"Seriously?" Bunny elbowed Tiger hard. His husband doubled up by the impact, but laughed. "This is not a biker bar, and you're not wearing leather and chains. Behave," Bunny amorously admonished him.

Droser wondered if Orfeo and he would ever reach that level of affinity. There were things inside him that were irreparably broken, and he didn't know if Love was enough to, if not repair them, at least patch them enough to make them work.

"I think it is time to explain this little side gathering," said Ares Vega, representative of the Warlock area, in a jovial, cheerful voice. He appeared to be the oldest of the Supra reps, with his short salt-and-pepper hair and prominent laugh lines. He was lean and not overly tall. His tux was bottle-green like the one Eck wore, but where Eck's made him look youthful and blithe, Vega's made him seem like a man with a very dangerous secret, in total contrast with his affable manner.

Zeff Ahren, of the Fae, and Iven Searle, of the Werewolves, moved closer to the other two Supras. Ahren was thin, blond and genial. He brought to Droser's mind an older brother version of that old-timey character from Disney, Tinker Bell. Searle on the other hand, was dark-skinned and had knowing eyes. He looked like a man who should be commanding a ship across disturbed oceans instead of a diplomat.

"As you heard during the ceremony, the attack on Meridian was not sanctioned by our governments. It was a cabal of subversive factions hell-bent on breaking a sacred covenant that goes beyond the limits of Meridian and it's essential for the harmonious survival of all the Suprabeings around the world. But, I'm going to let Minister Ahren give you more details." With a flourish, he gave Ahren the floor.

"There are legends among the Great Four of a rock, fallen from the sky, as our origin." Ahren's voice had a soothing ring to it, evoking a morning spring

rain that made you want to stay in bed happily wrapped in toasty warm covers. He walked about those present. “For centuries the Great Four fought with each other without knowing that we had more than legends in common. Advances in human technology gave us the tools to investigate our own genetic foundations and learn that we were related, not distantly but in a very deep and unusual way.

“According to our stories, a rock fell from the sky long before any sentient beings walked these plains of the northern part of the American continent, what we would call today a meteor. So when the first intelligent beings found it, they instinctually worshiped it, recognizing that there was something otherworldly about it. In time, its power affected a female who gave birth to quadruplets, and each of those infants became the seed that evolved into the Great Four Suprabeing groups. How we became so different, with contradicting powers and needs? There are other legends trying to explain these realities, but even if we don’t believe them, we can trust science. And science had proved undeniably that our genomes exploded from the same womb.

“Now, this little lecture is not about the intricacies of our genetic composition, but about the source of our gifts. Meridian is the unknowing guardian of those powers. The petroglyph in Central Fountain is that rock that came from the sky millennia ago. We call it *Skålgropar*.”

A collective gasp surged from all the humans inside the tent.

Ahren pointed at Searle with his long stemmed champagne flute, apparently giving him his cue. Searle cleared his throat. “From the moment we learned that this petroglyph was the source of our powers, war and plots ensued and it wasn’t until the end of the twentieth century that we were able to unite all the heads of the Suprabeing Groups to work on a solution to the property dilemma.” His guttural voice was measured and inviting. “After years of heated dialogues and cold negotiations, we decided that the only way to guarantee the stability of the Great Four was to ensure that no group was able to put its hands on it. This is why we surfaced, after eons of secrecy, and eventually gained control of the country.

“We separated this area from Suprabeing control and gave it to humans so they could guard our powers, preventing one group from prevailing over the others. We mistakenly thought that if you didn’t know the real reason you would be safe.” Searle sighed. “We are telling you now because you guarded the city, just to defend its citizens, but it’s time to put the whole truth in the sun.”

“The petroglyph cannot be destroyed or moved. We tried,” said Degan the Vampire. “So it’s futile to think that by getting rid of it you will be done with us. Understand that you have an opportunity here, of independence from our government, of pursuing your own ambitions as a race without our interference within the sacred boundaries of the 100th meridian, because in exchange you protect our birthright.

“True, it was an unbeknown symbiosis, but this day, you, as guardians, learn why this city must exist and why you have the right to be yourself in it.”

Droser saw all the questions written on the faces and in the auras of the humans around him, but it was Mayor Kurosawa who spoke first. “Is the petroglyph able to affect humans now like it did your common ancestor?” Her sparkly black dress gave her a younger appearance, and she stared at the four Supras almost like a girl waiting to be asked for a dance instead of a person with the weight of a city over her shoulders. Her aura stated that she was intrigued and revolted in equal measure.

“For what we were able to study before relinquishing the area to you, it could only affect Suprabeings. Alas, as with any mystical object, there is always room for a new development. Perhaps these defenders have been affected or enhanced by it.” Vega’s eyes settled on each of the Nephilim in turn.

“It’s an absolute possibility,” said Bunny. “But, it is now in human hands to find out about it.” He raised his glass in a toast. “To human nature!”

“Human nature,” said all within the navy blue tent with its soft music and comfortable lights.

Leo, Vicario, and Droser exchanged glances as four Supra auras darkened.

And Droser understood the words Star uttered that long ago night when she gave the rebel Supras the way to breach the boundaries.

“None shall have power above the others because even divided you’re nothing but the one spawn of the same wonder.”

Once the freaking monsters had the *Skålgropar*, a civil war would have ensued to control it, each group vying for the domination of the other, and humans would have been fodder for their messed-up war. The cunning jackasses.

Well, fuck them all.

~ Nephilim Facts – Kutra “Bunny” Lapin (b. 2106 – d.)

He was born in the South (Fae) area. His family moved to Vampire Los Angeles when Bunny was nine years old. A group of Vampires in a blood rage killed Bunny’s parents when he was ten. At age fourteen he received his assignation as COMPANION, the modern term for courtesan. He was trained for three years and worked actively as companion for two before moving to Meridian.

After discovering his Nephilim status, he started to look for answers as to his purpose in life and how this newly found power could be used for good. Soon he realized the power could heal, not only physical illness but mental and spiritual illness as well, thus he began his path as private healer. He has travelled outside Meridian (but never to the West area) to heal people who couldn’t afford Suprabeing medical intervention, especially children.

~ Transporter Facts – Themistocles “Tiger” Jansen (b. 2097 – d.)

Born in the South (Fae) area, he started his transporting shenanigans at the tender age of fourteen when he ran away from home to join a band of sinister bikers. They transported people, goodies and illegal stuff through the four Supra areas for not really cheap fees. At age twenty, he separated from the bikers and became an independent transporter. Eight years later, he met Bunny—when the companion hired Tiger to take him safely to Meridian. They fell in love in the process of dodging fangs, bullets, and the occasional burst of dark magic to reach the last human controlled city of the U. S.

Chapter Nineteen

Clearly

Droser

Two days later, Orfeo and Star picked Droser up for a meeting at the Mayor's Office. They entered a lavish waiting room in pastel tones and even more pastel paints on the walls. Only Eck and Joy had arrived before them.

"Well, I was gangbanged by ten guys once," said Joy proudly.

"Oh, that's nothing. For my twenty-fifth birthday my two best friends took me to Mega-Vegas, and I was gangbanged by twenty guys," bragged Eck.

"Why not twenty-five?" Joy was technically calling his bluff.

"I don't know. I didn't make the arrangements. Still, twenty is more than ten." Eck's grin screamed "I won."

"Show off," huffed Joy. She waved at Star, Orfeo, and Droser as she realized they were inside the room too.

They seemed more agreeable than before and by the strange connotation of their conversation it seemed like they knew each other at a rather intimate level.

"So what's the story between you too?" Star asked in her sweet, ethereal voice.

"This bighead was my first. I was deeply in love with him," said Joy, pointing at Eck with her thumb and rolling her eyes. "Then he wanted to do my best friend, a guy, and me together, and after that wanted to have another girl with us. It was too much for me at the time, and we didn't part in good terms. We decided it was best if we buried the fact that we knew each other if we ever coincided in a place again."

Joy didn't sound sour about what happened to them. As a matter of fact it seemed that after the whole Nephilim experience her image of Eck had changed for the better. Even if he still behaved like a total narcissist asshole while his aura showed that he was just half a jackass.

"That's going to be hard now that you'll be working together. You sure you don't need to fuck it out to feel better about it?" Orfeo told them half-seriously, half-jokingly.

They looked at each other, clearly considering the possibility. Then Eck said, "I like all genders," he cocked his head toward Joy, "and my body is a carnival ride without height limitations."

"I guess it's my duty to ride you hard and see if mechanisms have been updated and upgraded."

"Yeah, they are going to fuck it out." Orfeo snickered, and Star giggled.

"Have you ever been gangbanged?" Orfeo asked Droser.

"Not by ten guys." Droser winked. Unless Orfeo asked more clearly, the actual number wasn't important.

"Ten isn't my number either." Orfeo pressed his lips together like someone forcibly holding back a bark of laughter. His eyes tinkled mischievously.

Droser felt happiness squeezing his black heart; a feeling he still wasn't used to.

"So this is how it's gonna be?!" Tiger entered the waiting room with Bunny and Vicario in tow. "We ain't an official team yet and y'all are plannin' gangbangs?" He shook his head but his grin was wide and inviting, a father who found his kid precariously balancing to grab the cookie jar from where it was hidden.

"Planning a gangbang already!"

"Toma!" roared more than one, their censorship mild and jovial.

Toma just laughed as he moved further into the room and inspected a cooler with bottles of beverages, offering one to Leo and Arthur, who had come with him.

"Do we know why we were summoned?" Arthur asked to no one in particular.

"I think we're going to be officially sanctioned as guardians of the city," said Star from an armchair where she was perched beside Joy.

"We get to choose a team name?" Leo looked at Bunny as he took a swig of his bottle.

"I know, the Nephilim and the Vanes!" Vicario caught a bottle Toma had pitched his way.

"What're we? A Wizardry folk band?" Arthur narrowed his eyes. "We need ter sound like we mean business, not like entertainers."

“What about Meridian Force?” Tiger said, catching a bottle and passing it to Joy.

The group looked at each other. The name didn’t sound half bad.

“Sounds like an option,” Eck agreed. “Let’s see if the Mayor didn’t come with an idea of her own.”

“More like her PR department,” commented Droser, and there were giggles and snorts and chuckles.

“I pay them very well to come up with catchy ideas,” said Mayor Kurosawa entering the room. It was unexpected but nobody seemed startled by her presence. Her aura indicated that she had found the comment humorous. “Meridian Force has a nice ring to it,” she added.

Arthur and Toma clapped Tiger on his shoulders as they were flanking him.

“Now this is an informal meeting; that’s why I came to you here instead of sitting you in my office or a conference room.” She took a seat on a comfortable sofa. She crossed her legs elegantly, her bodyguards behind her. “If you accept my conditions, you will become city employees and report directly to the Mayor’s Office. The Supra Governments have agreed to add to the budget for your salaries, so you will be very well compensated for availability.”

“This means we’re not going to be able to pursue our own business?” Droser asked, not really liking her tone.

“Are you talking about being a mercenary or a drug lord, Mr. Sundew?” Mayor Kurosawa arched her eyebrow. She meant business.

“Both.” Droser kept his face blank.

“I cannot condone illegal activities from any city employee. Still, each of you has precious skills that are useful in the fight to protect the city. You are all hired, if you want the job, and after that I will have one-on-one sessions with each to analyze your individual situations with the law and what to do if the need actually exists.”

“You said ‘protect the city,’ not its boundaries. We’re ter become some kind orf law enforcement group?” Arthur didn’t sound very enthusiastic about that idea.

Mayor Kurosawa inclined her head slightly with a slow blink. Her aura shone with purpose and resolution. “You are to be Meridian’s Army.”

“I’m not comfortable operating just within the law,” Droser grumbled.

“Me neither, but this is for a higher purpose.” Orfeo entwined their fingers.

They had come to Droser’s house after the meeting with the Mayor. They had things to work and figure out before accepting the official proposal.

“There’s no such thing as a higher purpose. There’s only purpose. It is neither high nor low.” Droser towed Orfeo toward the greenhouse on the roof of his building. The view on the east side of Pontus was magnificent, overlooking the desert that surrounded Meridian. “We already helped with the boundaries. This shouldn’t become a chain.” He opened the door, presenting his thumb to the identification pad. They entered, and Droser grabbed a spray bottle with his free hand. Even if his other hand was busy (fastened to Orfeo’s), it didn’t feel awkward—it felt right, as if this action somehow completed him.

“We both have done things for selfish reasons, but I think that what we feel for each other should help us see life in a new way.” Orfeo pulled Droser to a stop, interrupting his meticulous spraying and making him turn to look at Orfeo.

“There is a *new way* and then things that don’t seem the way.”

“What do you mean?” Orfeo asked.

“Without all the details our conclusions might be mistaken. We see life based in our own assumptions.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“Jove and Nat died because they were in the way of Mike, Antha, and Ashley to save you from Tonis.”

“That can’t be right.” Orfeo sounded outraged. “Why are you defending them?”

“Their oath.” Droser sighed. “We made them swear to defend us.”

“But, they attacked us.”

“Are you sure? That’s not what Mike told me.” Droser looked anywhere but at Orfeo’s face.

Orfeo’s eyes became bigger with every heartbeat of comprehension dawning on him. “Shit.”

“You see? When you start meddling where you’ve not been called...” Droser shook his head.

For several minutes, Orfeo didn't say anything, just stood there almost paralyzed. Yet his aura showed the war within him. Guilt and hope and pride warred in a clash of colors that was beautiful and tainted with shame at the same time. A mixture of pride and hope finally won. "It was a mistake, a ludicrously stupid one, but that doesn't mean you and I cannot be a cleaner version of ourselves in the future."

Droser didn't want to meet Orfeo's eyes. Those iron-grey windows always did wicked things to his defenses, to his sense of independence. He had already accepted he loved this man, but there was a huge part of him that still rebelled against the notion. "Are we going to be model citizens now?" He focused on Orfeo's sultry lips; those didn't weaken him—those made him hard.

"That's not what I meant." Orfeo smirked, and Droser wanted to kiss him for more reasons than just make him shut the hell up. "You spoke of purpose. Let's have purpose together." Orfeo was holding Droser by the waist now, his guilt for the death of his teammates gone for the moment.

Droser flung the spray bottle away and put his hands on Orfeo's shoulders. "For fuck's sakes, Orfeo. I don't have faith in humanity. If I do something that looks like it's good, in the end, it's for my own benefit. It doesn't have anything to do with a higher purpose or the greater good." He sighed. "Your presence has made me reevaluate the scope of my selfishness, but only to encompass you, not the world at large."

"I'm not asking you to be humanity's champion. Shit. I can't be that champion either. But, this thing, I see in your eyes, makes me want to be different, to open up." Orfeo brushed their lips together. "This happiness is overwhelming, and I can't contain it inside me, all bottled up and selfish-like. I need to share it to be able to cope with it."

Share something that is bottled up.

Droser finally looked into Orfeo's eyes. And they said more than his shiny aura. Maybe it was time to share. "Did I tell you how my parents died?"

"You only said they died in a Vampire prison after a virus outbreak."

"That's how they died, but Vampires didn't put them in prison. It was humans."

Orfeo cocked his head, puzzled. "Humans?"

"Ours was a little out of the way town in New Mexico close to the Aztec Alliance border. I don't think it had a thousand inhabitants." Droser took a deep

breath. “One day the Vampire’s human enforcers said that they were going to start taxing children because they weren’t meeting their blood quotas.”

“But that’s not how it works! They can’t tax you before eighteen.”

“I know, but you have to remember this was a desolate place, and the people there were afraid. We trusted these enforcers to have our best interest at heart; that was the town’s mistake.” Droser leaned into Orfeo’s hand caressing his cheek. “Later I learned that these enforcers had lied to coax parents into submitting to them sexually in exchange for sparing their children.”

Orfeo’s repulsion showed brightly in his aura. “I still don’t understand what this has to do with your parents ending up in prison.”

“During a town meeting, my parents tried to galvanize the people into action to oppose and denounce the enforcers.”

“And the town folk helped, right?”

“Nope. At the beginning they were just heckling and throwing things at them, but it turned into a lynch mob. They restrained and kicked us through town to the Enforcement Office and left us, all bloodied, at its door steps.”

“Even you, a child? Fucking S.O.Bs!”

Droser nodded. “There was a trial, and the entire town testified against my parents. The whole thing was a joke. I was nine, and I stayed in the system until I was sixteen and escaped to the Fae area.” Droser showed his bare wrist to Orfeo. “That’s why I don’t have the tax marks of the Vampire area.” He wondered in that moment why Bunny still had his. It was fairly easy to remove them, but then again, many people kept such things as reminders of what they had survived.

“I can see why you think people are shit.”

“Oh, I did have my vengeance on Poopville, New Mexico. I went back and burnt that shithole down.”

Orfeo opened his eyes in surprise. “You didn’t!”

“Oh, I did.” Droser shrugged. “I think like three people were able to escape.” He chuckled darkly. “Now and then I rent a mini-hover and fly over it to see the ruins. I’ll take you some time.”

Pride, admiration, and frank confusion warred in Orfeo’s aura. “I’ll be glad to join you.”

“See, Supras are predators. They don’t act like they’re something other than what they are. You can’t blame a lion for eating a zebra. Even if you think the zebra is all cute and adorable you still admire the grace and wildness of the freaking lion. It’s their nature, and it’s about survival.

“On the other hand, we humans think we can be better, noble, strive to enlightenment. That is pure, unadulterated, smelling to high heaven hokum. Beasts are just beasts because they don’t know anything else. We calculate. We plot. We lie.” Droser grimaced. “In the end, we’re just selfish cowards looking out only for our own asses without giving a flying fuck about nobody else.”

“I did what I did for Star out of guilt.” Orfeo twisted his mouth. “Selfish,” he hissed.

“I’m not saying that we’re incapable of love. I’m just saying that love is not the solution to everything. I don’t know if this happiness, all these emotions swirling inside me because of you, all this love, could fix what’s broken inside me. It’s been broken for a long time.”

“Perhaps it doesn’t need to be completely fixed, just patched up,” Orfeo offered, scrunching his nose.

Droser laughed. “I had that same thought some time ago.”

Orfeo waved a hand in the space between them, close to their heads. “We are connected, mercenary.”

Droser saw his own darkness reflected in Orfeo’s aura. “That we are, hunter.”

Droser’s communicator started to beep. The name on the display was WERE-MIKE. Orfeo looked at it too and arched an eyebrow.

“You aren’t going to answer,” Orfeo growled. It was an order, not a question.

For the first time, since Droser’s early childhood, following an order didn’t feel like a challenge.

“Nope. That Werewolf can wait.”

~ Nephilim Facts – Phillip N. Eckhart (b. 2098 – d.)

Colloquially known as Eck, he was born in the Petrarch borough, Eck received his Master’s degree in Communication at the University of Meridian

in 2121. A year later he became the first human journalist allowed to do a report on Assignment Day (this is the day in the Vampire area when roles within the community are distributed, and it's done when humans reach the age of fourteen). After that story, his career has been steadily upward.

Now he has a show entitled "In Twenty Questions or Less," where he tackles Meridian and national issues, reporting many times directly from Suprabeing controlled areas. Charismatic and energetic, he supports quite a few charities as a silent contributor.

~ Nephilim Facts – Joy De Souza (b. 2096 – d.)

Born in the Wherefore borough. She was recruited by First Meridian Bank after two years with the Meridian Police Dept. Her official title at the bank is "Teller," but she was trained by the Israeli Mossad to carry out undercover missions on behalf of the bank. She's also a dance instructor at Meridian Splits, and this has been used as cover more than once to gain her access to very secured places to perform her "extracurricular" duties. Currently single, she's not looking for mister *right* but for mister *I assure you I can handle all that*.

Chapter Twenty

Eventually

Orfeo

Orfeo emerged from their hungry kiss. The humid greenhouse and its long rows of potted carnivorous plants with their red tentacles and white flowers didn't seem like the perfect place to have an impromptu fuck session.

Droser's expression was absolute mischief, and his optical enhancements were a whirlpool of swirling data and disarming emotions.

"It's really not fair that you can know what I'm thinking by reading my aura." Orfeo gave Droser a peck on the nose. "I don't like to be at a disadvantage," he said, smiling.

Returning the smile, Droser nodded. "I can turn it off for you."

"Really?"

"It's not impossible."

"Guess I'll have to show my gratitude in the filthiest way."

"I agree," Droser said with a serious expression that didn't reach his eyes; those were twinkling with naughty anticipation. "Shall we retire to a more appropriate location so I can be showered in your filthy, filthy appreciation?"

Droser had used a very stuck-up tone, and Orfeo had to hold back his bark of laughter. Orfeo was sure Droser could act all straight-laced and proper if his life depended on it, but this was neither the time nor place for propriety, not even fake propriety.

Something wicked surged inside Orfeo.

"Totally." Orfeo lowered his hands along Droser's body. "I'm about to pound you so hard, even the *Skålgropar*, all the way back there in Central Fountain, is going to tremble."

But what trembled in that moment was Droser's body in Orfeo's hands. "Fuck," he hissed breathlessly. "Keep talking like that and I'm devouring your cock right here, right now."

"Carnivorous, huh? Like your frigging flowers." Orfeo squeezed Droser's ass with both hands, grinding their crotches together. He ravished Droser's

mouth for a long moment, his hands kneading superb glutes. He bit Droser's lower lip before breaking the punishing kiss completely. "You feel it? Feel that rock in my pants?"

Droser moaned.

"Loosen your pants," Orfeo whispered in Droser's ear.

Droser fumbled with the fastenings for several heartbeats as if they were some complicated puzzle.

Orfeo turned Droser around and pushed a hand inside the pants, spreading cheeks to find the tight entrance. He teased the snug pucker, wringing a languid, breathless melody from Droser, and then his middle finger entered—breaching, conquering, owning. "Now we're going to walk to that bedroom like this, with my finger in you, so that sweet hole knows who his master is."

"You're killing me," Droser groaned.

"You want me to stop?"

"Fuck, no!"

They negotiated the short flight of stairs almost by instinct, between the quasi-awkward hand position and all the kissing and biting as they moved. For a moment, Orfeo thought Droser would ask to be fucked in the narrow stairs, so similar to those of their first encounter. But Droser didn't notice where they were or else was behaving, expecting a brutal reward.

Orfeo guided Droser's thumb to the recognition pad to open the apartment door; they entered, fumbling and tripping, with Droser pushing Orfeo with his whole body since they were flush to one another.

"Do you need medical assistance, Droser and Orfeo? All your vitals are beyond the normal limits." The house computer whined, nearly mother-hen-like.

Both stopped their assault to laugh, staring deep into each other's eyes, and said in unison, "We're fine."

"Duly noted." Relief, if possible, came clearly through the house computer's tone.

Their fracas resumed, and they stumbled upon a couple of bar stools. Orfeo couldn't believe they had moved so far into the living room without self-combusting, and totally missing the way to the bedroom. Well, shit, he couldn't wait any longer.

Orfeo helped Droser to get rid of his purple tee with his free hand; the other was firmly entrenched in Droser's pants, now with two fingers controlling Droser's sweet hole. He bent down to undo Droser's and his boots, and both toed their shoes off. Their pants pooled around their calves for a heartbeat before being kicked away; both obelisks pointed forward, seeping and free.

Biting Droser's lower lip, Orfeo dislodged his invading fingers, and before Droser could protest, he turned him upside down in a maneuver that would have left even a Supra dizzy, rendering Orfeo victorious in any fight.

"What the... ohhh"

Droser couldn't find the third word because Orfeo had engulfed Droser's leaking cock the moment he had Droser at the right level for the second maneuver of their upright sixty-nine. He was holding Droser up by the hips, and hairless, island-tanned thighs rested on Orfeo's shoulders.

"You crazy fucker," Droser groaned from the vicinity of Orfeo's own solid piece.

A tongue swirled around Orfeo's cock head, and there was an explosion of goose bumps all over his body. He redoubled the intensity of the suction. Now, Orfeo could only hear grunts and groans as Droser was matching his oral efforts and practically squeezing the air out of him by the tight hold he had around Orfeo's waist to keep his balance. Not to mention the gloriously strong grip he had on Orfeo's shaft as if he were steering a frigging mini-hover.

There was a spicy quality to the flavors and aromas enveloping Orfeo as he sucked for all he was worth. His taste buds were on fire, and his nose was in sexual heaven. Droser's sweat was a manly, luscious fragrance that no cologne or perfume could compete with, and the delicate quiver of Droser's delicious caramel ass cheeks was the ultimate visual complement. These things touched all the right buttons in an unprecedented way.

Orfeo felt the climax rushing toward his cock, every cell of his body clamoring and surging toward that perfect center, eager to be part of the detonation, but he halted it. Stalling that raging geyser was a simple thing for any respectable *Furia* Master to accomplish, even if every particle of his body screamed to share his essence with Droser. He stopped the flawless synchronization of pelvises and throats, and keen for the next stage of the conflagration, he released the perfect girth in his mouth. He pulled Droser from his cock and helped him to gain his feet.

Disheveled and radiant, Droser looked at Orfeo with so much adoration in his green bionic eyes, that the only true thing that Orfeo wanted in that moment was to be on his knees and adore Droser back, worship him, even if they were less than perfect human beings and capable of horrible things in the name of self-preservation. He sat Droser on one of the bar stools, pulling another closer so Droser could rest his back on it.

“Computer, butt-juice,” said Droser in a clear voice even if it was somewhat rough and heady.

“At once,” the house computer said politely.

As Orfeo was accommodating Droser’s legs over his shoulders, a drone appeared with its bee-like hum, deposited a lime green bottle of butt-juice on the bar, and elevated, returning to its unknown hub. Orfeo stretched a little to grab it.

“Thought we could ease the path to destruction,” Droser offered in the same husky, breathy tone with a wicked grin and a wink.

“You are so frigging hot.” Orfeo matched Droser’s throaty bass. He applied some of the tropical-smelling lubricant to both hole and shaft, and presented his weapon.

The moment when cock and orifice collided was always Orfeo’s favorite, especially in this position where he could not just enjoy all the sensations but have an intimate perspective of the breach. He spread cheeks with one hand and guided his cock head to tease his burning target with the other.

Droser groaned and tried to impale himself, grabbing Orfeo’s hips and pulling.

“Ah-ah, I say when.”

“You’re killing me! Fuck me already,” Droser growled.

“You want it?” Orfeo obnoxiously asked, even if his own body was blindly and furiously agreeing with Droser.

“If my hole could speak, it’d be cursing you.” The growl was an octave lower than before.

Luckily for Orfeo, Droser was neither Supra nor Nephilim, because his body was shaking in a very desperate way that could only lead to the unleashing of powers in otherworldly beings. He pushed forward, and, with every inch, the words of Droser’s “Fuck yeah, that’s what I needed” became more thunderous.

Soon Orfeo found a pounding rhythm, his hands on Droser's hips—his eyes traveling from gorgeous, enthralled face to where their bodies connected in constant, magical collision. He was incapable of deciding what was more erotic, his body entering Droser's or the sensual bliss written over his mercenary's debauched features.

But one thing was clear, amid all the lust and vicious arousal, no other man had ever moved every fiber of Orfeo as Droser did. All the things that were carnal and animal were washed in pure light and made new by the touch of that, which couldn't have any other name but Love.

And with this knowledge blossoming in Orfeo's heart, the ramming became crueler, his craving more ruthlessly desperate, and his happiness an ungenerous weapon at the ready—perhaps to destroy, perhaps to protect.

Droser's eyes screamed his need as Orfeo entered his body, as their forms crashed thoroughly and with formidable perfection. "Be mine, let me be yours." Droser's voice wavered, not just because of the merciless pounding but thanks to all the emotions that shone on his face too.

"We. Belong. To. Each. Other." Orfeo punctuated each word with a well-aimed thrust, upward, downward, sideways. Every impact wrung a grunt or a moan that was ovation and prayer, approval and oblation, praise and entreaty.

"Oh fuck. Make me come. Make me come!"

The road to *the little death* was crystal clear; the trigger had been encoded since their first encounter. And Orfeo let go. And everything that he was syphoned into his center, deep within Droser, and it broke in a gush of dirty light and shiny lust and drowning semen.

Orfeo's cry of ecstasy should have disturbed nature and unbalanced creation, but it accomplished only one thing—its ultimate purpose: Droser's climax, earth-shattering and glorious.

Before they could surface from the obliteration, their bodies (and their hearts) demanded more. In the darkness of a Meridian night and with the razed surroundings of their battle still smoking, there was no other solution than to cave in. And they hunted and damaged and sated each other for hours.

When the only thing coming out of their cocks was just exhaust fumes, and they lay drenched in sweat and manly fluids, Orfeo remembered that Mike had called while they were in the roof greenhouse. He didn't want to move, but it might be something they needed to know.

Before their greenhouse conversation, Orfeo felt a certain level of hatred toward both Mike and Ashley, but Droser was right, the Supras had just done what was natural for them, and defended themselves from the Red Vanes' attack.

Perhaps it had been Jove's and Nat's time to go, and very few people knew how they would go out of this world. Everything happened for a reason, and the Werewolf and the Fae could have just been his friends' vehicles to the Netherworld.

"Droser..." Orfeo said, forcing his vocal cords to be useful. "Call Mike."

"Huh. What? Why?"

"It might be important."

Droser groaned. "Can't a man be happily drenched in jizz for a while without being forced to interact with the world?" He pushed himself upward and rested his weight on his elbows, looking at Orfeo, a million things swirling in his bionic eyes. "I so fucking love you."

"That fucking love is both ways. I love you too."

The world wasn't perfect because humans were not perfect, but they, Droser and he, could make this work eventually if they had faith in each other. "We can do this," Orfeo said, beaming at the handsome man beside him, all caramel skin and satisfaction on his naughty grin.

"I'm gonna tell you one thing, though. That new version of me, you're expecting, won't stop enjoying when people get fucked-up."

"There's a word for that, you jerk," Orfeo huffed merrily.

"Uh-huh?"

"It's schadenfreude."

The End

Glossary

Deus: The drug's name comes as a joke on *Deus ex machina*, the plot device whereby a seemingly unsolvable problem is suddenly and abruptly resolved, with the contrived and unexpected intervention of some new event, character, ability, or object. This coming from the fact that Droser is a firm believer that drugs don't resolve anything.

Furia: The ancient defense techniques that allow humans to fight at Suprabeing speed. You become a Master after you complete several trials, independently of your age; it's all based in your ability to learn and master the techniques. A ten-year-old Master is no different than a seventy-year-old Master in the eyes of a *Furia* Council. *Furia* is a Latin word with several meanings like fury, rage, hurry, and rush.

Owatatsumi: One of the various names of the Dragon God, the tutelary deity of the sea in Japanese mythology

Bardagamaður: Icelandic for "fighter." A Fae gift. It gives the person the opportunity to assess the movements of their opponents by somehow "slowing" time around them, so they can maneuver around the situation.

RH Null Blood type: Blood types are considered rare if fewer than 1 in 1,000 people have them. One of the rarest in existence is Rh-null blood, which lack any antigens in the Rh system. "There are nine active donors in the whole community of rare blood donors. Nine." That's in the entire world. If your blood is Rh-null, there are probably more people who share your name than your blood type. And if you receive blood that contains Rh antigens, your immune system may attack those cells. In all, around 20 antigen systems have the potential to cause transfusion reactions.

Read more: [Your Blood Type is a Lot More Complicated Than You Think](#)

Fanaqua: Well, to know what this word means you need to check out [Broken Phoenix by Edmond Manning](#)

Nephilim: In the Bible, they were the offspring of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” according to Genesis 6:4; and giants who inhabited Canaan according to Numbers 13:33.

Chuffle, chuffing: It’s a sound made by the tiger and the snow leopard, a low-frequency equivalent to the purring found in domesticated cats. The animal’s mouth is closed and it blows through the nostrils, producing a breathy snort.

Madonna’s First Life: All the music Madonna made before the year 2020 when she became a Vampire citizen.

Skålgropar: Swedish for carvings or inscriptions.

Orphei Drängar: (or *Sångsällskapet Orphei Drängar*, often just OD) is a Swedish male choir and singing society founded in 1853, based in Uppsala and one of the two notable singing societies traditionally affiliated with the university there (the other one being the two decades older *Allmänna Sången*, “The Common Song”). *Sångsällskapet* means “The singing society”, *Orphei* means “of Orpheus”, while the Swedish word *drängar* is the plural of *dräng*, “farmhand”.

The little death: (translation of the French *La petite mort*) It’s an euphemism for orgasm in the twenty-second century. The French expression has generally been interpreted to describe the post-orgasmic state of unconsciousness that some people have after having some sexual experiences. This is why you would see the moments leading, through, and after orgasms compared to cataclysmic events in this book, and words like “viaticum,” which might imply Catholic Last Rites; even if no specific religion is linked to any character. *wink*

Author Bio

Born a Sagittarius in the fabulous year of the Rooster of '69, at the hour when his cat was about to become a complete dragon, Gabbo de la Parra landed on the Caribbean Coast of the outlandish Republic of Panama to start the adventure of Life.

Love and the Internet brought him to Middle Tennessee to embrace the American Dream and his husbandly romance. Writing has been an important part of his life since a very early age, and it's a pleasure to share his stories with others thanks to the wonderful opportunities this land provides. He is the author of the Spaniards series, Septima Luna and other titles available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Smashwords.

Gabbo cherishes Life with a southern gentleman in a townhouse close to a lake, crowded with the spirits of his characters, and their pets: black esoteric kitty, Luna; white emo-twink Maltese, Chance; and street smart Russian Blue, Bella.

His novel Another Dawn on Planet X (love child of his two stories for Love is Always Write) is available now for your e-reading devices. His historical novel The Pompeian Horse will be available in spring 2016.

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