



Nevermore: A Cal Leandros Novel

By Rob Thurman

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People die.

Everyone knows that. I knew it intimately as everyone in my life died thanks to my one seemingly harmless mistake. I'd brought down Heaven, lifted up Hell, and set the world on fire, all due to one slip of the memory.

I forgot the pizzas...

Caliban is a dead man. The Vigil, a group devoted to concealing the paranormal from humanity, has decided Cal has stepped out of the shadows once too often, and death is the only sentence. They plan to send a supernatural assassin into the past to take down the younger, less lethal Cal.

But things change when The Vigil makes one last attempt on Caliban's life in the present—and end up destroying everyone and everything he cares about.

Now, Cal has to save himself, warn those closest to him, and kill every Vigil bastard who stole his world. But if he fails, he and everyone in his life will be history...

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Nevermore: A Cal Leandros Novel By Rob Thurman Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #203531 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-12-01
- Released on: 2015-12-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Rob Thurman:

“All the great elements I’ve come to expect from this writer.”—#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author
Charlaine Harris

“A roaring roller coaster of a read...[it’ll] take your breath away.”—*New York Times* Bestselling Author
Simon R. Green

“A beautiful, wild ride.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Marjorie M. Liu

“Thurman continues to deliver strong tales of dark urban fantasy.”—SFRevu

About the Author

No Bio

No Bio

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Prologue

People die.

All the time. Everyone knows that, right? The world is dangerous. Existence is precarious, the footing beneath you shaky. Your first breath isn't a guarantee and if you get that, your next breath is the same. Touch and go. Life doesn't come with a warranty. It's something to be snatched, clawed for, and held in the tightest of grips. Life cuts you no slack, doesn't care if you're around or not, but death . . . death can't wait to drag you to his party. And once he does . . . you know that old song is as true as they come, "It's hard to leave if you can't find the door."

People die . . . but they usually don't die over something so meaningless. Me? I was the exception to that. I was the trigger. At least thirty people died all thanks to my one seemingly harmless mistake, one trivial, overlooked chore.

I forgot the pizzas.

Insane, right? That the world should end because I forgot several boxes of cheese, pepperoni, and grease. They weren't even the best pizzas in town. But that didn't matter. I'd brought down Heaven, lifted up Hell, and set the world on fire, all thanks to one slip of the memory.

How's that for the worst fuckup of all time?

One casual everyday event like forgetting my phone and running back a block to our place for it. That meant a five-minute shift in my routine, just enough to sidetrack my brain to revert to my normal schedule. I

unconsciously skipped over the irregular task of the pizza pickup I'd been stuck with at the last minute, and that was it . . . the world ended. Not with a whimper or a thousand radioactive mushroom clouds. No, it ended because I was an idiot.

It ended because I'd forgotten I'd lost a coin toss.

The only reason I didn't end with it as well was just dumb luck. I'd remembered at the last second fifteen feet inside the bar, cursed, and left, annoyed and impatient enough to use the "emergency door" to get them. I should've been there when it all ended, but, again, dumb luck.

No. Not true.

It wasn't dumb luck. It was bad luck. Worse luck. The darkest of goddamn fucking fortune.

Hell, wasn't that the story of my life?

There was a certain grungy bar, cramped, but popular among a certain crowd, that I'd been standing in less than three seconds ago when I remembered the pizzas. The name of the bar didn't matter. That I worked there most nights didn't make a difference either. What did matter was that the building where it squatted on the first floor slinging alcohol right and left was hit by an eye searing blast of light. It was as bright as it was incomprehensible. It was barely dusk. What could be that bright? I'd seen the flash from the corner of my eye as I stood at the pizza truck parked at the other end of the block. I turned to see what it was, not where it was. I should've known the where was what mattered, but I didn't have a flicker of suspicion that it was the bar, my bar. The one full of people, my people. It was one of those things you can't think. You can't know, as once you do you can't unknow it. That part of your brain shuts down. If it didn't all of your brain would stop . . . stop thinking, stop feeling, stop everything, and chances were good it'd never start again.

It was too late for all that now. I had turned. When I did, I wished I'd been smart enough to not turn, and when I had, then to not look, to live in blissful ignorance a few seconds more. But I wasn't that smart, never had been. I didn't register that it was an explosion, one that temporarily deafened me. In that silence I had turned. I had seen. I had seen it all.

It was as if the sun had plunged from where it hung bloodred and low to crash down on top of the city.

It was all it could be. The sun had fallen from the sky, I thought numbly as the money drifted from one hand as the pizzas slipped off the balancing palm of the other to tumble through superheated air to the street. The sun had fallen and we were all on fire—not the city alone, but everything. It was early evening with thin stripes of twilight purple clouds, and we should've stood in shadows, but we didn't. It was bright as day on the street and we were on fire.

The entire world was on fire.

I fucking prayed the way atheists like me do when the sky falls and their world is ripped away. I prayed that it was a lie. But I got what prayers gave you when you need their help the most. A kick in the gut and a spiteful laugh in your face as it was granted.

Because the world wasn't on fire.

It would've been better if it were.

No, the world didn't burn, I knew, only a small piece of it.

That I'd had the thought at all—the whole world burning to a cinder—had been shock and despair tearing my brain to shreds—not for thinking that it was true, but because I knew it wasn't. The world gone with a fiery snap of some child-eating pagan god's fingers, all of us . . . to the very last of us, dying with the earth, I could take that. I could take it with a, yes, sir, may I have another. But being left behind, a survivor who had no fucking desire to survive? That was the true nightmare. That I couldn't take.

I stared at the inferno that raged; it already had consumed the first floor front of the building. Gobbled up where I'd worked and drunk for years and had just stood heartbeats ago. I hoped with everything in my tarnished soul that its appetite would spread to at least the city if not to everything flammable on the planet. I hoped that it would roll over me like a wildfire and take me along with the rest of what it had already stolen.

It didn't happen. What you want the most hardly ever does. What you need the most never does.

Instead, it concentrated on my handful of the world, small as it was, with more inescapable flame than could remotely be needed for one small bar. The fire had grown before I could take a single breath. It was a breath I didn't want to take, knowing that the Auphe in me, compared to the human, would sharpen every scent a hundred times over. I didn't care if I took another breath again, for that reason and a thousand others, but your body overrides your wishes, no matter how desperate. Lungs rebelling, I gasped, pulling in that unwanted breath. I smelled ammonia, nitrate, other chemicals I didn't bother with. . . .

And flesh. They smelled different, the roasting scent of several Wolves from the lesser number of peri, and both distinct from the crowd of vampires. Every group similar but not the same as the other, but soon to end as identical charred fumes. Above them all, I caught the smell of two others. Not a group—just two. The two that mattered most.

Until now one had smelled of grass, fallen leaves, loamy earth, and musk. The other of sweat and weapon oil for cleaning every type of blade at the end of sparring, of goat milk soap and unbleached cotton from the shower that followed, of the clean bite of a chill wind only truly found on the top of a mountain where the air grew thin.

One puck.

One human.

Neither would give off their born scent again, the way they once had. Not in reality, and not in my memories that would be as blackened as the mound of rubble that would act as the tomb that covered them when the fire eventually died.

Not that I would be around to see their makeshift grave in the aftermath and not that I would have memories of any kind.

The smallest sliver of a second later there came a second explosion, a massive fireball ten, twelve stories high erupted, though the building itself was only four stories tall. It came close to incinerating anything left of the brick and metal of the bar and the bodies inside. The backwash of incredible heat and a concussive wave threw me flat, knocking the air from my lungs before I was able to vomit at the stench that had crawled inside me to stay.

An infinity of fire: Hell couldn't have claimed it all.

I sat up slowly and painfully to the sight of what the second one had birthed, a Jacob's ladder of fire that stretched up to touch the sky, maybe Heaven itself. It made the first look like an amateur attempt at a Boy

Scout campfire. It burned with the rage, flame, and heat of a hundred phoenixes. Yet when it finally would burn down, hours maybe days—ashes to ashes—no new phoenix would rise from it. Nothing would. The reaper owned this place now and everyone who'd been in it. One swipe of a scythe hotter than the sun had taken it all.

Now I am become Death.

Something that had been said in history a time or two.

Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.

I didn't think about who had done it—who was Death.

I already knew the answer to that.

I didn't think about how it had been done.

I didn't think why. I knew the why was a who. And I was still here as the fuckers had missed.

I didn't think anything but the bottom line of it all.

I didn't care.

Who, why, how, none of that mattered now.

My own personal Armageddon had arrived.

As the heat seared my skin, I sprawled on the asphalt with—unbelievably enough as forcefully as I'd been thrown back—the pizza boxes that had landed with me, one beside me, the other against my leg, almost in my fucking lap. A mocking jeer from the powers that be. “Your life is over, but dinner's on us!” My eyes were half-blinded by the fire, not that I cared to better see details of the apocalypse meant for me personally . . . but had missed.

It hadn't been able to steal my life, but as a trade, it had taken and destroyed my reason for living it.

As much as I hated to give them the satisfaction, they'd won. I didn't have to be at their ground zero in a failed aim at wiping me from existence. One block away was close enough to know that your heart could beat and your lungs could fill with oxygen, but it didn't make you less dead.

Wasn't that a trick?

I slid my hand inside my jacket. I touched the only comfort left: the leather holster that cradled my way out. The metal of the trigger, the hard plastic of the grip, and the grimly comfortable weight of my escape.

Sliding my Desert Eagle out, I placed the muzzle under my chin. My finger captured the trigger tight without any thought from me.

It didn't need any. It was automatic. I didn't have to think as I'd already thought about this too many times before. The end had come, no surprise. I'd been waiting on it for a good part of my life. But I hadn't thought it would be like this, unbearable as the lone survivor on a burnt and bloody battlefield. Dying was easy. Being alone, the last standing, having seen the others fall, it snatched away the relief and turned a mercy killing into a grim surrender.

Fuck it, surrender, retreat, despite being coward enough to not only think I'd go first, but to hope for it, I'd been prepared for years, waiting for the feel of the metal, the resistance on the pull of seven pounds of trigger pressure.

Seven pounds was my ticket out of this hell.

And it was hell, more of one than I'd ever end up in.

All because I forgot the goddamn pizzas.

But I'd forgotten something else too. The pizza guy. And he had something to say.

First, he said my name. I barely heard it with what small amount of hearing had returned. Whether what came next would have my finger sliding off the trigger, I didn't know. I doubted it.

Then he said a second name.

One that made me question, finger still on the trigger, yeah, but . . .

It made me . . . not hope. Hope was too hard, too distant. It didn't do that. Yet . . .

It did make me think. It made me consider the metal muzzle under my jaw as a sealed letter dropped into my lap, smelling of anchovies. With that second name said aloud and with me climbing out of the muffling quicksand of borderline catatonia, another form of escape that I hadn't bothered to fight, things changed. I began truly thinking instead of letting the smothering shock pull me deeper. I stopped my body and mind from reacting mechanically as both had from the first moment of the explosion. I did it solely because I could guess what that letter might say considering who had written it.

Tricks and truths . . .

It wasn't over until it was over and in this one unique case, maybe . . . maybe not necessarily then either.

Once, three or four years ago, I'd said something profound as hell—also wrong as shit—but it had sounded good and I thought it true at the time. I had said that what had been made couldn't be unmade.

What had been done couldn't be undone.

I'd been wrong.

I was going to do all that and more now. Undo this all. If I had to unravel reality itself at its seams, as a result, that's what I would do.

Why the hell not?

If there were consequences, if there was a cost? So what?

I'd already fucking paid it.

—Arthur Wing Pinero, 1894

History.

They say that those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

They also say history teaches by example. History is written by the victors. God himself can't change the past, but historians can. And a thousand more sayings about it. But the last one was the one I was holding on to with both hands. God can't change it, but historians could. They could write, erase, delete, and write a brand-new version.

They say a lot—hell, yeah, they do. But who cared?

History was, for the most part, boring.

Not like fire. Fire was anything but boring. The starkly chemical tainted smoke, now more of a taste than a smell, still coated my tongue and throat thickly enough to make me want to puke. The stink of burnt blood, sizzled to nothing in seconds. The heat of the flames had been intense enough that I'd been dully surprised my face wasn't seared to a blackened mask, despite feeling normal when I rubbed a hand roughly over it.

Then there was the image of it all locked inside my brain and tattooed behind my eyelids whenever I blinked, an afterimage of everything I saw: the explosive eruption of fire and fury that streamed upward with a raging hunger that made it seem possible for it to set Heaven itself on fire, devour God himself if he had existed. And the sound . . . shit, the sound, or the lack of it. The explosion, the roar of not flames, but of not one but *two* unstoppable infernos, yet not a single scream or shout. Not a sign that anyone had been alive in a building before it had become what Hell longed to be. No sign of it, life, but there had been.

Before.

There had been brothers, friends, others. They hadn't been alive, though, not after that. They'd died with the initial flash of light—there was nothing to hear from them. The Reaper had stolen their voices. They couldn't scream, couldn't say my name as they had since the day of my birth. They couldn't. . . .

Shit. I couldn't do this. I couldn't function with this memory, only a half hour old and yet at the same time one that came from an event that wouldn't happen for eight more years. I took that moment and pushed it away, buried it, as I couldn't do the job, couldn't do what I needed to if I had to see it in my head every minute of the day. I couldn't *fucking* breathe if I had to carry that weight on my shoulders.

Forget that was where half of it belonged.

And there was no goddamn hope of having the strength to carry that.

Ignoring the mental accusation, I took in the situation at hand and the alley I stood in. Both were grimy and ugly. One, the alley, was expected and two, the situation, wasn't precisely unexpected.

In this alley, in fact, this circumstance had been a routine risk in the day.

If nothing else, it could be a needed distraction. But with my luck, which was no luck, it would be nothing but an inconvenience. I found out which when I sidestepped, with little effort, the shard of metal rusty and crusted with old blood swung at my face or throat, his aim wasn't good enough to make an estimate, by a stinking, filthy waste of humanity. He'd leaped out of a bed of alley trash, his tainted harsh exhalation the hiss of a snake thanks to several missing teeth. He wore a stench of living on the street that was one step

from decomposition and eyes muddy brown swimming in wide pools of deep piss-yellow.

Inconvenience it was.

Putting a boot in his lower back as he passed me unable to stop in time, I helped him continue his headlong rush attempt by sending him the rest of the way across the alley to slam into the opposite wall. As inconvenience was more likely to piss me off than distract me. But I'd smelled what was on the knife. I couldn't let that go. I'd have to make do because this was what I had.

There was the sound of crushing cartilage and the scent of blood when he hit the brick. Someone had bought themselves a broken nose. Those were a bitch. It would be several seconds before he could see through the tears of pain to attack again. I folded my arms to wait. Inconvenience and then some. If not for what coated that damned knife . . .

I'd originally planned coming here eight years in my past to stop an assassination, my own assassination, by the Vigil. Pretentious asshole name aside, they had played a big part in history as well. They'd been human, but they hadn't interfered with the *paien* world often, didn't care if a boggle made a meal of a human. It was the circle of life, in their opinion—no more, no less, and their group had been around thousands of years, long enough to see the truth of that. Humans, thanks to a population of billions, were on top of the food chain as a species, but not individually. If it came down to a war, humans would win with their bigger weapons. Unimaginable monsters worse than anything you dreamed could live in your closet at night, even they couldn't walk away from ground zero of a nuke blast. Yeah, humans would win, but, first, the *paien* would make them damn sorry they played. Second, when it came to nukes, and it would have to come to them to end up on top, collateral damage to your own population will be a bitch.

The Vigil had one rule: stay hidden. Humans do not need to know mythology books are actually wildly incorrect, but with a grain of truth, history books. Do not show yourself in a manner that humanity might find out werewolves, vampires, lamia, revenants, ghouls, hundreds of other "bogeymen" existed. Let humans live in the ignorant bliss that fairy tales were just that. That fairies weren't real, spit acid in your face, and sucked off the melted flesh. Eating was a necessary sin of survival, of course, and some *paien* are predators. They have certain nutritional requirements. Merely don't be seen doing it unless it's by who you're currently consuming.

Slipups were understandable, but make certain they're at night and only at night and by no more than two or three people who will easily convince themselves it was a trick of the light. Admittedly, the *paien* were here first. It's a big world and they wanted to share it. But the average human, masses of them, wouldn't understand, the Vigil had said. They'd panic, and it'll happen as it has always happened when one civilization discovers another. War. We don't want to be pushed into that corner. If a *paien* follows the rule, we won't have to put that *paien* down. We don't want to put you down. We—

Aaand here he came again, interrupting my train of thought. With his nose bent to the side, blood gushing from it, I'd thought he'd have learned. Nope. This attack was crazed wild motion like the first. He was fast, I'd give him that, but fast is useless when your ambition wildly exceeds your ability to aim and your victim can . . . hell . . . practically Sunday fucking stroll out of your target area. With this attack he managed to hit the opposite wall himself, no assistance called for.

This was a chore and a half. I had to face it. I wasn't getting an iota of distraction here. It was down to business on his next try.

Back to the Vigil until then.

One rule. It seemed simple. It wasn't.

I broke that fucking rule like it had *never* been broken.

But I'd had a good reason, and I'd do it again.

The Vigil hadn't seen it that way and turned out to be aggressively armed with weapons, stolen *paien* artifacts, biology labs, and assassins than they'd been remotely upfront about when it came to the subject. For all the sharing and fucking caring they spouted, they had the type of Cold War arsenal they hadn't hinted at wanting or needing. Pity it wasn't as effective as they'd planned.

In the end, when it came to the world, humans would win. When it came to a throw down in NYC, the Vigil was wiped out except for my guess of two or three members: one a custom-made assassin with a stolen time traveling artifact.

They couldn't fix their wholesale destruction in the present, but they *could* send their hypocritically fabricated, mutated hope, Project Lazarus, back. They could kill me, the younger me, before the Vigil had known of Caliban Leandros, before I'd known of them, before I could break that rule. Then they'd be reborn. They never would've died.

Aside from the assassin, the remaining one or two members would've been all that had been left of the last cell. And every cell had one of their goddamn psychics the Vigil had loved for their spying. They would've briefed the cell, before we'd wiped them out, that a *paien* friend of mine, with contacts and spies better than psychics on his payroll, had already discovered what the Vigil had stolen years ago. The psychic would've told the cell we knew what we'd need to stop Lazarus when he used the artifact. They had known we already had a twin to their stolen one.

That was the two pieces of information my friend's contacts hadn't found out, that the Vigil was aware we were equally equipped to their assassin and that any of the Vigil survived aside from that assassin. The Vigil had been closer to being Nazis than the shepherds they painted themselves, but they were loyal—fanatically loyal. The single or few left made one last ditch effort against us. A truck packed with ANFO—overkill, not that they'd cared. The ammonia and nitrate reek I'd smelled was the unmistakable sign of a tool popular when the monsters were human and homegrown. The one or two Vigil who'd survived—it had probably been two, to gather all the components necessary, pack them in barrels, load the truck as that shit sounded heavy—had planned to keep me from using my own borrowed artifact to following Lazarus when he used his. They had tried to catch me at the bar.

By driving their bomb on wheels into it.

Funny, wasn't it? All that work and I was the only one they hadn't caught.

Funny.

But if they could undo what had been done, so could I. I'd still stop the assassination of an eighteen-year-old me. That goal would stay the same, but I had to do so goddamn much more now. I had to also fix a world, *my* world. It was a small part of the whole, but all I wanted or needed. The rest of the world—I didn't give a shit about, not anymore. If I couldn't remake mine, if I failed, what was left could burn for all I cared. Hell, I'd start the fire myself.

Anyone have a match?

Or maybe a lighter.

“You have a lighter I could borrow, shithead?” I drawled, tired of waiting for the third attempt. Shit, he’d been playing possum. He might have a brain cell left that the drugs hadn’t eaten. Coming off the wall, quicker than before, the jagged steel was now whipping at my throat. The hand that held it was white knuckled with tension where it wasn’t encrusted with dirt, and it slashed with vicious force, but no skill. Too easy. I didn’t have to waste any effort on a fight this pathetic.

That was the trouble with what lurked in dirty, ugly alleys. Dirty, ugly assholes who will cut your throat for a dollar. Drugs aren’t easy to come by when you have no money. I might have money. If nothing else my jacket would go for ten.

I didn’t let my mind fixate about how this was holding me up. I needed to go, but I also needed to crush a poisonous scorpion under my heel. Dripping venom from its stinger, it hid in the trash and the dark. Deadly to anyone who wandered off the path, the single safe place as all fairy tales tell you. It wouldn’t take long and required little effort, handling the scorpion, I had to think of that, think of anything that wouldn’t have me throwing him to the side and running to save the people I knew, not strangers.

It would take minutes, less, to save those strangers and those minutes were nothing compared to the time I’d need to change everything back. I could spare it. Nik would want me to.

Shit. Shit. Okay, then, big brother. For you.

I scavenged in my thoughts for anything else to concentrate on besides abandoning wandering sheep to this murderer. As inefficient as this dick was at cutting throats, I had the time. What had I been dwelling on—during my first step into the alley? Before the burnt and bloody thoughts. The boring side of history, that’s what it had been. Dull, boring, cruel and unusual punishment. Ask any kid in school.

The generation of Saturday morning cartoons had it so much easier, the middle-aged bastards.

The shot heard ’round the world . . .

Was the beginning of the revolution. . . .

Take your rifle, take your gun. . . .

Knives hadn’t made that list. I didn’t know why. They were as good in the right situation. Good, well-made ones at least.

Mine was very good.

That’s what I thought as I changed mental paths with a quick and savage satisfaction. I grabbed a handful of greasy hair as I evaded the man’s lunge at me. It was as unexpectedly fast, if as unskilled as his knife-work. Desperate and fast go hand in hand sometimes. I yanked my attacker’s head back, and did what he’d tried to do to me, only more efficiently. I cut his throat with one slice, blood erupting to paint the dirty brick wall of the alley with vivid crimson. It was almost twilight here as it had been almost twilight there—eight years in the future.

When you’re killing someone, whether it’s self-defense as they tried to kill you first or you’re a jackass who tries to kill for the hope of five bucks in your wallet, twilight is a good time for it. Alleys are a good place. Anyone would be less likely to be seen. It was probably why this one had chosen it.

I'd slid behind him before using my knife as that was some small piece of history, for once, worth remembering. I'd learned it long ago and it remained useful. Stand in front of someone when you cut their throat and the force of the crimson carotid spray will cover you from face to chest. As much as you wipe, you never get it all off either, not until you hit the shower. It makes for a cannibal-fresh-from-an-all-you-can-eat-buffet look.

And it makes catching a taxi impossible.

The man—no, not the man, not some guy—the *shithead* was what he was. And he proved that further by collapsing onto the asphalt and continuing to breathe. Not too well as he was doing it through a few pints of blood. It was pointless, but it didn't stop him from making the effort. Some people, the assholes like him, refused to make your life any easier by just dying already.

I could've helped him along.

But considering what I knew he'd done—bad.

That I knew what he was—a human monster.

Nah.

Let him suffer. Slow and painful was what he deserved. At least he hadn't turned while falling and hit me with that hosing down of blood I'd been so careful to avoid. It didn't change my opinion on history, though, that one useful cut from behind, dodge the blood, if you plan on catching a cab later little fact picked up along the way.

I'd always thought history was boring. I thought that the books were too thick, and whoever once gave a shit about memorizing all the tedious dates of this war or that ancient plague or some long dead philosopher who made logic so illogical you wished he'd died sooner? Dull as dirt, plain and simple.

Or so I'd believed.

But look at me now. According to one of those sayings about history, in this place, I was a historian. I could do what God couldn't.

I could change the future by *rewriting* the past.

I hoped.

Fuck, I hoped.

Giving the twitching body lying facedown at my feet an encouraging nudge, some might say kick in the ribs with my combat boot, I snapped, "Move your ass, you son of a bitch. You're already aimed in Hell's direction. Slide your metro card and go already."

A thin wet whine managed to work its way from his throat as the body, ninety-nine percent dead makes you a body in my book, struggled toward me with one shaking hand clawing at the asphalt and the other hanging on to that knife as if he'd superglued it to his homicidal hand. He was still coming after me. If he were at a funeral home, they've have embalmed him already and, yet, here came the knife weakly slashing at my ankle. Was it six feet away from his maximum reach? Details. Nothing but details. Motherfucker. I wanted him to suffer for what he'd done, but I was suffering too. The stench was only getting worse and he was getting more homicidal the less blood he had in him. How was that possible?

Sheer willpower to be the most annoying dick he could conceivably be?

Fingers kept scratching in the trash of the alley floor as the choking became louder and stubbornly continued. I exhaled, miles past pissed now. Asshole didn't begin to cover this one. I squatted to capture glazed eyes, once muddy, now dark as grave dirt. But there was a flicker in them, hate, vicious and brutal. It was fading, but I didn't know if it was fading fast enough. "You're a monster," I said, matter-of-factly. "Punishing monsters like you is a hobby of mine."

"But I'm on a tight schedule. Half a minute and I'll finish what you started. And I'll make it hurt. You think this is bad? Drowning in your own blood, agonizing breath by agonizing breath?" I smiled the special, nasty one I'd learned the two long years spent in my own monster hell. Fourteen years old and I'd been dragged there by the *thing* that bred my mother like she was a show pony, if show ponies accepted cash for services. The monsters there, the Auphe, had taught me death was a *game* and life was too dull to tolerate without the razor edge possibility of losing it at any second.

"This . . . this is *nothing*." I didn't sound anything but unrepentant as that's what I was, no more, no less.

Sometimes I was a monster too.

Sometimes I was a lion.

It depended on my mood and my mood now was not fucking good.

"This is flowers and fucking sunshine compared to what I can do to you. I'll make thirty seconds feel like thirty years. See if that motivates you to get your murdering ass in gear. Oh, and pray if you want. Won't work, but it's fun to watch." I slapped his patchy bearded cheek lightly. "Good talk. You've got fifty seconds left."

Standing back up, I kept count under my breath. Monsters and murderers both, true, but no one knew how to motivate like an Auphe. And they'd taught me, whether I'd wanted to know or not. I'd managed to bury most of the memories of those two years. Some resurfaced now and again and a few I'd never forgotten at all. This one refused to go. I hadn't made up my mind on whether that was for the best or not.

It *was* convenient. As long as you kept it a bluff. So far I had.

I was pretty certain.

Did my best, what else could anyone want from me?

I avoided the puddle of dark red edging toward my boots. Evidence was bad. Revealing. Avoid it whenever possible. It was part of being on constant guard—Nik's number one lesson when I'd been a kid when it came to Auphe and humans—*Be on guard, Cal. Always. Don't let the monsters come up from behind, don't let people see how different you can be. See them, but don't let them see you. You're a lion, little brother, remember? Watching from the tall grass. Invisible.*

I'd listened to Niko my whole life. And being on guard was a behavior I hadn't outgrown. Never be seen by those you might not escape and be on guard against those who didn't already know what I was. Being dissected by the government is not a healthy career goal. I'd listened, but sometimes no matter what choice you make, it's wrong. There isn't a right one and you are fucked—no escaping it. Being on guard hadn't changed the truth that during one desperate, otherwise hopeless moment when I'd had to make a decision to break Niko and the Vigil's rule.

To come out of the grass.

A lion in the light of the day.

One in the shocked sight of an entire herd of dazed and staggering human sheep.

There was no taking that back, leaving the tall, tall grass.

And here we fucking were.

No. Here I was.

Alone.

Until I made things right, and I would. No matter who had to die, no matter what I had to do. I'd already torn apart time itself to walk years into the past. I didn't know the consequences of that and I didn't care. Those were considerations that could kiss my ass at their very best, that's how little I gave a shit.

Weepy consciences are for people who have the luxury or the biological wiring.

Right now, I had neither.

There was the scraping of metal against the asphalt as the dick's knife hand spasmed, dirt rimmed nails clawing the ground. Too bad it wasn't dirt under him. He could dig his own grave. A wheezing explosive cough sprayed red on the alley floor and the random trash that littered it. Christ. The asshole absolutely refused to die. He wouldn't let go of it, his life or his knife.

Okay. Enough. This was over. Time for a countdown.

"Fifteen seconds. Ticktock," I reminded. "Ever wondered what it would be like to be skinned alive? It's time consuming as hell, don't get me wrong, but don't worry. I don't have to actually do it to make you fucking feel like I *am*."

I'd appeared out of thin-fucking-air, eight years rewinding in the absence of an instant, blinded momentarily by a blaze of the purest of white light. If OSHA had been around a millennia ago there would've been warning labels about bright lights/possible loss of vision everywhere in the time travel artifact industry. It had faded slower than my sight returned—I saw my own ink black shadow projected against the wall. I must've looked like an angel wanting to do some smiting. Wasn't that ironic? You'd think that would make an impression on the bastard who tried to slit my throat. It didn't. A fiery sword added to the mix wouldn't have made a difference. He was crazy enough it didn't get a blink from him as he had instantly lunged out of his makeshift bed and tried to bury that piece of shit blade of his in my throat.

The knife . . .

The knife told his story in excruciating detail of who had died by the blood-dried streaks on the metal. There was the scent of the heavier dose of iron that sped through the veins and arteries of men, the naturally wild honey fragrance of women, and, worse, the fresh bright tang of new life—kids. He killed fucking kids. I'd have finished him immediately when he was slow to haul ass to Hell if it hadn't been for the kids. For that I had no problem in letting him pay. Making certain he paid and paid and then paid some more.

I could still smell that new life, innocent children snatched and slaughtered, their lives snuffed out as I stood over him. He was a bastard of a monster who simply happened to be born completely human. That wasn't

new to me. I'd stopped being surprised at how the human ones outnumbered the supernatural kind long ago.

I was about to give him a ten-second countdown when the smothered gurgling at my feet became a convulsive seizure. It was quick to start, slow to end, and fierce as I could've wanted between. And then there was one last gasp—an exhalation soaked in blood. One breath finished. I waited for the next to begin. It never did.

"Ten seconds left, asshole," I muttered. "You got off easy."

The entire thing, attack and a kid killer too stubborn to die, had taken three minutes at most—quicker than the majority of his victims took to die at his incompetent hand I'd bet. Minutes in reality until his last breath, but that didn't stop me from hoping it had been an eternity for him. Either way, it didn't change my thought of an impatient, "Finally."

Now *he* was history.

And I had work to do.

• • •

Absently, I slid my knife, a favorite KA-BAR in matte black, back inside my jacket after I finished cleaning it with one last automatic wipe-down with the Greek take-out menu I'd snagged off the asphalt. Yeah, definitely, enough of dwelling on the how, the why, the what of why I was here. Now came the important part. It was time to rewrite what should never have been written.

I had to get moving.

I patted the body down for his cell phone. Everyone had a phone, junkies and murdering monsters too. Slipping it in my jacket pocket, I then stepped over the slumped form of what had been a snarling, filth spitting, rusty blade wielding addict. He'd wanted money for drugs. I could smell the chemical imbalance cascading out his pores the same as I'd smelled the blood of all his victims on his knife, and he'd been desperate. Too bad for him he had been in an equally desperately wrong place at a far more desperately wrong time.

Then I walked out of an alley I had once known well. Twilight didn't mean anything. It could've been afternoon or morning. That particular slice of space between two older buildings was forever a place of gloom and shadows. It didn't make a difference what time of day it was, in that place it was always night. It was why I chose it to take the eight-year step into the past . . . that and its location. I wouldn't be seen. It was a good guess that's why the son of a bitch who'd tried to stab me had picked it as well.

Bad luck for him was the thought of less than a second, and then I forgot.

Forgot about the asshole.

Forgot his dead body.

Hell, forgot he'd ever existed.

Scanning the surrounding area, I recognized the landmarks of a hole in the ground from eight years past. It was six blocks away from where I needed to be, and I started walking. The cars, I dodged. The people I less than politely elbowed out of my path in the routine New York way. The noise, the stench, none of it was that different despite the eight years difference. I inhaled the scent of Chinese kebab from a nearby street vendor

I'd been to at least fifty times. I'd lived for that shit when I'd lived in this area. But things were different now and not because I'd moved.

I immediately felt a fist of nausea that twisted my stomach, stretched up to claw at my throat, and filled my mouth with bile at the odor of the roasted meat. It happened too fast to move, much less run for a garbage can. Bending over, I vomited on the sidewalk.

Straightening, I wiped my mouth on my jacket sleeve. Hygiene wasn't high on my list of concerns right now. I ignored the bitching of the people milling around or lined up at the food carts. Instead I stepped over my pool of sick and stopped at the corner. I could've kept moving. I didn't have far to go to my destination as planned days ago. But plans had changed. And while I hadn't eaten today, food could wait . . . if I managed to be hungry again. I had my doubts.

As for meat, I had no plans of eating any ever again.

It was time to get moving. I damn sure wasn't waiting on a miracle.

Miracles never happened. That's why they had been and always would be the most painful and ugly of words. That's why you did it yourself. There was no one else. I didn't need a miracle. Miracles never failed to let you down. Miracles were for shit, plans changed and failed in the worst of ways, but there was me. I was for shit myself, no denying, but, unlike the lie of hope for the hopeless, I wouldn't fail in this.

I stepped off the curb at the red light, which for taxis means go five mph slower and caught an off-duty—sorry, not happening—cab by refusing to move as I stood in front of it. I added a polite slamming of my fist on the hood of the car when it tried to push me out of the way. Polite enough whatever cursing the driver spat. I had a new plan, a different and more important destination, and unexpected problems to solve. After that I'd be back here to put the ragged remnants of the old plan into motion. I'd be a few hours at the most. I had the time.

I had the time.

That should've, would've been funny barely hours ago.

It wasn't now.

2

When I returned two hours later, my driver was a happier man with the fare and a two-hundred-dollar tip to keep him from calling the cops when I needed him to wait for me a time or two. I had gotten out to take care of one precaution before moving on to the next. I'd debated punching him in the face at his nonstop bitching and slowing down long enough to roll him onto the sidewalk, but while maybe one or two New Yorkers would call the police, neither would remember the cab number. But when the driver woke up, he'd remember and for once in my life I could not afford cops anywhere near what I was doing. Money worked as well as a punch, if not as satisfying.

Back where I'd begun, on the same damn curb even, I started walking. It was full dark at seven thirty, October edging into November. The sun disappeared sooner and the monsters came out early. It didn't make a difference, light or dark. It was safer to walk the remaining three blocks than have anyone, cabdriver included, knowing where I was going. When I arrived at my onetime original destination, it was as humble as I remembered. There was the cracked concrete stairs that collected a hundred stains, vomit, blood, other

bodily fluids you didn't want to know about—every color different and a brutal blend spelling out the dregs of NYC life. Rip it out, hang it in a gallery and someone would pay you ten thousand dollars for it.

Down the stairwell to the basement, there were several piles of trash that were home to rats big enough to eat a Chihuahua in a swallow, no chewing required. I heard the rustle and squeal of them as I waded through the stinking bags. The rats hadn't bothered me before and they didn't now. They were New York's real citizens, not the people—if you went by head count. I ignored the rustle under the garbage and the slink from pile to pile. Standing on the bottom stair, I blinked dubiously at the door from the bottom stair before snorting despite myself and shaking my head.

I hadn't remembered this little detail.

This bar had no name.

It had originally, long before I'd known about the place. There had been a neon sign spelling out Talley's once upon a time. Some of the wire and glass was still on the door, but I didn't know what color the sign had been as it'd been long shattered before I came along. Never fixed, it was the invisible label of one of the many nameless pushers of alcohol in the city. It was the perfect place for a kid three years shy of being legal to work in a bar to fork over a fake ID, one out of ten or so, all with different names. They were names just like Talley—his was gone, the kid's weren't real. Same thing in the end—nameless.

This no-name bar was what that kid had needed. It had been one of the best options to get the privilege of working under the table for poverty wages as he slung beer and mopped up vomit. Not a great job, a shitty job in fact, but better than nothing at all.

There were a helluva lot better things than nothing at all, but there were worse too.

That I was here was proof of that.

I zipped my jacket a third of the way up to keep the metal of knives and other weapons muffled from scent and sound. The jacket was beat-up black leather worn enough to be cracked and shot with creases of gray. Planning for this, I'd gotten it this morning from the Salvation Army. It was comfortable and the brutal weathered look fit the neighborhood. More important, it didn't smell of home or family and it had cost only fifteen bucks. It also gave me room where I needed it. Automatically, I shifted my shoulders to adjust my holster, double-sided with a gun under each arm. It was habit, no more. I couldn't shoot who was waiting inside. I could do barely more than give him a hangnail, which was going to be a trick as he might not feel the same about me.

He was a cranky son of a bitch. I knew that better than anyone.

And with every right to be one, my brother would've told me with disappointed reproval if he was here.

But he wasn't.

Closing my eyes for a second, I settled into a crucial frame of mind. Then, stepping down over the trash, I took the two steps necessary, if that, to put my hand on the door. I hesitated, then pulled my shit together with every ounce of determination I had within me and every ounce I didn't, but would lie to myself that I did. As my best friend often said, fake it until you make it. He also said, if that doesn't work, stab them in the eye and steal their wallet. Since this one was hands off, I'd have to go with his first piece of advice.

“Hurry up, asshole. I got places to be.” The rumble and growl of warped vocal cords came from behind me.

Wasn't that the way to be on top of things? I could forgive missing the smell. Wolves were all over the city, living their crooked lives. I caught their natural cologne of wet-dog at least a few times every day. Having one sneak up on me without trying, that was pathetic. What was more pathetic was he'd done it while I was brooding. Worrying whether I had the skill to make it past our natural suspicion and get me to believe myself.

Yeah, odds were my life was over. I had to remake and undo the worst of nightmares and while I had an opportunity, a second chance when I didn't have faith in second chances. I'd used all mine up. That made this a bad day, fuck did it, but focusing to the point that I wasn't aware of what was around me, that would have me dead before I could begin to save anyone else.

I turned around to face the Wolf who was two steps up. He was wearing a longer leather jacket over a hooded sweatshirt. And need the sweatshirt he damn well did. The hood was pulled up and forward to hide as much of his face as possible. Shadowed face or not, I'd come across more than my share of this kind of Wolf and knew what I'd see, more or less. With an under bite of fangs too large to close his mouth over, inhumanly pale amber eyes, and a fine coat of brown fur climbing up from beneath the shirt to cover his neck not quite to his chin, he was one of the Wolves that would never pass as human.

I saw something else: an inch and a half of metal showing below the bottom of his jacket. There were nicks and a ragged look to what was one of the worst sawed-off shotguns I'd had the misfortune to see. If that was the best he could do, I had no reservations that my younger self could handle it. Hell, I could've handled it when I was thirteen, much less eighteen. But it would be a complication to what was going to be complicated enough. I didn't have the patience for this kind of shit. Not today.

"You're goddamn kidding me with this," I growled, harsh toward the back of the throat. My ex was a Wolf. She'd taught me how to throw a measure of lupine threat in any growls or snarls I might want to hand out. It wasn't speaking his native tongue, but it let him know I was familiar with it in a manner that meant I'd picked it up by running with Wolves.

And Wolves did not run with just anyone.

"I know Wolves who could do more damage with one fang and half a claw than that piece of shit sawed-off will do. But you're not that kind of Wolf. Can't run with the real ones. An omega who's licked the boots of every other Wolf in the Kin, so weak you need a gun." I lifted my upper lip in a display of scorn. "The weapon of a sheep." Wolves did love throwing the word sheep around. If you were human, you were sheep, prey. I ratcheted up my growl. It was shading into something else, less and less Wolf. "But I shouldn't be an ass. I like guns too. What do you think of mine?" I spread my jacket open to let him see the Desert Eagle and the Sig Sauer in my holster and the eight knives that practically covered the lining.

"No comment?" I took a step nearer to him. "Then how about this?" I stopped growling, but my voice wasn't any more human now than the growl had been. I spoke the language of broken shards, crushed metal, avalanche shattered rock. "I smell you, *dog*. Why don't you do the same and take a whiff of me?"

He did, his already wide nostrils flaring. All his fangs were showing now, but that was the type of instinct that was a lie, a bluff. The sharp tang of urine filled the air as the crotch of his faded jeans darkened. That was another instinct, but one that told the truth. He didn't know me, but he thought he did. He knew what had made me, and while we weren't identical, our scent was to most.

"My kind doesn't play well with yours. You're boring. You're too easy. It's over too soon. You taste like crap, like you live on rats. And coughing up hairballs for days is an absolute fucking bitch." I took another step. "But you are still standing here boring me. *Annoying* me. I guess I can make an exception." I moved to

take another step and he fell, all Wolf grace lost. He did crawl up the stairs with impressive speed to disappear, leaving only the stench of piss behind.

That taken care of, I unzipped my jacket partially as it had been before and headed for the door. No more overthinking. No more waiting.

It was showtime.

Pushing the door open, I walked in while rubbing my palm on my jeans. I was liberal with my disgust. “Jesus, that is the most goddamn disgusting sticky door I’ve touched in my life. You can get 409 by the gallons you know. Or soap. Soap works. Steal it from the bathroom.”

I’d forgotten that too, the filth. Inside the place it was dim, if you wanted to be generous with the word. Too cheap for lightbulbs could be one excuse. Another could be that the gloom conveniently concealed the very worst of the grime, the Talleywhacker’s sharp business sense hard at work.

It didn’t surprise me he didn’t recognize my voice. Whoever does in similar situations?

I walked across to the bar and picked a stool directly across from the bartender and plopped down, casual as they came. I grinned, trying for friendly, but I’d lost the ability for the genuine article around when I was five or so—unless I slapped on my best imitation. And I could imitate the fucking hell out of the real deal normally, but not to him. He, if anyone, would know the falseness of it immediately. Not that he was looking. His back had been to the door when I came in, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t been aware and alert—he had once been a lion, too, before the Auphe had taken us, and habits lingered. Were they skillful as they had been? No. They did linger and that was something.

I had seen him glance up at a dingy fragment of mirror duct taped high up on the wall. That was Talley’s idea of security, letting you watch your back, get a look at who came in the door if you were busy washing glasses, see if they already had a weapon out to rob the place. I didn’t miss Talley at all, the cheap, sleazy bastard. The kid had finished checking my cloudy, fly-specked reflection, not seen a shotgun in sight—which was nearly all the visual accuracy the DIY security system was good for—and silently finished up drying the glass in his hands while dismissing me without a second look.

He was a rude little asshole.

Made me kind of proud.

He was also careless as hell.

Made me rather embarrassed.

Most of all, it made me think how easy it would be to put a bullet in the back of his head. Sloppy and young as he was, he wouldn’t see it coming. He’d drop instantly, a painless death. I would disappear, as I wouldn’t have existed those eight years from eighteen to twenty-six. The Vigil wouldn’t have crossed my path and never would have created Lazarus to end what never had begun. Everyone who had died in the bar would live. Goodfellow would live. Niko . . . Niko would not. He’d use a different method, but the result would be the same as my finger pulling the trigger while surrounded by fire and death.

When one went, the other followed. Always. In every life we’d lived.

No committing a suicide bizarre enough to make Guinness, then. I released the grip of my gun and slid my hand silently back out of my jacket. He still didn’t notice that or what a wide-open target he’d made of

himself. Maybe that wasn't fair. I'd come a long way in eight years, walked a long, more than human, path.

"So, hey, Junior, what's on tap?" I asked, letting go of the failure of the buddy-buddy tone. I did keep the grin, but this one was a neutral and narrow baring of teeth. I was genuinely distracted with my own view of the mirror. He'd given my reflection a quick and disinterested look for blatantly visible weapons, hadn't seen any, and then ignored me.

Sloppy. Considering how many weapons I did have—not just in hand for but a moment, but more than enough in my jacket, and one still lingering with the faint smell of blood—very sloppy. I went with moderately humiliated instead of merely embarrassed. I hadn't gone with the same quick glimpse in the mirror that he had. I'd scrutinized his likeness when he'd looked up at the dirty silvered glass. Having only the short length of assessment he'd spent on his visual weapons check, I was lucky I'd learned in my business that facing down misbehaving *paien* mean each second counts. Use that second or two to examine every detail as closely as possible.

We weren't twins.

I hadn't expected us to be. I'd known that eight years can make a difference, sometimes big, sometimes small. It depends on how you age. Do you look younger than you are? Older? Do you look almost precisely the same but with more scars? I didn't know. I hadn't thought about it before. Why would I have? Rewatching old sci-fi movies I'd seen as a kid to be braced and ready for *time travel* wasn't something that had crossed my mind as being prepared for potentially dangerous situations that could jump out at you.

Until it did.

Leaving fuckup number three hundred and ten behind, I was now thinking, with morbid curiosity, what a person's reaction would be to seeing themselves sitting on a stool three feet across the bar from them.

What would I have done in his place, what if I'd seen what he was going to see? I had a good guess and it was—the thought was cut off as he finally turned around, ready to tell me what was on tap. It would be watered-down piss if I remembered right, but that hardly mattered as I found out about this particular person's response to facing themselves. This copy of me . . . no, not a copy.

This was me.

A particular pucker had been right days ago when giving me the usual hard time. I hadn't been bad-looking, barely legal baby face and all.

How the hell had I not gotten laid sooner?

He, the kid, had frozen, still and unblinking but that didn't last long. The eyes that had fixed on me narrowed to slits. The mouth that had gone fractionally slack with surprise, tightened to a hard line, then bared teeth in a snarl, and the baby face disappeared beneath the cold menace of a predator. He didn't know. He really didn't know. He had no idea that I was him, and he was me.

What he thought I was could only be someone else—*something* else he hadn't imagined existed—until he wrongly guessed he was facing it. And there had been someone else—several, in fact, but only one that was functional. Cal and I, when we were one instead of two, we'd been blind and conceited to think we were the single half-breed born of the Auphe. I'd learned differently, and Cal was assuming differently now. And he was shocked as hell. I knew that, as I had been surprised myself when I'd met my genetic "cousin." I shouldn't have been. I'd known a long time I was an Auphe experiment, made with a purpose. No good

experiment has only one subject. I should've known better.

This younger me thought I was that kind of family, linked by DNA only, not the family you'd ever claim. It was a reasonable guess, as technically it could've been true.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch, kid," I drawled. "I'm not what you think." And I also didn't have much time to convince him of that, as my prediction minutes ago of what he'd do when he saw me for the first time was on the money. There went the hand reaching under the bar for either a weapon or a cell phone.

Which would I have reached for eight years ago?

Both.

Drumming all ten fingers on the bar, I leaned back and tried not to smirk, but it was hard to hold back. It was no less than he deserved. I'd screwed with everyone I knew my whole life, delivered sarcasm and snark to anyone who crossed my path, family and friends more than most. You torture the ones you love, else how would they know you gave a shit about them? That was my code through and through. This was the opportunity to fuck with myself and I couldn't pass that up for anything.

I knew I had it coming.

But as I thought that, I thought something else. Did I sincerely deserve it? I'd forgotten this was also the me who was barely two and a half years back from being kidnapped by the Auphe. They'd snatched him/me through the explosion of glass that had been a trailer window and told me they were taking us home. My brother, trapped in a burning trailer, couldn't stop them, and Sophia, giving them the entertainment they suddenly couldn't get enough of, lit up like a torch and burned to death in the frame of the door.

We'd seen it, the two Cals that then had been one, before we were pulled through a hole in the world, a rip in the air itself to a place outside this reality, a place that would put Hell to shame. Two or so years later I'd torn open my own ragged doorway that I'd instantly forgot how to make and crawled through it back home, back to my brother. Two years, but not. My brother had guessed that for me, now taller by several inches and hair longer by at least a foot, that it had been approximately two years. For him it had been not quite two days. Time ran different in Auphe-Land, where it's all-you-can-eat so long as you can catch it, and the screaming is free!

When I'd returned, I'd spent my time alternating between acting as predatory and feral as the monsters who'd taken me or too terrified to crawl out from under the bed while clutching a knife twenty-four seven. I had reason for both behaviors, as in the beginning I'd remembered the years with the Auphe. Tried not to—what had been done to me, worse yet, the things I'd been forced to do. Tried to bury it, tried to wipe it clean.

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