

The Killers in the Crowd, Prologue, 2021
Or, *Willow and Thread*
By Eliot Howard

Before I understand, before I choose, before love and grace and sonder, I am a child who plays at war.

I'd been hurt before, sure. Scrape a knee, stub a toe. But you understand the Geneva Conventions before you know what they are, when you take a snowball full of ice to the face.

If you've ever *packed* a snowball full of ice, you know there's an illicit thrill in it. You know it's wrong. You touch something inside you, a visceral, sadistic impulse that runs along your spinal cord.

Or maybe *you* don't. Maybe evil lives in all of us, or only some of us, but you'll have a hard time convincing me it didn't live in the moment that Susanne Edgerton, hopped up on third-grade authority and eager to prove the oft-whispered notion that her ginger hair made her soulless, kicked over the snowman I'd been working on for six consecutive recesses.

That's when I made my first ice-packed snowball, by the way, and the day I took my first to the face. And my second.

As Susanne's friends dumped snow down the back of my jacket, holding my thrashing arms tight, I made a vow to end their reign of terror. I'd gather allies. I'd build defenses. These fiends would never hurt an innocent snow-person again.

And so alongside that impulse in my spine, as I crouched, stockpiling ammunition in the snow, there crept in something dangerous, something deeper. My seven-year-old brain knew what justice was, and I was to deliver it.

Nestled there in the valley, beneath the exhaust streaming from refinery towers – *is that where clouds come from*, I remember asking – the schoolyard slowly arranged itself into battle lines.

It snowed heavy in December back then, though you can never really distinguish nostalgia from climate change. My best friends – a cloud of hair on a baggy beanpole we called Moz and a squat, humble boy named Simon – helped me organize our side. Everyone who had ever been wronged by Susanne Edgerton knelt in the snow beside me as we built our impregnable fortress.

Piles of snow up to our knees became the ramparts, with stockpiles of snowballs set up in the trenches behind. Including ice would draw too much attention from the single recess supervisor, we decided (though she was reading as

usual, unaware of playground politics, let alone our warrior's decree), though we made an emergency stash in case Susanne's forces didn't abide by decorum.

We poured water on the walls so no assailants could disrupt our supplies, or harm the snow-civilians we tasked less-bloodthirsty children with building at the center of the structure. We assigned guard positions, created vaults for granola bars and apple slices in case of a sustained siege, and bestowed ceremonial icicles upon those who distinguished themselves for the cause.

One morning, we arrived at school to find our population of snow-people destroyed, scattered. Heads had been thrown. Our forensic team determined that they had used illegal sticks and rocks to massacre our civilians.

"Susanne did it!" I shouted my righteous fury. "She came after school and ruined everything!"

And there she was, across the field. She was even twirling a long, sturdy stick, taunting us with the murder weapon.

Simon, ever unassuming, lured her close. Humility too often hides intelligence – with Simon to chatter at, Susanne wouldn't realize she was being guided until too late.

I hid, my back to the rampart, snow seeping through the holes in my gloves. Simon's voice drifted into earshot. Moz nodded at me, reflected the straight line in my brow.

Susanne shrieked when we popped up, a line of nearly ten kids all armed to the teeth. Thomas dove for cover as we pitched our projectiles in a volley that slightly obscured the sun. We'd topple her cruel reign of terror.

My first shot sailed off into the surrounding field, and my second, though my compatriots were right on-target. Susanne's hands came up to protect her face, but she didn't have her gloves on; I knew from experience that the snow would filter through and splatter frigid slush on her, it would dribble down and saturate her sleeves.

Moz delivered the blow that made Susanne try to run, a direct hit on her freezing fingers. But the last shot was mine, high on her cheek as she turned. My only hit.

She stopped dead still, snow clinging to the red welt on her face as her eyes seemed to vibrate wider. The kids next to me had paused their assault, understanding somewhere implicitly that we had crossed a line, though none of us could point to the moment our retribution became cruel.

The satisfaction drained from me the moment she started to cry, but I tried desperately to hold it in, to grasp that feeling when all was right. The supervisor had put down her book and was running across the field now, summoned by Susanne's wailing.

There was no doubt as to who was responsible. I slid down the slick ramparts and ran. Over the fence, into the valley, under the refinery that blocked the near-solstice sun all morning. Everybody was shouting, but I couldn't let them catch me. If I couldn't hold the good feelings in, I'd leave the bad ones behind.

The snow swallowed my boots with every step as I got closer to the river, filling them and soaking my feet – even then, deserving kept me from turning back. I knew I had to run, and I knew I had to suffer.

Bare birch and lively spruce beckoned me on, and finally I collapsed at the edge of the river. It seemed like salvation, the open air, billowing pillars like the seat of God's judgment. I believed in God then, as a fact in my repertoire. *Clouds are made of water, or oil by-products. God hates you.* Susanne Edgerton had said that one to me once.

In the water was a milling crowd of ducks. Weren't they cold? But no – my eyes lead me to the runoff from the treatment plant, itself in the shadow of the refinery, like everything on this side of town. We had a field trip there, we learned how sewage could be recycled.

It must have been warm, but was it toxic? The ducks were just floating there! What if they were sitting in poison for the heat of it? A little duck family doomed to death by ignorance!

I wasn't brave enough to save them. Or to stand up to my punishment at school. I could only kneel there, snow seeping into my socks and my gloves and through my overalls, contorting my own mind into shapes about how something that felt good could be wrong.

They found me in the snow. Shouted at me to come over. When I didn't move, they picked me up and carried me to the principal's office. I pretended I couldn't hear their words, since they were telling me what I already knew. I was a *bad kid*.

I couldn't look at my parents when they slipped through the wide doors of the office where I waited. Their gaze was too kind, their touch too tender, caustic on my skin. They shuffled me through corridors, into the fogged-up car, set me up in the passenger seat next to the best heating vent. My dad stayed behind me with a hand on my shoulder while mom drove. Were they taking me to jail?

They kept asking me why I was so mad. I mumbled something I don't remember.

"He's *upset*, Gina. Something's wrong." Behind me.

"You should know better." Beside me, to me. "Could have cried, told a teacher, called us... There's no excuse for this, sweetheart."

I looked down at my hands, pale brown and stiff with cold. Could I trust them? *No excuse*.

A shiver crept through me, and another, in a cascade. My father's warm, worn hand moved to my head, through my hair.

At home, they pulled away my outer layers and took me up to their bed, where I lay watching my mother's dreamcatcher twist in lazy circles. They settled on either side of me, like healers drawing out poison.

"When you're ready," my father said, "we'll have dinner. I can tell you what happened in my day, and if you want you can tell me about yours. But if you want to talk, or, sleep? That's okay too."

My mother didn't speak. She hummed a little melody, more honest to her disappointment.

"You can say anything, now or later." Father continued. "What's most important is that you're honest. I might still disagree with you, but that's okay. I love you enough to figure out a little difference of opinion, right?"

But my eyes were on the dreamcatcher. I felt it thrumming in the cords twined across its center, nightmares there, so close we could touch. I stood on the bed and reached up my hand.

Willow and thread, just as I expected. Another sensation under my fingers. If it didn't feel different, if I couldn't tell...

My throat is dry, my words cracked through. "Is it in me?"

My father cocked his head. Mom, though, she took my hand away from the willow and held it.

"It is in everyone." She said. "It's there with kindness and smarts and charm. Hard to tell it apart, right?"

I nodded. "Susanne's really mean."

She tried to stifle a sudden laugh. "Did she deserve it?"

Consideration weighed my head down. "Not that bad."

Father slaps my shoulder. "I think you get it, hmm? We'll talk more about this – but for now, would you want to draw while I make dinner?"

And I did. I drew a place where the rules were never wrong, and teachers always attentive. I drew a place where war was play and justice, and everyone was different, but they all got along. My parents kept it on the fridge until the day they died.

Fifteen years later, after I choose, after heartbreak and blood and peace, I'm still a child – a strategist – a peacekeeper – oh, fuck it. I'm in a tree.

“Seriously, I think my phone is *cursed*.” Griffin’s easy tenor was nearly garbled beyond recognition in my earbuds. “They can do that, right?”

“It’s probably not about you, specifically.” I could hear Eleanor’s bemused smile. “Open any suspicious email attachments lately?”

“Oh *man* I got *got*.” Griffin moaned. “There’s like a dozen 3D centaurs fucking non-stop all over my buttons. Clicking ‘home’ just makes it worse.”

“Worse how?” I imagined Elly prepping a diagnostic clipboard.

“You... don’t want to know.”

“That’ll teach you to accept permissions from *hotcentaurmilfs.cash*.” The rumbling of Simon’s baritone voice made the garbalation even worse. “Technology and supernatural sex appeal don’t mix.”

“You’d know, huh?” I thought I felt a ring of earnest bitterness through the imperfect phone-translation of Griffin’s voice, but I didn’t have time to investigate.

“Eh, cleanse it in some salt water and you’ll be fine.” I whispered into the tiny headphone mic clutched in front of my face. “And, also, what was the codeword for when I saw these folks stroll in?”

Fall moves fast in Stillriver, Alberta; half the time I’ve been alive, we get a snow-dump in the middle of October that causes the trees to shriek and drop trou essentially overnight. Sometimes it gets warmer and we’re left to slosh through piles of snowy mud and decaying leaves; sometimes that’s the start of winter, and the thaw doesn’t happen until mid-December.

Perched on a sturdy branch above the main path into the graveyard, I found myself praying to no one in particular that the golden autumn leaves would hold just a few more minutes. It being early September, it wasn’t exactly a rational worry, but the brain is a machine that transmutes information into anxiety with frightening efficiency.

“And here I thought setting codewords was supposed to minimize chatter.” Serena Mosley’s frying voice filtered into my ears. “But I realize now that was always a lost cause.”

I quickly fumbled to mute my phone so I could hear the group passing beneath my hiding place.

The five of them were varied in stature but not aesthetic, dressed in the kind of hoodies you see tech bros wear when they want to seem approachable – most black, with a simple iconic logo on the chest or arms. Maybe this went higher than we thought - some kind of ‘plainclothes’ brief? Two of them were carrying six-packs of shit-tier beer, which made it seem unlikely.

“... out here for the *vibes*?” One of the beer-holders was saying. “Could have set up in Rod’s fuckin’ basement, but no, let’s go hang out in the *graveyard*.”

“It’s part of the intention thing. You know, uh – what’d she say, some twelfth-grade-English bullshit.”

When they had gone a good one-point-five-times out of my best guess at earshot, I whispered into the mic: “These guys don’t know shit about magic.”

Serena sighed audibly. “Won’t stop them from trying, huh?”

“Why don’t we just take them now?” Griffin might as well have been chomping at the bit. “Eleanor and I could drop three of these guys before they have time to get racist.”

“We only have rumours.” Moz’s tone turned flat; it’s possible she’d explained this to Griffin before. “Consonance demands we see what they’re capable of. Don’t worry, there’s a skylight on the roof. I’ll let you know when I have eyes.”

We don’t have nearly enough crypts in Stillriver, so our hoodie-clad cabal trudged past rows of identical world-war-two headstones to the graveyard’s concrete administrative building. What better place to hold a secret ritual, than the place some night guard gets to be bored all night?

“Wait.” I said aloud, somehow still nervous about how my voice would carry. “Shouldn’t there be some kind of night guard?”

I peeked through the leaves to find Eleanor and Griffin set up in their own tree at the corner of the graveyard, with sightlines on the administrative building and both other entrances. “Do you see anyone?”

“I think one of these guys is it.” Eleanor’s round face twisted, unsure. “Just scanning them from a distance it’s hard to tell, but it’d fit, right? The kind of person who wants to walk around a graveyard eight hours a night could be into some hinky shit.”

“Easy money, dark magic, same thing.” Griffin idly adjusted the slouchy toque on his head. “Moz?”

“They’re here, setting up in a circle around... a cat carrier.” It was hard to surprise Serena. “Simon, you’re ready?”

“Mmhm. If they hurt that cat, I’m bustin’ in.”

“No one would blame you.” I slid to the turf in a careful tumble. Of course, there would still be grass stains on my jeans. “Move in, folks. Cover the exits. Moz, stay in touch.”

Eleanor and Griffin formed up next to me as I hustled low between the graves. The admin building had front-facing windows with broad sightlines – though I couldn’t see anyone at them, I circled us wide.

I had to step quickly to keep up with Eleanor – at a leggy six-foot-one, she doesn’t always realize how fast she can move. Griffin had to work even harder than me, but I knew not to give him shit about it.

“You guys should have worn black.” He whispered, his monolidded eyes narrowing.

“Want me to dye my hair real quick?” Eleanor brushed her sheet of shining blonde for emphasis. “I figured out a spell the other day that makes it real simple. I *think* I’ve got the genes straight...”

“We weren’t spotted, right?” I said, and Griffin conceded as we reached the main entrance to the admin building.

Just as we heard the door handle click.

“Someone’s going for the- ” I muted Serena; too late.

“Eleanor!” I hissed, but she was already pulling something from her bag, a shimmering, opaque piece of fabric. The words she whispered as she spread it over her face were soothing, and I had the sudden easy inclination to look past her, to unfocus my eyes. An invisible blanket settled heavy over our heads and shoulders, muting the world outside, as the front door swung open and crashed against the outer wall.

It was one of the shorter goons I’d seen before, eerily similar to people I’d grown up with. Unkempt stubble. Shaggy, neglected hair peeking out from the sides of his company toque. Unhumble yet insecure eyes -- something was burning there, some stake I didn’t understand, but I imagined it was what lead him here tonight. Inside my head I called him Melvin – it helped to give them names, kept me grounded.

Griffin tensed underneath the man's gaze beside me, and I slowly, carefully, put my hand on his shoulder to soothe him.

Melvin's eyes darted to where I'd moved, his pupils dilating as he tried to refocus on what he'd seen in the dark. Eleanor was stock-still, the shimmering fabric – was that fabric? It looked almost like reptilian skin – covering her eyes and half her nose, her whispering ceased since the door swung wide. We were only going to get through this if we had absolute faith in her.

"Fuckin'..." the guy peered closer at the blank spot that was us. His beer-basted breath washed over us. Could he hear us breathing? Oh god, Eleanor wasn't breathing, we probably should have held our breath too.

But then Melvin's eyes crossed again, and he decided to turn back inside and haul the door shut. "We're clear." He called back. "Let's be heroes, people!"

Eleanor finally exhaled, pulling the scales from her eyes and the cloak from our backs, and turned to us with a smile like dawn.

"Not so bad, huh?" She whispered, panting. "Chameleon skin catalyst. Been working on that one."

"Looks tough." Griffin took up a position next to the door, one of his hands ready at his belt. He had something there, but I didn't have time to ask him about it before Moz's voice came over my headphones.

"They didn't spot you, nice work." She said. "They're forming up around the cat carrier, everybody get ready."

I formed up next to Griffin while Eleanor posted in front of the door, digging in her messenger bag for some other spell component.

This close to the front door I could hear their muffled voices inside – they weren't trying to be subtle.

"We beseech you today, at the lowest – put that down! – ahem. We beseech you here, targets of, uh, misfortune – and we beg for your blessing." That was a treble voice – so at least they weren't a completely uniform group, as I'd expected.

"Beggin' seems a little much, Candace..."

"Bud, we need to focus." A third voice.

"We offer you this vessel, Lord of Cups, that you may fill - fill our families' cups. We beseech you!" The woman – Candace, assumedly - shouted again. "Come on down and take this vessel!"

“Is she... joking?” Griffin couldn’t contain his incredulous look.

“Really should have written down an incantation, if they wanted to use one.” Eleanor sighed. “Moz? Can we crash yet?”

“Not yet.” Came her urgent reply. “No hint of conta- wait. Yes! Go now!”

I breathed in sharp, go-time air, and hauled the door open for my companions. Griffin pushed in first – but as he passed me, I saw him pull a black nine-milimeter pistol from his belt.

“A g-?!” I whispered protest, but he was gone. “Eleanor, stop him!”

She shrugged at me and filed in, a whiteboard eraser in her hand. My teeth involuntarily slammed together. I tried to put on my best authority-face, knowing I’d have to back Griffin up whether I wanted to rip the gun out of his hands or not.

“Everybody get the *fuck* on the ground!” Griffin screamed, his pistol pointing at the smooth stone floor, ready to snap into firing position. His confidence had been growing over our last few engagements, but after a whole year of working together I didn’t think he would go this far without showing the warning signs. *You should have seen through it*, I chastised myself. *You should have known to go in first. Or seen the gun on him.*

The wannabe cultists didn’t know how to react – most of them froze. The one who had been doing most of the chanting, the woman in the middle of the salt circle next to the cat carrier, raised her hands and turned around slow – I would have cast her in a police procedural. But when she met my eyes, scanned our clothes, the corner of her mouth peeled up.

“You’re not cops.” Candace said, eyes glittering. I held her name to remind me not to fear her.

“You’re right.” I forced my tone to come out straight, diplomatic. “We-“

“We’re the ones telling you to *lie down* for your own safety.” Griffin cut in.

The five of them exchanged looks, from *we can take them* to *we’re in over our heads*. One of the taller guys started to go supine.

And then the light drained from the admin building’s fluorescents, slowly, like the sun going behind the horizon. My skin prickled, and suddenly I felt lighter, looser, as reality’s rules flooded from the room.

Red and blue leaked in from a hidden source and cast the faces of our wannabes – some horrified, some rapturous, one still wrapped around a beer can – in snapshot shadowed moments. Standing this close to a dimensional tear is pure nails on a chalkboard – a sympathetic scratch inside your head, fundamental wrongness that floods your monkey brain.

When someone shouted “run!”, I could hardly blame them. This was one of many things we’re supposed to protect them from.

Of course, we couldn’t protect them if they remembered it. So when our wannabes scattered like panicking sheep, it was our duty to round them up.

Griffin met my gaze in the otherworldly light, his finger curling around the trigger. I winced, but I didn’t stop him. Muzzle-flash, the curt *snap* of a bullet – and one of the black-clad forms fell, screaming, clutching their leg. The one I’d called Melvin.

Eleanor streaked forward to catch a short wannabe who thought they could slip past her and swept her whiteboard eraser across their crown front-to-back. The figure fell to their knees with a blank stare, and Eleanor grinned at me.

She didn’t need my help, so I scanned the laser-light-show and found another figure streaking for the emergency entrance, where a massive shadow waited for them, bulky and almost as broad as the door.

Six-foot-five Simon stepped out, more fat than muscle, red catching in his eyes as he locked the man’s gaze. Simon turned, and the man turned, like they were dance partners. It could have been terrifying, but Simon held the smaller man almost tenderly, by the wrists. I thought I heard him whisper “you’re safe here, safe with me...” I could have sworn I saw the man’s fly bulge out as Simon pressed him against the wall, but it might have been a trick of the light.

There was only one more I could see, a woman who had been standing frozen by her stash of beer. I was ready to approach, to tell her to take cover, when she pulled a hefty can of bear spray out of her bag, yanked the safety off, and aimed it at me. I cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Get back!” She commanded. I raised my own hands and backed out of range. “This’ll burn your fucking eyes out. You’re not taking me anywhere.”

“I don’t *want* to take you anywhere.” I spared a glance around the room. The fluorescent light seemed to be returning, that cracked feeling sealing itself – if the membrane between dimensions could be permanently damaged by a bunch of drunk yahoos, the human race wouldn’t have lasted long enough to invent the

wheel. A look at Eleanor told me she was helping the process along, eyes closed, miming with a little silver sewing needle.

“You fucking *shot* my friend.” The woman with the bear-mace hissed at me, finger still on the trigger. Melvin was still awake, propped up against the wall, his pained gasps punctuating our conversation.

“We’re going to get them help.” I tried a pointed glare at Griffin and found him absent; he must have gone after Candace. I presented the woman my most conciliatory face. “I’m sorry. The situation got a little out of ha-“

And just when I thought I might be able to figure the situation out, the skylight shattered – I saw Moz’s thin frame and wild curls land on the stone floor, roll to protect her from the fall, and streak down one of the admin building’s side-hallways.

But Bear-Mace saw her chance to go for the door behind me and took it. I didn’t have time to hope she wouldn’t mace me, or to choose much at all. I couldn’t let her go, so I looked down inside myself.

Your essential *you*-ness is spread throughout your body, wrapped in every muscle fibre and ounce of blood. It’s malleable, and it flows with you, your movements, your thoughts. If you focus – or *unfocus* – just right, you can even feel it. And with a lot of training and a little secret ritual, you can hold it in your hand.

As Bear-Mace bullrushed me, I gathered from that wellspring and pulled a thread of energy through my arm to coalesce in my palm, a radioactive viridian. I pitched it at her like a baseball and winced as the streak of colour splashed across her shoulder and sent her flying a good four feet.

The mace sputtered wide as she hit the wall sideways -- I caught it before its compressed contents could explode and turned my attention to this poor person I could have concussed. “Oh *shit*, sorry, are you okay?”

“What the f-- w-what did you hit me with?” She mumbled, dazed, trying to get back to her feet.

“Potential.” I shrugged. “You seem okay. Uh, Eleanor?”

“Absolute quiet, please!” She replied, her voice cheery despite the command.

I sighed, watching Bear-Mace get back to her feet. I *really* didn’t want to restrain anyone today.

“Don’t suppose you’d sit back down if I said please?” I lowered my voice to keep from disrupting Eleanor.

“You’re like *magic cops*.” She said, refusing to extend the same courtesy.

“Sure. Except we’re not funded by the city – god I *wish*. More peacekeeping, less institutional racism.” I pointed at my own face. Not that we didn’t have our own shit to unpack – but we kept each other accountable.

I was sure going to hold Griffin accountable. A car’s engine roared somewhere outside, making me worry, but I couldn’t investigate while Simon and Eleanor were both tied up.

“Oh good. *Libtard* magic cops.” Bear-Mace – I should have thought of a better long-term name – rolled her eyes.

“Labels are limiting.” I winked at her. “For instance, I’m not going to label you in contempt of Consonance until you demonstrate you knew exactly what you were doing here, tearing at the bounds of reality.”

“Consonance?” She seemed earnestly confused, which was good for her. “Look, man, we’re not in contempt of anything. We all got laid off a month ago and we’re fucking broke.”

I looked at the logo on her hoodie, the one they all wore. *That solves that*, I supposed. *No busting-up corporate offices for you today, Jer*.

Bear-Mace kept talking, which was also good for her. “Candace had a page from some weird book, said she could make gold pour out of a cat’s mouth if we showed up at the right time and said some dumb shit.”

“Step three: profit! It’s just that easy.” I threw my hands up, exasperated at the sheer thoughtlessness. I couldn’t blame people for trying to use magic to make money, but they were almost never curious about what it might actually cost.

“Yeah. I just came for the beer, but apparently I should have believed her. Or not, since the magic cops showed up.”

The room’s energy fell to a tentative hum as the lights returned to normal. Having fixed the tear, Eleanor appeared at my side, digging in her satchel for the whiteboard eraser. “Hey, I’m ready.”

“Go ahead. She doesn’t know anything,”

“Don’t you-” And before she could finish, Eleanor swept the eraser over Bear-Mace’s forehead, and she collapsed against the wall again.

Eleanor nearly collapsed next to her – I caught her arm. “Hey, whoa. You got a few more in you?”

“Uugh... Yeah, I think so.” Her face was even paler than normal. “But I hope Moz comes back soon. Invisibility, mind wipes, dimensional tear... I probably shouldn’t mess with a bullet wound on empty.”

I gave Eleanor an encouraging back-rub and turned my attention to the room. Simon was still locked in eye contact with the man in the back, and Melvin was quietly sucking air through his teeth to keep from making any more noise, scanning for exits he knew he couldn’t reach, clutching his leg tight. I wanted to help him, but I had to make sure the team was okay first.

“Simon, how’s it going?” I called across the room, toeing scattered salt and broken glass. “Did you see why Moz needed to make such a mess?”

“She followed Griffin down the hall.” Simon’s voice was strangely smooth when he was like this, almost unsettling. “Could have been chasing a visitor.”

“No way.” Eleanor panted, still trying to catch her breath. “I sealed the tear tight, and I couldn’t have been watching it harder if it was an adorable puppy. If anything slipped through, it was before we came in – on that you have the Eleanor Royce-Taylor guarantee.”

“I was *hoping* to keep Mr. Tactical from shooting anyone else.” Moz strode in from the side hallway, leading Griffin all but by the ear.

Griffin unleashed his best sheepish grin. “Okay, did I need to shoot him? Maybe not. But did I keep him from escaping? The results speak for themselves.”

“And Candace?” Eleanor asked. “She was the only one who seemed to know anything.”

Griffin sighed. “She knew how to jump through a window, I’ll give her that.”

“I’ve already cleaned it up.” Moz wiggled long, deft fingers. “She had a car parked nearby, though – took off just as we got outside. We’ll have to put together some sort of tracking spell.”

“Maybe we can use the furry baby?” Eleanor leaned over to peer at the completely nonplussed calico in the carrier – it stuck one lazy paw out the front grate. “Assuming, of course, he isn’t possessed by an adorable demon. Are you possessed, little guy?”

With the team accounted for, I couldn't ignore Melvin's pain any longer. I approached cautiously and, when he let me, pulled his hands away from his bloody thigh. It wasn't gushing – looked like the bullet had lodged itself in the muscle.

"Let me hold this." I said softly, and Melvin gave me a pained look. He heard the whole exchange I'd had with Bear-Mace, and he knew we wouldn't be talking for long. "Hey Moz?"

"One sec." Moz had walked over to free Simon. Eleanor tossed her the eraser and she swept it – slower than Eleanor had, more deliberate – over the last wannabe's eyes. Simon lowered the man gently to the tile, then stretched his meaty shoulders as that deep, compelling red faded from his eyes.

"Hoof." He puffed. "Haven't held someone that long in a while."

"The ol' blue-balls, huh?" Griffin grinned conspiratorially, causing Simon to screw his mouth up tight as he tried to figure out how to respond. Luckily, Moz was there to save us all from the awkwardness of the moment.

"Shove over." She slung her backpack to the floor next to me and started pulling supplies out of it – tweezers, a small cloth, sanitizing wipes, a spool of thread, and a little vial of ice cubes.

"Wha- what are you going to do to me?" Melvin bit his lip, eyeing Moz nervously.

"I'm Serena Mosley, and I'm going to get the bullet out of your leg." She shook the ice cubes experimentally before pulling the cap off. "And then I will bestow upon you the sweet gift of ignorance."

"Is that how you think of it?" Melvin seemed to regret as soon as he said it, as if we were going to leave him to bleed.

"No." Moz tipped the vial into her hand and started rubbing an ice cube around the wound, alternating with the cloth to mop up blood and water.

"Wha – ah!" Melvin protested at first, but then calmed into smooth amazement. "You made it – it doesn't hurt."

"Pretty cool, huh?" I said to him. "Don't worry, bud. Moz is the best healer I've met."

"Have you actually met any others?" She tossed the bloody cloth at me and pushed her tweezers steadily into the wound. "Didn't go too deep, won't even need to x-ray. You're going to be fine, buddy."

She dropped the bullet in my hand a moment later, and then set to work tying the thread loosely around her own fingers, held up in front of her face in a strange imitation of the wound, almost like a cat's cradle. She whispered something softly to herself, pulled the thread slowly taught, and through the bloody hole in Melvin's jeans I watched his flesh stretch across the wound from both sides. After another tug on the cradle, the denim did the same, only slightly worse for wear.

It never seemed any less miraculous – or any less draining. My hands were ready to steady her when she finished, but she waved me off and started sanitizing her tools.

Eleanor was ready with the eraser, too. Her seafoam eyes locked on Melvin's, golden brown.

"Look, I'll be real with you. Something traumatic, like getting shot, can mess with the memory spell. I'm going to go slow, try and be thorough, but you might get flashes, especially in your dreams."

"... Why would you bother telling me? Do I have a choice?"

"About getting wiped?" She looked back at me, unsure. I checked Melvin's face – he was clearly afraid, affected by what he'd seen, with some curiosity showing through.

There was an option, but I wasn't going to do that to him. I shook my head in a solemn *no* – and a quick glance at Moz and Simon confirmed my judgment. Griffin wasn't paying attention, checking the windows and doors, and checking them again.

"No." Eleanor told Melvin. "But I can attach some instructions in case the dreams get bad, if you'd like. Like, uh, a feeling, a pull, to go where we can help you."

Melvin frowned. "Jesus. I mean, yeah? I guess?"

"Sure thing." Eleanor brought the eraser up to his forehead. "I'll keep my office hours open for you, how about that. Oh, and, uh, if you lean back this is going to be more comfortable."

And as soon as he complied, he was out snoring, slack against the wall. Eleanor took a little more time – still less than Moz – to finish the wipe, and then starfished face-down on the floor.

"Naptime!" She proclaimed.

"Couldn't agree more." I dragged my feet over to Simon, who had hefted the cat carrier for transport. "Let's get kitty back to base for testing, put out a – what's that thing where you look out for a vehicle?"

“APB.” Griffin didn’t miss a beat.

Simon’s eyes crinkled puckishly around the edges. “Nooo, I think it’s ATV?”

“No, that’s an all-terrain vehicle.” Moz had a vastly superior poker face. “You’re thinking of a VCR.”

“Yeah, okay. Everyone make fun of the new guy.” Griffin pouted.

“Mm, speaking of.” I beckoned everyone to follow me out the front door and squared up on Griffin outside, lit overhead by warm but poorly-maintained graveyard lights.

“I need your gun.” I straightened my back into a stern posture, but couldn’t make it feel easy. I hoped Griffin wouldn’t notice. “Serena, Simon, are we in agreement?”

“Excuse me?” Griff didn’t give them the chance to back me up – I didn’t know him that well yet, but he seemed like the type who wasn’t denied often. He was handsome, objectively speaking, and I thought I’d heard he had rich parents. Couldn’t blame him; couldn’t excuse him, either.

“I’ll get it back, right?” He puffed his chest out like a pigeon I’d known once.

“Hmf.” Moz rolled her eyes. “You’ll be lucky to get it back at all.”

“I need it.” His hands moved a fraction of an inch to where the pistol was stowed in his belt - the line between protective and aggressive narrowed considerably, only confirming my fear. “All of you have your otherworldly bullshit. I don’t have anything else.”

“You could learn magic.” Eleanor offered. “I’d teach you.”

“That’s not the point.” Simon rumbled. “Griffin. The gun.”

“We’re all tired, man.” I said. “We’ll hash all this out later, I promise you’ll get to say everything you need to. But for now...”

I swear, if I had given him the order one more time, he might have snapped. As it was, he slammed the pistol into my hand hard enough to bruise it and stormed off in what I knew to be the opposite direction of his place. *I* wasn’t going to be the one to tell him.

Why. I thought to myself. *Why do we ever recruit people before they’re a good five years out of puberty.*

You turned out fine, didn't you? My self thought back. I found myself unable to answer the question.

"See you tomorrow!" Eleanor called cheerily at Griffin's back as it faded into the dark.