

We Are What We Create.



FLASHPOINT

by David Salcido

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All characters in this story are fictitious. Any resemblance to real individuals-either living or dead-is purely coincidental. This story is speculative fiction loosely based on existing characters from the golden age of television. Very loosely based. Very, very loosely based. So, don't sue me.

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“It all came from there,” Lech Walesa said, pointing to a TV when a reporter asked him why communism fell. Can democracy, then, be so far behind?



Eddie

Running. Can't catch my breath. Lungs on fire. Running. Howling from pain. From fear. Where are they? My family? I can't find them. Can't smell them. Only smoke. Sweat. And hatred. Where are they? Mother? Father? Grandpa? Where are you? Howling. Howling. Howling...

“Eddie! Eddie, wake up!”

I try to spring from my bed, dream howls echoing into reality. Strong arms hold me down.

“Eddie!”

I snap out of it, breathing hard, hair bristling, eyes wide and staring.

“Edd,” I growl groggily. “Not Eddie...”

Wednesday looks deep into my eyes, hers black as midnight, twin holes burned into a beautiful lean face, pale and without expression. My oldest friend. She's stronger than she looks. I've got a good hundred pounds on her and she can still restrain me. She looks deep into my eyes, searching for something. Then, satisfied that I am truly awake, releases me from the vice-like grip of her decidedly un-ladylike embrace.

“The nightmare again.”

It's not a question. I nod.

“That's not good.”

“It's nothing. Go back to bed.”

She raises an eyebrow. The only expression she allows herself. “It's never nothing with you, Edd.”

She's right, of course. The only time I ever have this awful dream is when something equally awful is about to happen. It's a gift. Or a curse, depending on how you look at it. Same thing in this house.

“Are you going to tell them, or am I?”

I glare at her. She stares me down. “I don't want to alarm anyone. Go back to your room, Wednesday.”

A rare smile creeps into the corner of her mouth, but is never fully realized. “Silly boy, alarm is our business...”

Dr. Collins sits, patiently listening. Beside him, Dr. Rhodes takes notes. I feel like a guinea pig. Like the boy who cried wolf. Or, is that the other way around? Dr. Rhodes clears his throat, bringing me out of my reverie.

“Was there anything different about the dream, this time around, Edd? Anything you might have noticed that set it apart from the last time you had it?”

I can feel my brow furrowing as I try to remember. It’s all so fuzzy now. Fading into my subconscious, where ugly memories like this belong.

“I’m sorry, Doc. Same as always. Me running from the Feds, looking for my family. Everything around me on fire. And the horrible sound of my cousin Marilyn screaming...”

I look from one to the other. Dr. Michael Rhodes, a tall, handsome man in his mid-sixties and an expert at parapsychology. Dr. David Collins, shorter, more distinguished, in his early forties, owner and administrator of The Institute. Our home. The only

place that will accept freaks like us.

“Not freaks, Edd. Never freaks.”

Dr. Rhodes smiles and I shake my head. Partly out of exasperation, partly to get him out of it.

Dr. Collins stands. “Alright, Edd, if that’s all you remember.” He looks disturbed. Troubled. A sure sign that he takes what I’ve told him very seriously. “You can go now. Just stay close. And alert the team to do likewise. We may have to scramble on a moment’s notice.”

I sigh. Another mission. Another attempt to save the world from itself. Considering the timeliness of the dream, most likely another villain to overthrow.

Dr. Rhodes cocks his head. “There are no true villains, Edd. You know that. Only misguided individuals who misuse their power.”

Yeah, easy for him to say. He hasn’t gone head to head with one of those “misguided” power trippers. Hasn’t ever looked into the face of absolute evil. Hasn’t had to outsmart, overpower and in some cases exterminate those who give the rest of us a bad name. Fellow freaks with a personal agenda. Rogue magicals who refuse to play by the rules so graciously set down by our benevolent government.

“Who’s to say who’s misusing whose power, Doc.”

It’s an old argument. One I never expect to win. So, I leave without waiting for a rebuttal.

“No idea who, where or when?”

I shake my head, running my hands through the thick mane my hair has become. It always grows so much faster around the time of the full moon.

Wednesday nods, then leans back in her chair, making it creak as she pushes it up to balance on two legs. Placing first one stilletoed leather boot on the corner of the table, then crossing it with the other, she puts her gloved hands behind her head and stares at me thoughtfully.

“I’ll bet it has something to do with the government, this time,” she says quietly. “I’ve noticed that Dave has been watching a lot of news lately, paying particular attention to the Fox broadcasts. And the other day, I heard him telling Michael and that old crank case Julia that the President was trying to push through an amendment to the Constitution that would make it illegal for magicals to marry each other.”

It always amuses me the way Wednesday refuses

to use the professional titles of the Institute's staff, choosing instead to treat them like peers. This time, however, I'm not in the mood for levity. "What's the point in that?" I ask. "I guess he'd rather we marry regular mortals, instead?"

"Well, it does make a kind of sense, doesn't it? Dilute the bloodlines. Tabby's not nearly as powerful as her mother was. And her little brother was completely powerless. That had to be her father's genes at work."

"Well, she holds her own," I say, probably a little too crankily. Being team leader isn't always easy with this group.

"I didn't say she doesn't."

I try a different tack. "It's that fucking Senator Kolchak's influence, I'd bet my fangs on it. Dr. Collins told me that there was a time when nobody believed a word he said. He was seen as a loose cannon with an overactive imagination. I can't imagine it..."

"That was a long time ago," Wednesday says. "And things change. He's a very powerful man now."

"So, you think he's behind this, too?"

"Of course," she says. "Who else? The Kolchak Initiative is what started this whole descent into

madness in the first place.”

“Don’t remind me. I still have nightmares about it, remember?”

“We both lost family members in that holocaust, Eddie.”

It’s a statement of fact and she says it with her trademark lack of emotion, but I can tell that the memory still hurts her as much as it does me. In the days and nights that followed the signing of the Kolchak Initiative, witches, genies, disembodied hands and Transylvanian immigrants like my parents were rounded up, bound by bell, book and candle and taken to concentration camps, set up on hallowed ground. Talking dogs, cats, horses and cars were included in the “cleansing.” None were spared. Soon after came the rumors of holy water showers and garlic gassings. And questions that never seem to be answered, no matter how many times they’re asked. Or by whom.

“Kolchak,” I snarl. “That man should have been put out of our misery long ago...”

She brings her chair down onto all fours and leans toward me. “Maybe we’ll get that chance, finally.”

“Chance to do what?” asks Tabby, strolling into the

kitchen looking flushed and dewy. She's wearing her workout clothes and toweling at her forehead as she opens the refrigerator and pulls out a bottle of water. She opens it and looks from one to the other of us, questioningly. Her smell is intoxicating.

"Win the lottery," Wednesday says.

"You can't win, if you don't play," Tabby chirps, swigging at the bottle of water.

"Like you have to worry about that," Wednesday says. "You're married to Lord David Moneybags. A man so rich he's got an entire town named after him."

Tabby's delicate brow furrows and her blue eyes flash in Wednesday's direction. "That's hardly a nice thing to say about the man who has opened his home to you and given you a purpose in life."

Wednesday's coal black slash of an eyebrow shoots straight up into her hairline. "Is that what he's done? And here I thought he had turned us into the government's magical lapdogs. Silly me."

Tabby's face drains of all color. "How dare you. You were nothing before David took you in. You're lucky to have a place at all to call home. He deserves your respect, not your condescension."

Wednesday stands, the six-inch heels of her boots raising her already considerable height to something close to seven feet. Whipcord thin, and sharp as a blade, she never ceases to impress me. And, yes, to scare me a little, too. The leather of her corset creaks and the whip at her side swings seductively close to her gloved hand. She steps forward, dwarfing Tabby and crowding her into the corner nearest the sink.

“I give my respect to those who deserve it. And don’t you ever call me nothing again...”

“Or what?” Tabby challenges, her blue eyes flashing and her blonde hair beginning to lift in a non-existent breeze.

“Ladies, please,” I finally say, standing and laying a calming hand on Wednesday’s shoulder. She shrugs it off angrily, turning to glare at me. “We’re supposed to be a team, remember?” I finish lamely.

Wednesday turns to penetrate Tabby with her soul-sucking eyes and snarls, “A team of whipped dogs, doing the bidding of a government that despises us and only keeps us around to do its dirty work! I shouldn’t have to remind you, Mrs. Better-Than-Thou Collins, that you lost family in the holocaust, too. David may have a family crawling with immortals, but he’s still just a man. And just because you’ve married a mortal, doesn’t mean you’ll ever be one.”

Trembling with rage, but somehow able to erase it completely from her face, Wednesday turns and shoulders past me. “If you need me, I’ll be in the training room... killing something.”

We both watch her go, then I turn back to Tabby. Her lip is trembling and tears are threatening to overflow onto her cheeks.

“She didn’t mean it, Tabby,” I say, trying to find words to comfort her.

She shakes her head abruptly and wipes angrily at her eyes. “Yes, she did.”

“Tabitha...”

She puts her hands up defensively. “Leave me alone, Edd.”

I step back, feeling like a lummo--a huge, overbearing brute. I don’t have the words to say what I want to say. Never have. I’m just a monster. A monster by name and a monster by design. While she is so fine and delicate. So beautiful. So opposite Wednesday and me in every respect.

I can’t bring myself to look at her again. Instead, I simply nod and shuffle out of the kitchen.



Wednesday

I hate the bitch. Hate her. So smug and self-righteous. Always lecturing us on how grateful we should be to her husband for taking us in and training us.

Taking aim at the holographic imp projected specifically for my training maneuvers, I imagine it to be Tabitha Collins and snap it's little head off with the tip of my lash.

Of course I respect David Collins. I'm not stupid. The man is a tactical genius, converting his ancestral home into the government sanctioned Institute for Paranormal Research, which serves as a front for the FBI's modified X-Files division.

An imp bounces under my lash and springs toward me. I side-step, bring the lash back and roundhouse the imp as it flies by, the heel of my boot catching it just under the right ear. It implodes silently.

What even those lunkheads at the agency don't know, however, is that the Institute is also a safehouse for magicals; an important stop on the underground railway which eventually transports them to Europe, where the witch hunt mentality has been tempered by centuries of tolerance.

The imps try a concentrated attack, but I scatter them with my lash, then follow that with an overhand slice of my blade. Another imp bites the dust.

Only someone of David's cunning and intelligence could figure out how to use the government's attempts at controlling the situation against them. One of the benefits of being privately owned and operated, I suppose. The man is a god in my eyes. Naturally, I would never tell HER that.

I pop another imp into oblivion, then rebound and backlash two more into ionic dust. I'm a bit off my game. Distracted by that fucking witch.

Tabitha fucking Collins. Little Miss Prep School. What in the hell does David Collins see in her? What do any of them see in her? Even Eddie is infatuated with her. Drooling like a puppy when she comes around. All that blonde hair and tanned skin. Those bright blue eyes. Those perfect, fucking, gravity-defying tits! Tell me that's not magic at work. She's a fucking Barbie Doll come to life. If it weren't for her, Eddie might

actually see me...

Pop. Slice. Fizzle.

No, I can't think like that. It'll only make me weak and that's one thing I cannot afford to be. My mother was weak. Lovesick and infatuated with my father. The perfect, doting wife. A model of civility and grace. It all seemed so wonderful back then. So right. Before we were all dragged out of our home like common criminals, separated and shipped off to concentration camps and holding cells. Before the holocaust. Before the evil times. Even the fact that my father was a lawyer couldn't save the rest of my family.

Thwack. Swoosh. Three more are vaporized. Two more to go.

But I'm stronger than he was. Much stronger. I learned what I could from him and improved upon it. And though it fuels my anger to be a lapdog to our oppressors, I understand the role we actually play. That's why I continue to play it. Michael understands my reasoning better than anyone. He's been inside my head, but he's never judged me for what he's seen there. He does, however, keep a very close eye on me. He knows that, given the opportunity, I will get revenge for what was done to my family. I bide my time for now. Play the good foot soldier. Bring rogue magicals to "justice." For now. But he knows.

He knows...

I step back and let the remaining two imps come to me. I stand perfectly still, my blade before me, dividing my line of sight. The lash is wrapped around my leg, a ready tool of coiled destruction. The imps advance from either side, chittering like monkeys. In my mind's eye, I see the face of Senator Carl Kolchak and my vision goes red. My blade sings and the face of evil disintegrates in a silent scream.

Some day, that scream will be real. And the silence will be over.

I'm not at all surprised when the call finally comes.

“A young lady of some importance has been kidnapped by an RM,” David says in our briefing. “All that's known about the abductor is that he's from somewhere in the deep South and that he appears relatively young.”

Not that it means anything. Magicals tend to age much slower than mortals do. Eddie and I are pushing 50, but look to be in our early 20s. Tabitha is ten years younger and still looks 18. The bitch.

Then he says something that makes my ears prick

up. “You’ll be flying to Washington D.C. for this one. It seems our RM has chosen a full-frontal attack on the Capital itself. The abductee in question is the President’s daughter.”

Michael is watching me intently. It takes all of my learned abilities to make my mind as bland and emotionless as my face.

“My stars, David! That’s horrible!”

Everyone turns to look at Tabitha. Everyone except Michael. That just serves to irritate me.

“Why does the fact that it’s the President’s daughter make it any more horrible?” I ask.

Tabitha looks at me, round-eyed. “Well... it’s not any more horrible... it’s just... I don’t know... Is nothing sacred?”

I raise my eyebrow. “We work for the government, Tabitha. Think about it.”

“When will we be leaving, Doc?” Eddie asks, obviously trying to diffuse the situation. I shoot him a withering look. It has its desired effect, as he shrinks slightly and turns his attention fully on David.

“Immediately,” David says. “The chopper is on the

pad and ready to fly. Take only what you need. This is an in and out operation. The FBI wants it taken care of quickly, before the press gets wind of it.”

“Naturally,” I say. “And what are we supposed to do with the RM when we find him?”

“Standard operating procedures.”

“Right,” I say. “Try to make him see the error of his ways and if he doesn’t, waste him.”

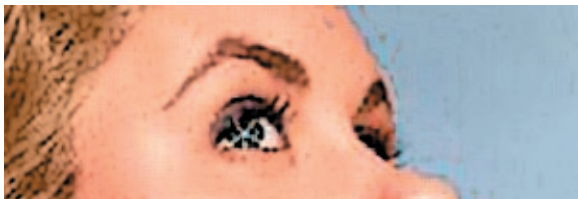
“Wednesday!” Tabitha interjects. How is it that the woman can always look so shocked at anything I say. You’d think she’d be used to it by now.

“Don’t start with me, Snow White,” I reply. “We’ve got a job to do. It doesn’t mean I have to like it. Savvy?”

Tabitha blinks, but opts to remain silent. Maybe she’s not as stupid as I thought.

“Let’s move, team,” Eddie says authoritatively.

“Yes, sir,” I reply. He is, after all, our team leader. A role he’s perfectly suited for. I hope he can see, when he turns a relieved look in my direction, that I would follow him into hell, if that’s what the mission calls for. Him and no other.



Tabitha

I'm always a bit nervous when we set out on a new mission. Just jitters, nothing more. They always seem to dissipate when I climb behind the controls of whatever aircraft we'll be using for the trip. I've always had an affinity for flying things. Comes with the territory, I guess. Sort of makes up for the fact that my powers aren't nearly as strong as my mother's were. No snappy flying suits and broomsticks for me. My grandmother never quite got over that little glitch in my wiring. Even sent me to the exclusive Hogwarts prep school in Europe, but all the flying lessons in the world couldn't get me off the ground without a rudder and control panel.

“You're cleared for take-off, Tabitha.”

My husband's voice sounds a bit tighter than usual. I try to put him at ease, by sounding more chipper than I actually feel.

“Roger, dodger. We’ll be back before dinner. Keep it warm for us.”

It seems to have the desired effect. I can almost hear the smile in his voice when he responds with “I’ll do that. Be safe. No heroics.”

“Is that supposed to be funny, or just ironic, David?”

I wince inwardly. Why does Wednesday always have to be so... inappropriate. Luckily for us all, David takes it with a grain of salt.

“Both, I suppose. Take care of one another.”

“No problem, Doc,” Edd says authoritatively. “We’ve got it all under control. Back soon.”

Thank heavens for Edd. His strength and leadership abilities are really all that hold this team together. He seems to be the only one who can keep Wednesday under control, these days. She’s such a wild card. There are times that I wonder if she’s even right for this sort of organization. Not that I would ever question my husband’s choices, but still...

“Okay, head’s up, team,” Edd says, once the com has been silenced. “From what intelligence tells us, our RM hasn’t exhibited any outward manifestations of power, but we’ve got to be ready for anything.”

“How do we know he’s an RM, then?” Wednesday asks, spitefully. “Maybe he’s just a mortal who’s as fed up with our current presidential administration as we are.”

“No such luck,” Edd says, confidently. “He somehow escaped being registered, but he’s announced himself, loud and clear. In his message to the White House, he stated that unless the President significantly changes his policy regarding magicals, he will never see his daughter again. I don’t have to tell you what that implies.”

“Oh, my stars. That poor girl!” I can’t help myself. It just slips out. I ready myself for the inevitable snipe from you know who...

“I guess it’s escaped you, little Miss Perfect, that this is an act of desperation, by someone who probably isn’t much different from you or me.”

“No,” I reply acidly. “It did NOT escape me. And he’s nothing like me, little Miss Sourpuss. I would never kidnap an innocent girl and use her like some sort of... of... pawn!”

Her meanness presents itself full throttle. “We’re all pawns. You’re just too stupid to realize it.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Edd says forcefully. “We’ve

got a job to do and we're not going to get anywhere if we're arguing amongst ourselves about the particulars."

I feel stung by his rebuke, but Wednesday just lets it roll off her back. "Of course, Edd," she says a little too sweetly. "You're right. We're just wasting valuable time. What's our plan of action?"

I hate it when she acts like she's the victim. Toadying up to Edd, just because he's the team leader. She's just lucky I don't have the powers my mother possessed. I'd have turned her into a toad a long time ago. Oh, who am I kidding. I could turn her into a toad right now, if I really wanted to. It just wouldn't be appropriate in a team member. Not to mention how disappointed David would be. Silently, I concentrate on flying and processing the plans Edd is laying out for us.

The thing I love about flying, is that it gives me a lot of time to think. The trip from Maine to Washington, D.C. isn't a long one, but I still find myself wondering what kind of person would kidnap an innocent girl to make his point. It just seems so, I don't know, brutal. Not that I should be surprised by brutality in this day and age. It's a brutal time. And as much as I would never admit it to her, I do think that Wednesday is right. We are pawns. Pawns in a secret war.

Oh, we do a lot of good. I believe that strongly. We've helped a lot of people. But we've also done a lot of damage, too. Most magicals who are aware of us, despise us. They see us as traitors to our kind. If only they knew of David's brilliant underlying plan. And that, despite appearances to the contrary, we really are the good guys. We've made a lot of sacrifices. And we've lost just as much as they have. Sometimes I think more.

It doesn't seem like so long ago that I was living with my parents and little brother, in our lovely little house on Morning Glory Circle. We were always surrounded by family. My grandmother was a frequent visitor. As were various uncles, aunts and distant relations. My father wasn't always happy with the intrusions, but as a child I lived for them. I thought my life would always be like that. Even when I was shipped off to school in Europe, I saw my mother and grandmother often. I just naturally assumed that they would always be a part of my life.

I can't think about the rest. Don't allow myself to do so. My mother and grandmother are gone. Other members of the Dobson clan have been forbidden to ever set foot on American soil again. My father and I had never been very close and, after that horrible night, he always cried when he saw me. Said I reminded him too much of my mother. Then he would lecture me on the dangers of witchcraft, until I couldn't stand it any

more and would have to retreat to the safety of my own apartment in the city. He died a few years ago. My brother, Adam, says it was alcoholism. I think he died of a broken heart.

It was pure luck that I met David Collins when I did. He had been giving a lecture on the important contributions magicals had made toward the benefit of mankind over the centuries, when a group of thugs decided to make an example of him. They attacked him openly and dragged him from the stage. They beat him and probably would have killed him if I hadn't interceded. I whisked him away to a hospital, then stayed by his side to make sure he would be okay. A few months later, we were married and I became the mistress of Collinwood.

Sounds romantic, doesn't it? I suppose it was, in a way. Oh, don't get me wrong, there was a lot of romance early on, but try as hard as I might, those moments become harder and harder to remember anymore. David's gotten older and more focused on his Institute. Our home has become the home to many. Some simply pass through, defeated, disillusioned, desperate to escape the hell our country has become. Others, like Edd, Wednesday and Dr. Rhodes, have chosen to stay and become a part of David's plan. We've seen so much ugliness over the years. So much hatred. So much that's bad. These are not very romantic times, I'm afraid.



Eddie

It's all controlled chaos when we finally arrive on the scene. Our target has taken several more hostages, but the biggest surprise is where he's holed up.

“How in the hell did he get into the White House?” Wednesday asks with her usual lack of diplomacy. “Aren't you supposed to have people who prevent things like this from happening?”

The thin-lipped agent in charge looks right through her, not easy considering she's towering over him, dressed like a comic book assassin.

“So much for keeping the media in the dark,” Tabby says, looking up at the helicopters circling the national landmark.

“Just get him out of there,” the agent says to me. “Without provoking the loss of human life, if at all possible.”

“As opposed to non-human life, I suppose?” Wednesday asks, her face unreadable.

The agent focuses on her. “Non-humans are expendable.”

To my surprise, it’s Tabby, not Wednesday who responds to this slight.

“I wouldn’t provoke her, if I were you Agent Jennings. That’s a very sharp blade she’s packing. And accidents have been known to happen.”

The agent turns a stony face in her direction. “I hope that wasn’t meant as a threat, Mrs. Collins. Even your husband’s considerable influence has its limits. And I don’t have to tell you that if anything happens to the President’s daughter, it won’t go well for you or any of your other so-called magical friends.”

Wednesday’s facade cracks, but Tabby is quicker. She steps between the two, turning her back on the agent and looking up into her teammate’s eyes imploringly. “Don’t Wednesday,” she whispers. “He’s not worth it. Let’s do what we can to save this situation. We can lodge a formal complaint later.”

“Complaint...” Wednesday snarls, but then takes a deep breath and nods curtly. “Of course. You’re right.”

The agent, apparently miffed at having been upstaged, turns to me. “I’d keep my bitches in line, if I were you. This is Washington D.C., not San Francisco. You have no allies here. Just do what you were sent to do. Get in there and take that asshole out.”

“Where, exactly, is he holed up?” I ask, trying to keep control of the situation.

“The Diplomatic Reception Room,” the agent says.

I look toward the building. “How appropriate.”

“Your opinion on this situation isn’t appreciated,” Jennings sneers. “Just get in there and take out the trash.”

Fury often fuels my change. I make a great show of it, feeling the lupine energy coursing through my veins, reading the expressions of Jennings and the agents flanking him as I do so. I can feel my canine lips curling into a smile, which is probably mistaken for a snarl. They step back, despite themselves. It’s unnerving to watch a man change into a wolf. Especially when there’s no full moon in the sky. That inevitability is still hours away. But I don’t really need it. Not anymore.

Once the change is complete, Wednesday steps forward and scratches me behind my right ear. “I’d

stand back, if I were you, boys. He hasn't had his rabies shot this year."

Jennings turns disgustedly and motions his men to follow him.

"Okay, now what?" Wednesday asks. I'm not sure if it's me or Tabby that she's addressing.

"Hold tight," Tabby says. "It's going to be a bumpy ride." Then, gesturing expansively, she teleports us from the barricaded parking lot and into the confines of the President's home.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" a voice rings out from behind us when we make our appearance. "More of them!"

"Easy, Senator," another voice says, calming the first. "These are our people."

"Our people?" the first voice sneers. "Not as long as I draw breath."

We turn, as a group, to glare at Senator Carl Kolchak. Instinctively, I utter a long menacing growl.

"Nice to see you, too, asshole," Wednesday sneers back.

Rage plays across the Senator's ruddy face and he

reaches out to pull a pistol from the holster of a nearby agent.

Wednesday smiles evilly. In my present state, I can smell the Senator's fear, as well as the surge of adrenaline his actions are causing in my teammate. I crowd closer to her, rubbing against her leg meaningfully.

Tabby steps forward. "Senator, I'm Mrs. David Collins, from the Institute for Paranormal Research." She extends a hand in his direction.

The Senator looks at her as though she's a plague victim. "Get away from me, monster!" he snaps, waving the gun in her face.

"Now, that's just not nice," drawls a new voice from somewhere behind us.

Wednesday and I spin around, assuming attack positions. The speaker appears to be in his late teens, golden hair cropped into a buzz cut, dressed casually in a white t-shirt and blue jeans. He stands uncertainly in a nearby doorway. Unassuming as he appears, I can feel the power radiating from him. This boy isn't just a magical, he's something more. And he isn't alone.

"Who the hell are you," Wednesday asks.

The boy blinks. “Name’s Caleb. Who’re you?” His accent speaks of the deep South.

Quicker than I would have thought possible, Tabitha steps around us. “We’re friends, Caleb. We’re here to help you.”

The boy’s eyes narrow. “Ah ain’t got no friends. An’ ah ain’t the one needin’ help.”

“You’ve taken innocent people hostage, Caleb.”

“Ah know, it’s the only way t’get their attention.”

The other I sensed earlier becomes more corporeal and I emit a low growl from the back of my throat. A woman dressed in white materializes, standing to the boy’s right.

“Shit,” Wednesday says. “A ghost.”

The boy’s eyes widen in surprise. “You can see her?”

Wednesday’s face loses its composure. “Oh, fuck... I know you! You’re that brat from South Carolina. The one they couldn’t contain. The sheriff’s son. That makes you...”

“Ah ain’t nuthin’!” the boy shouts. “Ah’m a man, jus’ like them!”

“I’ve had about enough of this,” Kolchak shouts from somewhere behind us. “Let’s see if you bleed like a man!”

I hear, rather than see, the Senator pulling the trigger of the pistol and suddenly everything is moving in slow motion. I lunge at the boy, putting all of my weight into my shoulder so that I can knock him off balance. I see his eyes grow round and the ghost’s mouth open in a silent scream. Then the bullet crashes into the back of my skull and the world splinters into shards of pain and blissful oblivion.



Wednesday

“Eddiiiiiiiiiiii!!!”

The scream is familiar. I should be, it comes from my own mouth. I whirl around to see Senator Kolchak preparing to fire another round. Instantly my whip is in my hand, the leather unfurling like a living thing. The leather sings. Guns appear in the hands of the agents flanking the Senator.

“Stop!”

Suddenly I can’t move. The descending lash halts in mid-air.

“Senator, prepare to pay for your sins,” the boy in the doorway cries. Kolchak, too, appears frozen in mid-action. “Come with me,” Caleb says, gesturing with an open palm. Almost as though he’s in a trance, the Senator lowers the weapon and shuffles forward. As he nears the doorway, the boy steps back and the Senator

follows him through into the other room. Slowly the door swings shut, the sound of its click echoing in the too quiet hallway and breaking the spell. Literally.

The whip descends on empty air. Civilians and agents alike scatter. Chaos erupts.

“Tabby,” I bark. “Get Eddie out of here!” For once she doesn’t argue. That unmistakable chime, a whoosh of air and she’s gone. All that remains is a splatter of blood decorating the doorjam and wall. And a helpless rage, like nothing I’ve ever felt before.

“This is an unmitigated disaster!” Spittle flies from Jennings foamy lips. “You were supposed to rescue the hostages, not give him another one!”

“What the hell was the Senator doing in that hallway?” I ask angrily. “Everything would be fine if your people had done their job and kept the area clear!”

“Don’t you dare blame this on the Senator or my people! It’s your bumbling that caused this problem. And you’ll damn well pay for it if he’s hurt in any way!”

It takes all my strength not to separate his head from his shoulders.

“If I were you, mortal, I’d get the FUCK out of my face!”

“Agent Jennings, please do as she says.” Tabby’s face is hard and cold. There’s blood smeared across the front of her white bodysuit and the right sleeve is red all the way up to the elbow. “You’re not helping matters any.”

“Just who do you think you’re talking to!” Jennings screams.

Tabby reaches up and pinches her tongue between her thumb and forefinger. Jennings grabs his throat, his jaw flapping like an unhinged box lid, but no sound comes out. His eyes bulge out of his head and his face grows even redder, but still he can’t utter a word. Tabby turns away from him dismissively.

“Nice trick,” I say. “I wish you’d done it sooner.”

She looks annoyed. And something else. I fear the worst. This is the first moment I’ve had to talk with her since emerging from the building.

“Is Eddie...”

Her brow furrows and her nostrils flare dramatically. “He’s badly hurt, but he’ll survive. Luckily there was no silver in those bullets.”

I turn to focus my rage on the Executive Mansion, looming like a storm over the proceedings. “I’m going to kill that man.”

“Caleb may beat you to it.”

Another agent, standing nearby, lowers his cel phone and says, “We’ve got a bigger problem.”

“I don’t see how it can get much worse.” I look at Tabby. She’s taken the words right out of my mouth.

“It’s worse,” the agent says. “Your rogue has somehow gotten hold of a camera and is now broadcasting his demands on national television.”

“He’s got it locked up tight as a drum,” Tabby says. “I don’t know how he did it, but that entire wing of the building has become a magical dead zone. Nothing magical works, which means I’m pretty much useless to you now.”

I don’t say it. Somehow, it just doesn’t seem right.

“I guess it’s up to me, then,” I say. “Aside from extraordinary luck and a quick healing ability, I have no real powers.”

“Your sword and whip skills?”

“All learned and honed through years of training. My father was an expert swordsman.”

For the first time in hours, hope creeps back into Tabby’s blue eyes. “Remember what David said. No heroics. If you can get in there and convince him to drop those shields, I may be able to get you both out. We can let the agents handle the hostages.”

“That’s a tall order. What if he doesn’t listen to me?”

“He has to. I can’t transport the unwilling or the resistant. You know that. You’re going to have to convince him that it’s in his best interest to trust us.”

“I’m not even sure I trust us.”

Tabby looks confused and a little hurt. “Do your best, Wednesday. Please? That boy’s life is at stake,” She crosses her arms, rubbing her left shoulder with a blood speckled hand. “I’d like to get us all out of here as soon as possible. I don’t like the way that crowd is reacting to our presence. Agent Jennings was right about one thing, we have no allies here.”

She’s right, of course, and I hate her for it. I can’t help myself. It’s either that or feel sorry for her. I’m worried about Eddie. Feeling things I don’t want to

admit. I have to stay sharp. Hate makes me sharp. Compassion, on the other hand, is a weakness I can't afford right now.

I know how to get in. I know how to get him to let me in. I just have to wait. Alone. That's the hard part. Convincing that asshole Jennings and his drones to evacuate the garden outside the room is cake by comparison. Using all the diplomatic skills I can muster, I get them to completely evacuate, not lurk in shadows. Caleb would know they were there. Just as he will know that I'm here.

It's part of his power. I know who he is. I know what he is. He may be conflicted, as so many of the newer generation of material planers are, but he's still who and what he is. He'll sense me. And when his curiosity gets the better of him, he'll either come to me, or open the doors and let me in. So, I wait. Alone.

I watch him watching me through the windows of the garden door. It's drizzling now. I'm cold and wet, but I don't show it. I stand, perfectly still, concentrating my gaze on the doors. Meeting his eyes when they present themselves. To him, I must appear as nothing more than a shadow. A statue. Or a patiently waiting specter of inevitability.

The door swings open.

“How’s yer friend?”

“He’ll live,” I say.

He steps through the door, looking around apprehensively. Cute. I know that he knows there’s nobody else out here. But it isn’t a show. He’s reacting like a human being. He shifts his attention back to me.

“Kin ah ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Why?”

I think about it. Too many variables. “Why what?”

“Why are you helpin’ them when they hate you so much?”

Ah. The million dollar question. “I’m not helping them. I’m here to help you.”

“Me? Ah tole you, I don’t need yer help.” Suddenly the ghost is there by his side again. She looks at me with mournful eyes, then turns her attention on Caleb.

“I think you do, Caleb. You’re in a lot of trouble here. These people are spooked. They’d have to be, to call on us to get you out.”

“Is that what yer here for? To get me out?”

“Yes. But not in the way you might think.” The ghost tries to say something, but there is only silence in the garden. Caleb reacts like he’s listening. I wonder what it is she’s telling him.

I continue, regardless. “We want to help you. We know why you’re really here, doing what you’re doing. We’ve all been there. We want you to know that you aren’t alone. That there are others like you out there. And that those others are actually working to make this fucked up world we live in a better place for people like you. And me. All of us.”

Caleb waves the ghost away with an irritated expression, then narrows his eyes at me. “How?”

“It’s complicated. Not something I can talk about here.”

He looks around warily, then nods. The ghost tries to talk to him again, but he shakes his head as if to clear it. “You want me to release the hostages.” Statement. Directed at me.

“Yes. And no.”

He furrows his brow questioningly.

“We want you to come with us. Leave the hostages to the authorities. Let the mortals handle them. They aren’t our concern.”

He looks behind him, then back to me.

“Not all of ‘em. One of ‘em has t’die. He has t’atone fer his sins.”

The ghost clasps her hands together and silently whispers in Caleb’s ear. She appears to be begging him to do something. I pray it isn’t what I think it is.

“The Senator,” I say to him, my eyes on the ghost.

“Yeah.” He gestures behind him and the Senator appears behind the panes of the still closed door to his left. His eyes are glazed and sweat stands out on his bald pate. The gun is in his mouth and his own hand holds it. A finger rests on the trigger.

“I don’t think that’s going to work, Caleb. For one thing, you kidnapped the President’s daughter. That automatically made you enemy number one. If you kill that worthless piece of skin, and somehow escape after doing so, they will never stop until they have

hunted you down.”

His eyes drop to the ground. He’s thinking about what I’ve said. He shifts his weight, from one foot to the other. The ghost watches him carefully. Only the sound of crickets marks the passage of time.

“I wasn’t gonna hurt that girl. I was jus’ tryin’ t’get their attention.”

“It worked,” I say. “You got it. What you didn’t count on, though, is that these... people... are all animals and animals react with violence. All they see is that this innocent girl has been taken against her will. And that now you’re threatening one of their own with assassination. That makes you the animal in their eyes.”

The ghost turns its attention on me. I can’t read her expression. Just feel the cold dead eyes studying me. “The only answer for them, is to exterminate you, like a rabid dog,” I continue. “That’s their ultimate goal, Caleb. They won’t listen to a thing you have to say. They’ll pretend to, until they get you to release the hostages, then they’ll try to kill you. And that will be the end of this story. Is that what you want?”

He shakes his head. “Everythin’s moved so fast. It was jus’ gonna be the girl. Then these others got involved. Then... him,” he turns a disgusted face on the Senator.

“They call me evil, but he’s the real evil, doncha see? What he’s tryin’ to do is wrong. What he’s already done, is wrong!”

The Senator’s trigger finger begins to twitch. The ghost raises her hands to her mouth.

“Yes, Caleb, it is wrong,” I say, trying to keep my voice calm, my heartbeat steady. “But so is what you’re doing. I’d love to see the slimy bastard dead, myself, but it won’t fix things. It’ll only make them worse. They’ll blame you for his death and they’ll use this incident to persecute innocent people like us, even more.”

I let the words sink in, then deliver the punch. “I hate him, too, but not enough to let you make a martyr of him.”

The word causes the boy to pause, just as I had hoped they would. He blinks. The ghost at this side looks from him, to me, then back at him again. “A... martyr?”

“They’ll make him one, Caleb. You know they will. And the destruction will continue...”

I stop. The ghost is saying something to him. Pleading with him. With a sob, the boy’s resolve disintegrates. His face crumples like a tissue and he falls to his

knees. “I jus’ want it all to end,” he wails.

I step forward and see the camera trained on his back. Damn. Everything we’ve said has been captured on tape. I put my arm around his thin shoulders, move him away from the door. “It will, someday,” I say quietly. I don’t quite believe the words myself, but they seem like the right ones. “Now, we have to get you out of here, before the military storms this place.”

“But where will ah go?”

“We can help you, Caleb, but you have to let us. We’re running out of time. Will you come willingly?”

He lifts a tear-streaked and defeated face, his eyes filled with a trust I’m not at all sure I deserve. “Yeah. Ah’ll go with you...”

I don’t hesitate and I’m sure he’s startled when I shout, “Tabitha!”

I’ll never know, because suddenly the boy is gone, whisked away by the witch’s magic. The ghost looks at me, then smiles thankfully, before fading into mist. I turn and walk into the oval room. The look of relief on the faces of the hostages is frighteningly open as they come out of their trances.

Aides rush to the President’s daughter. Others approach

the Senator cautiously and, as he slowly comes out of his trance, gently take the pistol, first from his mouth, then from his hand altogether. Our eyes meet briefly--his bewildered and still somewhat frightened; mine, swimming with regret. A regret that causes everything to blur, until I blink it away.

My job here is done. Why, then, do I feel so empty inside?



Tabitha

“You did a good job,” Wednesday says to me. I’m not sure what she’s referring to. The mission? Getting us out of Washington without further incident? Or patching Edd up until we can transport him back to the Institute.

“Thank you,” I say. “You did, too.”

I can’t see her, sitting as she is, behind me in the cabin of the chopper. I’ve got my hands full pushing this bird to the limit, so we can get home. I know she’s at Edd’s side. She hasn’t left him since she climbed aboard. The boy, Caleb, sits all curled up, his face against a window, watching the world whisk by below. His mind must be swimming with questions. Poor thing. He’s both the reason for this mission and the cause of its outcome.

I worry that David will be disappointed. Yes, technically it was a success, but that success came

with a price tag. A wounded team member is bad enough, but having Wednesday's words to Caleb broadcast over national television. That doesn't bode well, at all. If David felt even a fraction of the icy chill I did, while watching that broadcast, he's no doubt deeply embroiled in damage control.

Not that anything she said was wrong. It wasn't. Not really. But it also wasn't the kind of thing the American public needed to hear. Mortals are so skittish these days. So ready to take up arms against us at a moment's notice, for every imagined slight. The government spin doctors are no doubt hard at work, denying any knowledge of Wednesday's involvement. They'll probably write it off as one RM coming to the rescue of another and brand them both a national threat. Then brush it under the carpet, like they do so much else.

"His breathing is so shallow," Wednesday says. Worry creeps into her normally flat and even tone.

"I had to put him in a form of stasis," I say, simply. I know she'll accept that explanation. The details are complicated and I know her well enough to keep it simple. My knowledge of medicine is limited to first aid battlefield training. I was able to magically remove the bullet lodged in Edd's brain. Being a magical, that isn't as alarming as it would be for mortals. Edd's natural healing abilities will correct any damage.

David will know what to do to make that process easier. All I could do in the meantime was weave a spell around Edd, create a bubble that removes him from the natural passage of time. For him, it's only been a few minutes since he was injured, while for us it's been hours.

Still, time is of the essence. And so I push this bird to its limit to get us home.

The Beginning...