

The overpowering smell of cooked meat and car exhaust couldn't compare to the explosion of colors emanating from the wall of billboards outside Mexico City's Benito Juarez International Airport. The thick, hot air was rank with jet fuel. Traffic noise battled a trumpet blasting enthusiastically over a car radio.

Deven took deep breaths, like his therapist taught him as he scanned the passenger pickup area for his ride. He wondered how the driver would recognize him. He didn't look much different from the men around him... maybe a little paler, and maybe greener eyes, but they were hard to see through his sunglasses.

"Taxi?" A man offered, waving at Deven as he blinked on the curb. "Taxi, señor?"

"No." Deven glanced around, looking for someone who resembled an Irregulars agent.

They had to know he'd landed. It required special clearance to get his obsidian knives through security, and someone at the Irregulars clearly pulled strings to procure him a business class seat on an overbooked flight with little advance notice.

"Mr. Shaw?"

Deven turned, squinting against the harsh sunlight, even through his sunglasses.

"I'm on your right," the man said.

Deven frowned. "I see you."

The man's face was pink with sunburn, nose already peeling. His short brown hair darkened in sweaty patches at his temples, but his sleek black suit hid any sweat on his body.

"Sorry, I was told you have vision issues." He held out his hand. "Agent Frank Klakow."

Deven didn't shake his hand. "ID?"

Agent Klocow's smile faltered but didn't fade. "Yeah, hold on." He struggled with his wallet, tight in his back pocket, and pulled out his badge. Deven took hold of it, rotating his wrist to glimpse it from different angles. The refraction of light bent oddly and warped the engraved image, but in this case he knew this wasn't an effect of his damaged eyesight, merely a seal of authenticity.

"So, the information I received about your vision was incorrect?" Klakow asked.

"I'm not blind. I have dark-adapted eyes." Deven returned the badge and picked up his duffel bag. Klocow led him to a black sedan. Inside it was air conditioned, and shockingly cold.

"Is this your first time to Mexico City?" Klakow asked, sliding into the driver's seat.

"I was here a year ago," Deven said. He watched the agent pull a seat belt across his chest and Deven followed suit, mimicking the man's gestures as he'd learned to do over the last year. "But I only stayed for a few hours before I was repatriated to the U.S."

Klakow pulled into the stream of traffic. "Well, it's damned hot, that's all I can say for it."

Their car emerged from the concrete landscape of the airport and headed toward the center of the city.

Deven turned to face the window, but found the jumble of images too confusing to look at for long. He closed his eyes.

"Do you need to rest at the hotel before we go to the crime scene?"

"No." Deven didn't open his eyes. He wasn't sure exactly what he could offer the Irregular department as a consultant, but they paid well, and it seemed like the kind of job better served with promptness.

Besides, it was something to do. Something better than running, or reading, or learning how to fish.

Agent Klakow glanced at Deven frequently as he navigated the car. His eyes flickered to Deven's neck, but Deven was used to it.

What he wasn't used to was the look of pity that crossed people's features when they spotted the jagged scar where Deven's throat had been slit. It had happened so long ago Deven barely thought of it himself anymore.

"Has anyone briefed you on the investigation?" Klakow asked.

"I know someone was killed and Aztaw magic is suspected," Deven said.

"Two people," Klakow corrected. "One of ours, Agent Carlos Rodriguez, and his younger sister Beatriz. Agent Rodriguez had come here to spend his vacation with his sister. None of his caseload had anything to do with the area."

Deven considered asking what Rodriguez's caseload typically consisted of, then thought better of it. Participating in the investigation would be hard in any case - Deven had a very good reason to distrust Irregular agents - but he would need to overcome his hostility toward the agency if he was going to remain on their payroll.

Klakow turned the car onto an unevenly paved road, and Deven opened his eyes. They maneuvered through a densely packed neighborhood. Low, single storey structures plastered in faded pastel colors lined the narrow street. All the windows were barred. Bright billboards rose above the structures bearing layered, peeling advertisements.

"The victims' skulls were smashed in with no apparent sign of a struggle." Klakow shook his head. "Rodriguez was one tough motherfucker. There's no way he wouldn't have defended himself unless he was taken by surprise."

"Was there a lot of blood?" Deven asked.

"No." Klakow sounded impressed. "The forensics team commented on that. Several pints of blood seem to be missing."

"That's typical of deaths related to Aztaw magic."

"They use human, not Aztaw, blood in spells?"

Deven nodded.

"So I assume they wouldn't leave something that valuable behind."

"If you know all this, then why did you hire me?"

Klakow smirked. "We know some things about the Aztaw, but you're the only one who's actually lived with them for an

extended period of time, and has practiced their magic.

Hopefully you'll catch details we'd otherwise miss."

The streets narrowed, and the buildings appeared more dilapidated. Bright yellow tarps stretched over stalls erected on sidewalks selling piles of cheap clothing and household goods. The sidewalks were packed with bustling people. Deven stared, amazed by their sheer numbers. He'd never seen so many human beings crowded in one place.

"Where are we?" Deven asked.

"*Tepito barrio*. Beatriz Rodriguez's house is a few blocks away."

The buildings looked impoverished, with rusted metal awnings and chipped plaster corners. Power lines drooped down nearly at street level and formed webs across the skyline. Piles of shiny litter clustered over the broken pavement. Dark blue corrugated garage doors shuttered closed blocks of shops.

Deven concentrated on a building corner, finally realizing he was staring at peeling, colorful posters layered upon each other. Deven felt triumph at finally comprehending what he saw, and then confusion. Why would anyone want to look at that mess?

They turned onto Republica de Paraguay. Agent Klakow maneuvered the car to a stop along the sidewalk in front of a

two-storey, persimmon-colored plaster building. There was little outward sign that a murder investigation was underway - no police tape, or the crowds of onlookers Deven had come to expect based on the television shows he watched. The street appeared nearly vacant.

But as Deven glanced around, he saw other things. Two men in suits down at the end of an alleyway. A dog that watched closely as they got out of the car. There was a smell here too, barely detectable above the overwhelming odor of roasting pork. The sizzling odor of the supernatural world, a smell of sulfur and ozone, pervaded in the distance, like a nearly-forgotten memory. It burned Deven's nostrils.

It made him homesick.

Klakow led them to a crooked red wooden door, held open by a man in a suit and sunglasses. Following Klakow, Deven climbed a narrow set of stairs up to the second floor.

"The good news is, you have a great magical forensics team working with you," Klakow said, breathing harder as he climbed the steep staircase.

"You aren't leading this investigation?" Deven asked.

Klakow turned and smirked. "No. Though you're going to wish I was."

"Why?"

"Because the bad news is, you're working with Agent Silas August."

"Bad news? Why?"

"August is a complete prick. The only agent who could ever stand working with him was Rodriguez. He was August's partner for the last six years, so needless to say Rodriguez's murder hasn't sunnied August's disposition." Klakow pushed the door open.

Inside the small room were half a dozen people, some in business suits, others in personal protection gear, collecting evidence. Klakow stepped carefully over chalked outlines of two bodies and pointed Deven toward a tall man standing near the window, speaking on a cell phone.

He was thin and handsome, and dressed as if planning to attend an awards ceremony. He wore a tailored charcoal suit and fitted white dress shirt with the collar open. His black, wavy hair accentuated the distinct angles of his pale face - sharp cheekbones, long nose, and piercing blue eyes.

The man turned and gave Deven a cold, cursory glance without bothering to interrupt his telephone conversation. Deven

found himself looking away from the intensity of the man's stare, and that's when he noticed the stains on the floor.

Bloodstains formed sprayed haloes around the heads of the body outlines. Dark, serpent-like soot stains marred the floor-to-ceiling mirrored wall. Deven noted the cracked glass in the framed photographs; the burned paper, matches, and a copper bowl dented inward with great force; and shattered pieces of jade, ground into the carpet, glinting in the low apartment light.

And covering every surface, hundreds of them, the tiny, broken bodies of dead quail.

Deven's heart began to race.

The sharp clap of a phone snapping shut startled Deven's attention back to the agent.

"I'm Agent Silas August. You the Aztaw expert?" August asked.

Deven felt nervous under such scrutiny. "Yes. I'm Deven--"

"About goddamn time you got here."

"No spell on earth can make the traffic in this city any better," Klakow said. He patted Deven on the back. Deven tensed at the contact. "He's all yours."

August fixed Deven once more with his steely glare. "First impression?"

For a second, Deven thought the agent meant himself. Deven caught up quickly. "This isn't a murder," he said.

"The hell it isn't."

"This isn't *just* a murder," Deven amended. "It's a message."

EXCERPT