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Loose Rabbits of the Rabbit Trilogy

Rabbit Trilogy & Rabbit Saga

By Ellen C. Maze
 Sixth Edition
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1: Roman and Javier / The Early Years

“Elder and Proselyte: Beginnings”¹

Year 1885

It was midnight when 8-year-old Javier arrived at Roman’s secluded log cabin in the wild forests outside Montreal. All legs and arms, Javier stumbled through the front door accompanied by a Rakum senior student who had escorted him from their burned-out group-lair fifty miles south. The youngster took in the room with huge green eyes, his lips parted in a comical “O”. His black hair was buzzed short, and his hand-me-down clothes, two sizes too big. Roman regarded the wafer-thin pup with an amused grin, and shooed off his chaperone leaving the two of them alone.

Elder and proselyte.

Barely a proselyte, really.

At a new eight, Javier smelled more human than not and Roman breathed through his mouth more than once in disdain. He was not accustomed to such young ones, but soon enough, he’d begin to transform the boy properly. Purge the weak, beggarly elements and replace them with immeasurable, unstoppable Rakum gifts.

Born to a mortal woman by a Rakum Father, Javier would grow much like a human boy until he reached thirteen. At that point, his metabolism would slow gradually until he aged only days as the years passed him by. As his appointed guardian and Elder, Roman was expected to prepare him for an eternity of life at the top of the food chain.

Little Javier stopped in the middle of the room, took in the four walls slowly, with his mouth agape, and faced his superior. When Roman didn’t acknowledge him for several long seconds, he shifted his weight to one foot and bent his knee, throwing his balance to one side. He looked like a tiny gymnast, double-jointed and loose-limbed, perhaps able to contort himself into any number of odd shapes. Roman pondered all this as he watched the kid bear up under the scrutiny. He wanted to know what kind of pup they’d sent him. This would be the youngest Rakum Roman had ever disciplined, yet he was up to the challenge. The Fathers requested him specifically and that had to count for something.

Roman softened his gaze and attempted to send the boy a telepathic directive.

“Come close, Javier.”

¹ Elder Roman and Javier have a special relationship that plays into the plot of the novel *Rabbit: Chasing Beth Rider*. This is a glimpse into the day they met over a hundred years ago, and gives a deeper understanding of First Ritual.

Roman watched the kid's face, but gauged no reaction. His eyes were wide and intelligent, taking in every detail, yet he heard nothing telepathically. It was not unusual; most Rakum developed the more mystical skills as they approached puberty.

"Come close, Javier," Roman said, his voice low, and the boy stepped up without hesitation. "What stage did you complete before your group-lair was destroyed?"

"Stage five, Master," Javier responded in English with a thick French accent.

"*Parlez-vous du français?*" Roman asked and the boy nodded shyly. "*Quelles langues parlez-vous?*"

If the kid spoke more than two languages, it would suggest a higher-than-average IQ. Roman spoke fifty mortal languages and was prepared to test the boy in each one if he showed a propensity for linguistics.

"English, German, Spanish, French, and Hungarian," Javier answered in English, no doubt in an attempt to dazzle his new Elder with his accomplishments. Roman nodded with approval.

"We'll get along fine, young man." Roman allowed a small smile and Javier's eyes sparkled. Roman grimaced. The kid was a romantic. From that point forward, Roman made an effort to disguise his affection.

Very rarely, a Rakum was born with an over-developed sense of joviality, and now he understood why the Fathers chose him. They wanted to test him. Roman had never missed with a proselyte and the Fathers were capricious. Presumably, they sought to trip him up, or at least see if they could.

Roman cleared his throat and laid a heavy hand on the youth's shoulder. Javier was at stage five: drawing blood from humans. At first, the boys would learn to draw from a consenting male, a Cow. But as they grew adept, they'd take blood forcibly from a mortal resister. Even an 8-year-old Rakum was expected to procure his own food, and now Roman knew where to begin.

"Stage five, then. How efficient are you?"

"Top of my class, Master," Javier responded, and puffed out his narrow chest.

"Are you ready for stage six, then?" Roman removed his hand from Javier's shoulder and pushed up his sleeve. Stage six was initiated by an Elder's blood. The immature Rakum would experience extreme pleasure at ingestion, but crippling pain as the Elder's time-enriched blood seeped into his system. Plus, the leeching effect of stage six lasted several nights. Despite knowing all of this, Javier's green eyes widened and he nodded his head.

"Let's see. Show me." Roman put out his arm and Javier hesitated.

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"May I, er, use *les toilettes*?" Javier whispered, tucking his knees together and adopting a puppy-dog expression.

Roman sighed and nodded. He gestured through the hall door and watched the kid shuffle out of the room at a trot. He was cute and worse, he

knew it. Roman shook his head. Why didn't they send him a brute? A wild-child that no one else could control?

Roman looked up at the ceiling as memories of other Rakum he'd disciplined over the years filtered down to him. There had been dozens. But somehow this one connected with him on a deeper level.

Roman closed his eyes.

Discipling a youth through First Ritual required vicious and violent instruction. It was easier with the brutes.

So much easier.

Five years passed and Roman recalled that first night fondly as he watched Javier endure First Ritual.

The Ritual actually began at birth, but by the time a Rakum youth reached his thirteenth year, he was expected to accelerate his training and hasten his development so that he could be released into the brotherhood a fully functioning member. Ideally, a proselyte would progress from First Ritual onset to a fully graduated Rakum in four years. By the looks of Javier's first seven days, he was going to need a lot more time.

At the moment, Javier was lying on his bed writhing in pain, enduring silently, but just barely. The first tests of the Ritual were physical ones, tests of stamina and fortitude. Various bones were broken, in a specific order, over a period of weeks. The bones would heal slowly at first, but as the weeks progressed, the young Rakum's body would begin to heal faster and faster, until a broken bone meant no more than a sting from a mosquito. It took enormous audacity to submit to the tests, but tremendous courage to return the next evening for the next treatment. Thirteen-year-old Javier was on his seventh day of *The Broken Bones*.

Roman glanced at the axe handle he'd used tonight. The first few nights, he fractured Javier's pointer fingers with his bare hands. But tonight, he was to snap the youth's forearms with anything of wrought iron. Roman disregarded tradition and opted for the wooden handle hoping to lessen the discomfort, but Javier nearly fainted during the lesson. He didn't cry out, but the pain in his eyes caused even Roman to wince.

He watched Javier from across the small room, twisting in agony, cradling his left arm. Roman was supposed to break them both, but he refrained. It was only day seven and he was altering the kid's training.

Yet, he knew best.

Isn't that why the Fathers chose him? Because he never missed?

"Oh."

A small sound came from Javier's direction and Roman rose to his feet. Crossing the room quietly, he reached the side of the bed and looked down on the pitiful youth crying silent tears, bearing up under tremendous torture. Against his will, Roman's heart went out to him and he whispered the boy's name. Javier opened his eyes and clenched his jaw.

“Yes, Master?” he asked, his voice raspy and nearly inaudible.

“Javie, put out your arm.” The nickname was born a few years earlier. Roman used it sparingly and usually unintentionally.

Javier carefully put out his slowly healing arm and watched with tearful but trusting eyes. Roman wrapped his own hands around the fracture and commanded the injury to repair itself. He had an extraordinary gift for healing and he didn't let it go to waste this night. As the bones knit together, the pain subsided and Javier took in a deep and careful breath. Finished, Roman stood to his full height and managed a miniscule grin.

Javier blinked several times in succession and grateful tears filled his eyes. Roman held up his hand to prevent the boy from thanking him, but Javier's gaze said it all. He motioned brusquely for the youth to sit up, and Javier did so at once.

“Yes, Master?” His voice full of reverence, the youth clasped his hands in his lap and grinned ear-to-ear.

“We'll revisit *The Broken Bones* later. *The Stinging Sun* is your next test. When was the last time you endured the day?” Roman took a seat next to him on the edge of the small bed. The youth came up to his shoulder, already. He would be tall and he was filling out; no longer the bean-like character that arrived on his doorstep five years ago.

“Not since before I came here, Master,” Javier said.

To Roman's approval, his accent was fading.

“I didn't like it,” the boy finished, with a frown.

Roman chuckled and pushed up his sleeve. “I guess not.”

Javier eyed his bare arm and swallowed. Part of his current stage was bi-weekly ingestion of a mature Rakum's blood. With Roman being the only adult within a hundred miles, he put himself to the task of strengthening the boy in this way. The blood no longer pained the youth. In fact, now that his digestive system had matured, Javier desired Roman's blood nearly as much as the occasional human that Roman brought near for feeding.

“Where's your knife, Javie?”

Javier felt in both pockets and then hopped up to look around the bed linens. After several moments he found the small blade hidden in a leather holster. He popped the knife free and waited for the invitation. Roman thrust forward his arm and nodded his head. Javier was an excellent disciple. Loyal and respectful. It was good.

At 17, Javier still hadn't completed the Ritual, but Roman enjoyed their day-to-day existence more than he thought he would. Their adventures seemed unending, and one cold, blustery October evening when he brought Javier into the village to visit a familiar brothel, an unexpected acquaintance soured their trip.

Javier's mother was a Gypsy slave, purchased with gold by the Fathers with the sole intention of impregnating her. As far as Roman knew, after the

live birth, she had been moved to America to serve another Elder. As a result, she was the farthest thing from his mind as he came into town to seek a willing blood donor for himself and the boy.

Tonight, his regular girl was out sick and he settled for a recommended replacement. Her name was Esmeralda, and when she sauntered into their rented room a little past eleven, everything proceeded normally. She seemed to know the drill, which didn't surprise him—after all, Agatha might have shown her the ropes sometime earlier. But when she pulled out a small dagger she kept strapped to her thigh in a leather sheath, Roman suspected she was more familiar with Rakum than he first perceived.

“Who would be first, master?”

She spoke Hungarian in a dialect Roman had only heard once or twice and he strained to understand her. When she repeated herself more slowly, Roman gestured to Javier and the woman turned to face him in the dimly-lit room.

“Like this, then.”

She mumbled this time in broken English and sliced deep her forearm as she approached the youth. Javier lurched forward and brought her arm to his lips, dropping clumsily to his knees. Roman shook his head in chagrin and watched the woman as she nonchalantly held the dagger above Javier's back. Moments later, she transferred the knife to her donating arm and touched his hair with her free hand.

“*Szív és a rózsza,*” she mumbled, returning to her mother tongue.

Something about roses? Roman stepped to her side and snatched her fingers from Javier's head. Her only response was to look at him with huge, black eyes that filled with water.

“Hearts and roses. Roses!”

She cried now and Javier ceased his meal to look at the adults standing over him. Roman reached for her lacerated arm and covered it with his palm.

“What are you babbling about, woman?” Roman asked, and removed his hand, her wound completely healed.

He was irked that she touched a Rakum uninvited and if she didn't appear to be insane, he would have chastised her physically. She mumbled the same three words a few more times in English and fell silent, her eyes glued to the boy. Pulling the back of Javier's neck into view, Roman saw to what she was referring. Right at the boy's hairline was a birthmark in the shape of a heart. It was a very deep red. *Rose* red.

Javier wiped his mouth with the heel of his palm, his expression open. He was about to ask a question, when Roman held up his hand to silence him. Roman buried his right hand in Esmeralda's thick black hair and forcefully pulled back her head. She whimpered, but angled her eyes to keep the boy in sight.

“*Hearts and roses! Mine,*” she whispered, her larynx compressed by Roman's rough treatment.

Roman froze, finally understanding what was happening. A hearts and

roses birthmark. Something she might have seen when the infant was pulled from her body seventeen years ago. The woman, Esmeralda, was claiming to be Javier's mother.

It was bad news and Roman's mind raced over possible scenarios. A Rakum was never to meet his birth mother. Never. Without exception. An unavoidable weakening occurred when a Rakum looked into the eyes of his mother and Javier was weak enough already.

Decided on a course of action, Roman placed his free hand over the prostitute's face.

"Javier, stand outside." He gave the boy a stern look that he interpreted as intended. Roman sometimes visited with the regular girl carnally, and Javier was accustomed to biding his time out of sight when necessary. He watched him exit and when the door was closed, he released the woman.

"*Szív és* —" she began, and Roman cut her off.

"Listen, witch—I'll cut out your tongue if you say one more word. That Rakum is not your son. One more word and I'll silence you forever," Roman hissed in her face, meaning every word.

Esmeralda's crossed herself and mumbled a prayer under her breath in her dialect. "*Én baba,*" she whispered, barely audible.

Roman clenched his jaw and violently shoved her to the floor. Esmeralda yelped in pain, but stayed put, her eyes wide with fear.

Looking to the door, Roman exhaled to calm himself. Why was she here? So close to where he lived, and hunted, and raised her son? Was it another trick of the Fathers? A terrific prank devised for their amusement? Were they even now watching him telepathically?

Roman regarded the woman coolly and took a deep breath.

"Woman, if you leave this town in the morning and never return, I will allow you to live." He took another cleansing breath and hardened his gaze. "But if I return and find you here, I'm an Elder, and I will mark you. Do you know what that means? Are you familiar with this term?"

Esmeralda shook her head quickly.

"No. No *Nyúl*. No Rabbit, Master. Please no."

"No, if you leave town." Roman switched to Hungarian and she understood him plainly. "Yes, if you remain. I will mark you as a Rabbit, and then you'll know hell like you've never imagined."

The woman shook her head again and covered her mouth with both hands as she sat on the dirty floor. Satisfied, Roman replaced his wide-brimmed hat and left the room.

Outside of the building, sitting on a bench covered with snow, Javier looked up to see him approach.

"She leaving town, then?" he asked, his voice even.

Roman allowed a small smile. "What do you mean? You heard me instructing her to leave?"

Javier shrugged. "She's my birth mother. I suppose it was an accident that brought us together and you'd want to be sure it didn't happen again, right?"

Still smiling, Roman nodded his head. “When did you make her?”

Javier got to his feet and dusted off his canvas trousers. “As soon as she entered the room.”

Roman’s mouth dropped. “And you fed from her anyway? Knowing full-well she was your blood?”

Javier smiled an impish grin. “I was hungry, why not?”

Roman laughed and put his arm about the boy’s shoulders. “Indeed. Why not?”

He was a funny kid.

Strange, weak, unpredictable, but funny. Roman was glad to have him around. And he hoped the Fathers appreciated his performance.

2: Roman & Javier Move to New York

“Javier’s First Time”²

1897

Javier caught Roman’s eye, aware that his goofy grin irritated his Elder immensely. Elder Roman detested his emotive tendencies, but how could he not be excited? Since he moved in with Roman twelve years ago, he’d only been in the company of mortals a handful of times, and all of those had been aware of his supernatural propensities. Now they were on a steam locomotive traveling to New York City to reside in a *hospital*. One literally filled with humans, most of them unaware that he was a Rakum, and all of them as helpless as babes. Javier couldn’t even begin to imagine the adventures in store.

So, he grinned like a lunatic.

Of course, Roman frowned.

“Why don’t you go for a walk,” Roman ordered.

“Where to? We’re on a train,” Javier replied smiling, but Roman was not amused. “Okay.” Javier dropped the silly grin and stepped to the door of their private room. “I’ve been feeling strange. Maybe it’s too stuffy in here.”

“Wait.” Roman stood and touched Javier’s sleeve. “Explain.”

Javier turned. “What?”

“Explain this feeling.”

Javier was thoughtful as Roman was not one to mince words or waste time with worthless conversation.

“Yes. Right here.” Javier made a circle around his midsection. “I feel a lightness, and then,” he made a popping noise with his mouth, “it changes to a feeling of heaviness.”

“And you first discerned this when?”

Javier grinned, enjoying Roman’s undivided attention. “When the train got underway. I assumed it was the motion.”

“No.” Roman shook his head. “There’s a Cow on this train. I sensed him myself. You’ve inherited the radar. *Finally, a step forward.*”

Roman said the last under his breath with disdain, but Javier’s jaw dropped. It was the first time he’d experienced a draw for the mortals who willingly gave blood to his people.

“*Cow-dar?*” Javier chuckled, but as before Roman didn’t crack a smile. He resumed a poker face and fell quiet.

“Yes. So, go for your walk. Track him.”

“It’s definitely a man?”

“Yes.” Roman managed a very tiny smile. “See if you can find him.”

² This Loose Rabbit gives good insight into the life experiences of a young Rakum, and Javier’s youthful enthusiasm aids our understanding of his behavior in the Rabbit novels.

“And if I do?” Javier’s heart rate increased and he swallowed with anticipation of the hunt.

“Bring him here. Do not take his blood outside of our quarters.” Roman released his sleeve and gestured with his hand. “Go, now.”

Javier nodded and left the room, walking purposefully down the narrow aisle that ran the length of the private sleeping car. He had no instructions to follow except to go and do, so he proceeded as far as the exit and paused.

Nothing.

His stomach still ached, longed, but...nothing. Curious but not frustrated, Javier opened the door and entered the dining car.

Dinner was over and half of the tables sat empty. Those who remained drank brandy and smoked, creating a veritable cloud. No one took notice of him as he walked slowly down the center of the car, peeking at the other passengers out of the corner of his eye. Of course, he wouldn’t be able to *see* the Cow so much as sense him—he knew that much from his lessons. Still, using his vision was easier, and he scoped the car’s occupants. When he reached the end of the car, he sighed and yanked open the door. The next box was for livestock so he stood between and listened to the rails.

It was not nearly as noisy as he expected and he could see the track passing at a good clip through a narrow opening in the floor. He watched the ties zip past one after the other, shining in his special vision, for several minutes. Just before he became mesmerized by the repetitive movement his stomach lurched. At the same time, the door from the dining car came open behind him. Javier turned, leaned against the wall of the next car and met the eyes of his visitor.

The man was 60, if a day, with white hair sprouting from his head as well as his chin. His eyes were translucent blue and a life of hard labor was etched in the wrinkles of his face.

“Evenin’,” he said, nodding to Javier in a style reminiscent of the brethren. The man positioned himself against the door of the dining car, the placement of his thick frame preventing accidental interruption.

Javier opened his mouth to speak, but was at a loss for words. His midsection flopped again and he subconsciously put a hand to his belly. The stranger eyed him up and down and smiled, revealing only a few good teeth.

“Name’s Chester. Harold Chester.”

He spoke in a curious American accent and stood motionless, allowing Javier a moment to process. Finding his voice, Javier spoke his name.

“Javier d’Millier.”

Old Chester inclined his head to Javier and gave him a knowing wink. “I recognized you, master.”

Javier exhaled and nodded his head. This guy was familiar with his people. That was good. Some of the pressure relieved immediately.

“I recognize you, too,” Javier joked weakly. Chester nodded and a partial smile could be seen beneath his copious beard.

“You look like a kid,” he said with humor.

“I am a kid,” Javier answered, matching the grandfather’s attitude.

“Do you mean you’re not a cuppla hundred years old, masquerading as a teenager?” Chester chided and scratched his chin.

Javier shook his head, liking the stranger more and more. “I’m twenty.”

Chester chuckled and swore jovially. “You have a long life ahead of you son. My master was pert near 2000 years old when I met him. He looked fifty, at the most. And that was, well…” Chester removed his weathered newsboy cap and rubbed his head thoughtfully. “Thirty years ago.”

“Where is he now?” Curious, Javier asked the next obvious question.

“When I came back from the War, he was gone. I fought for the South.” Chester winked, replaced his hat, and grinned wistfully. “Damien was his name.”

“Damien is a Father,” Javier blurted, but the old man only shrugged.

The Rakum were governed by the Ten Fathers, ancient and powerful creatures whose lives were shrouded in mystery. Perhaps Damien did visit this Cow as a youth. Why would the guy lie?

Javier chuckled again at the irony.

Father Damien was *his* true father.

“So, you hungry?” Chester asked, and unbuttoned the top of his canvas duck coat. Javier stepped forward, covering the man’s gnarled hand with his palm.

“Wait. Follow me.”

Chester moved away from the door and fell in behind him as they re-entered the dining car. Javier paced his breathing and grew more excited as they neared their destination. By the time he reached the door to his quarters, he could no longer hide his excitement nor quell his longing. He pushed open the door and shoved Chester inside. Roman was waiting, obviously telepathically aware of all that had transpired outside. He gestured to Javier, palm up and greeted the Cow with a nod.

“Chester, remove your coat.”

Javier’s hands clenched into fists as he stood behind the old man, watching him slowly remove his overcoat and then push up his sleeves. The bloodlust was nearing a level that frightened him. He met Roman’s eyes, but his Elder’s hand was still upraised and Javier made a small sound in his throat.

“Chester, you’re Javier’s first catch, but far from his first mortal. He will be careful.” Roman glanced at Javier then, his eye hard. Then he looked down on the old man and took his coat. “Don’t be afraid.”

“No, Master, sir,” the old soldier answered stoically and faced Javier.

“Javier, hand me your knife.”

Roman held out his hand now and Javier dug around in his trouser pockets, his eyes red. Once he grasped it he tossed it to his Elder not at all concerned about what he was going to do with it. All he could see was the blood. The sound of his own heart beating nearly drowned out that of the stranger that shared their small room. Again, a small noise escaped his throat and he watched the knife in Roman’s hand.

“Javier, step over here.”

Roman only had to wait a millisecond and Javier was by his side his hands open and ready to grab Chester’s bared arm. As he watched, Roman sliced the man’s flesh quick and deep and Javier dropped to his knees to take his portion. At one point during his meal, Roman spoke to the Cow, and then a minute later, spoke to him. But Javier drank on, oblivious.

His first Cow.

His brain buzzed with delight, and he did not let up until he was forcefully pulled off the man’s arm by his Elder.

“Now sew him up, Javier,” Roman said sternly, his fingers tugging Javier’s hair.

Javier’s eyesight blurred and his brain was stuffed with cotton, but as if from far away, he recognized Roman’s terse tone. His Elder was instructing him. Javier focused as well as he could and covered Chester’s still-leaking laceration with his palm. Taking only about fifteen seconds, Javier was able to convince the man’s blood to clot and for the skin to knit together. Finished, Javier dropped his arm and sat on the floor.

“Where’re you headed, Chester?”

Roman was speaking to the Cow, both of them ignoring the smiling Rakum on the floor. Javier looked between them, amused at nothing and everything.

“Boston, master.” Chester looked at Javier and shook his head. “Unless you think you might need me again.”

Roman glanced at Javier on the floor. “No, thank you, Chester. You go on to Boston. Do you miss your Rakum master?”

“Sometimes I do. I’m right lonely now, Master.”

Roman nodded and handed the man his overcoat. “If you go to a lounge called the Red Herring and ask for Beatle...”

Chester smiled at the name.

Javier laughed out loud, saying, “Beatle!”

Roman glared at his proselyte on the hard floor. “Yes. Beatle’s master will use you. Mention my name, Elder Roman.”

Chester’s eyes widened. “Elder...”

“That name will open doors for you, Chester.”

“Thank you, master.” Chester turned his cap around in his hands and bowed low. He then turned to Javier and bowed to him, as well. “Thank you. It’s been a pleasure. Thank you...”

“Chester!” Javier called as the old gentleman put his hand to the door handle. “The pleasure was all mine.”

Flattered, Chester nodded and exited the room. Javier looked dumbly at the door, his buzz finally passing. Roman cleared his throat and he made an effort to stand.

“My first catch,” Javier whispered as he pulled himself up using the bench that doubled as a bed. “Who’d have thought I’d meet my first catch on the midnight train to New York?”

“Amazing,” Roman dead-panned and rolled his hands at his disciple. “Shake it off. You barely held it together. That was pitiful.”

“There’ll be Cows in New York, won’t there?” Javier watched as Roman nodded. “And I’ll get to practice over and over, right?” Roman nodded again, this time allowing a twinkle in his gray eyes. “Good.”

“Yes, good.” Roman gestured to the opposite bench. “Now sit. We have two hours until our stop. I would appreciate some peace.”

“Yes, Master,” Javier agreed. He settled across from his Elder and crossed one leg over the other. “Do the Fathers keep Cows?”

Roman caught his eye, apparently annoyed at Javier’s impertinence.

“I thought it was ironic Chester knew Father Damien. So...they use Cows then?”

“Drop it, Javie.”

“We’re not permitted to know?”

Roman sighed and lowered the newspaper he was reading. “When you meet Father Damien, why don’t you ask him?”

“I’m meeting Father Damien in New York?” Javier sat up, his mind crystal clear. He’d never met any of the Fathers, but he knew that he was supposed to before he graduated First Ritual. His Elder nodded his head and returned to his reading. The subject was closed.

Javier smiled as his mind raced. Soon he would meet his blood father and his Rakum Father for the first time. What adventures he was in for, and at the moment, he was as serene as he’d ever been. His stomach was full and his eyes heavy, yet a satisfaction filled his soul that he’d never known. Things were looking up.

He had Cow-dar now and he laughed aloud at his new word. He’d never go hungry again. On top of his thoughts as usual, Roman scoffed and fell silent.

Javier looked out the window, feeling better than he had in his whole life. It was good. *All good.*

3: Roman & Javier Move to New York, Part II

“Javier Meets Canaan”³

Javier followed behind Roman at a respectable distance and studied the Rakum who picked them up from the train station. Their arrival was punctual, midnight precisely, and this Rakum was waiting on the platform. He drove them in a hansom cab, sitting over their shoulders in the sprung seat up top. He didn't speak, but Roman indicated that he was in the last stages of Elder Training, which tended to make the sturdiest Rakum pensive. Javier gave him the benefit of the doubt and entertained himself watching the other buggies pass on the streets of New York.

Within twenty minutes their driver turned into a wrought iron gate and the four-story hospital loomed ahead in the dark, illuminated sparsely by the occasional gas-powered street lamps. They circled behind the large stone structure and pulled up to a quiet stable. After halting the dusty gelding, the Rakum hopped down and opened the small wooden gate for Javier and Roman to exit.

“Master Kilmeade is right through those doors, Elder Roman,” he said in English with a British accent, and bowed politely as Roman nodded and passed him. Javier made as if to follow, but the Rakum cleared his throat and shook his head. “Please remain with me, little brother.”

Javier looked at Roman who demonstrated his acquiescence by turning and heading for the door to the attached dwelling. Feeling abandoned and awkward, Javier met the driver's eyes and looked him over. He was tall, broad and bound with muscle, much different from the slender figure of his Elder. His every glance exuded confidence and a cool *laissez faire* Javier only dreamed of one day developing. Javier was about to ask him his name when the stranger beat him to the punch.

“Call me Canaan,” the Rakum said and turned to remove the sweat-stained harness from the carriage horse. “Can you clean tack?”

“Of course,” Javier replied as he watched Roman disappear into the house to meet their host. Sulking, Javier received the traces from Canaan. When both had their arms full, the older Rakum gestured to the barn and Javier led the way.

He was uncomfortable with the stranger for several reasons. Firstly, because since coming to stay with Roman at age eight, he had lived a sheltered life. Now he was twenty, but he could count on one hand how many Rakum he'd met in his two decades. More than that, Canaan was too quiet. Elder Roman explained to him long ago the tendency of their people to keep to

³ A truncated version of this Loose Rabbit was incorporated in *Rabbit Legacy* as the Prologue.

themselves, saying that it was appropriate and even desirable that a Rakum remain aloof. Knowing this did not make it easier for Javier to accept. Javier's propensity for chattiness was a bane to his Elder. Still, if Canaan would say more, he was certain his nerves would settle.

"I apologize, little brother," Canaan offered as he pulled open the barn door. "I will attempt to be more communicative."

Realizing that the older Rakum was a telepath, Javier made an effort to think happy thoughts. Canaan chuckled at that moment and tossed Javier a cleaning rag from a bucket on the floor.

"Ask me a question," Canaan said as he rubbed moisture from the bridle in his hand.

Javier nodded, appreciating the apparent concern for his comfort. First Ritual was bad, but he had heard that Elder training was hell. Canaan would have been nearly destroyed repeatedly to reach his position, and if he was nearly done, then the worst was over. Javier decided to ask him about that.

"What have you left of your training?"

Canaan smirked and flashed his perfect smile. "Elder Kilmeade. He's my last assignment."

Something about the way Canaan referred to the Elder piqued Javier's curiosity. "He's not your master?"

Canaan shook his head, a mysterious grin spreading across his face.

"No, he's not. I came to escort him to Montreal." Canaan took part of the hastily-cleaned harness from Javier as he spoke. "You and your master will take his place here for a year."

Javier held up his hand. "I don't need to know anything about Elder Kilmeade's situation. Roman is very private and he ordered me to keep my nose out of it."

"Good boy," Canaan laughed, and hung the traces on the wall peg behind him.

Javier ran the leather through the cloth in his hand and tried to think of something else to ask. He still didn't like being ditched by Roman so casually. Canaan made a soft noise of amusement a few feet away and Javier grimaced. The guy was a superior telepath and none of Javier's thoughts were getting past him.

"Do not fret, little brother. I'm not your enemy." Canaan threw him a wink and made a grab for what Javier had cleaned. "Pretty good job."

Javier said nothing and watched him push closed the door on the tired gelding's stall. Canaan collected his oil lamp and checked the animal's water trough before heading for the door.

"What now?" Javier asked, a feeling of dread inexplicably upon him. Canaan grinned and winked.

"Shortly, I will begin the tour of the hospital."

Javier nodded his head and stood from the low stool, but Canaan gave him a smile coupled with a small head shake. His blue eyes flashed as he leaned against the closed barn door and crossed his arms at his chest.

“I like your master, Javier. He has a soft spot for you. Speaks of you very tenderly. You’ve lived with him alone for how long?”

“Almost thirteen years. Since I was eight.”

Canaan whistled and shook his head. “I knew you were young, but not that young.” Maintaining eye contact, he lowered his chin and licked his lips. “And Roman is your main buzz all this time?”

Javier nodded. Canaan was referring to the blood Javier consumed, and since he lived alone with Roman isolated in a forest miles from town, his Elder’s was the most available. Canaan made a noise of surprise and Javier was curious.

“What? Is that strange?”

“You have no idea,” Canaan laughed and tucked the oil lamp on a set-in wooden shelf. “Rakum are raised in group-lairs for a reason. One of those is so they have a variety of blood donors available to them. You were raised in isolation. Why, only the Fathers know.” Canaan lifted his eyes to the dark rafters above and paused.

Javier remained silent. Canaan might be communicating with them as far as he knew. The Fathers were known to spy on their children, and with Canaan about to be promoted to Elder, they could have him under close surveillance.

The Rakum lowered his gaze and smiled at Javier again, his manner friendly.

“Indeed,” he said, answering Javier’s unspoken observation. “I am 245 years young, Javier, and I have never met a Rakum like you. You are a rarity.”

Canaan sounded wistful and finally Javier’s mouth curved into a smile. Of course he had a notion that he was special, that his situation was Roman was quite singular.

“This is why Roman consented, as a favor to me.” Canaan took a deep breath and stepped off the door, remaining across the floor, for now. “Who is your father? Theophilus? Johann?”

Javier shook his head. “Father Damien.”

“Ahh,” Canaan nodded and approached, stopping a few feet away. “I can see that.” He then closed the distance between them and touched Javier’s hair, looking thoughtful. “Your mother was very dark, then? A Gypsy, perhaps?”

“Yes,” Javier answered, unnerved at the close quarters. He furrowed his brow and met the other Rakum’s gaze. “What happens now?”

“Do not be impatient,” Canaan chastised. “Have you met Father Damien?”

Javier shook his head and Canaan reached for the collar of his plain white cotton shirt. Unlike Canaan and Roman who dressed to the nines in the fashion of the day, Javier wore plain brown canvas trousers and a roomy white farmboy shirt. He looked down at Canaan’s hand on his shirt and grit his teeth.

“Father Damien is an extraordinary Rakum. He can levitate anything. Even a carriage. He’s amazing.” Canaan successfully opened Javier’s shirt a few inches and stepped closer. “Can you do that Javier? Move things with your mind?”

Javier inhaled sharply and shook his head. Normally he'd be extremely interested in learning anything about his true Rakum father, but with Canaan close enough to embrace him, he began to resist the prospect of volunteering his blood.

"Why do this? Am I *that* special?" Javier asked in a low voice.

"We do this for training purposes, little brother." Canaan became still, only inches from Javier's chin. "To be an Elder, I need experiences, as many as I can gather. I may never meet another like you, with your circumstances."

Javier did not care at all for the man's reasons, and he was wounded that Roman would give permission so hastily. He put his hands up and pressed into Canaan's chest half-heartedly.

"Just be still," Canaan ordered and put his long thumbnail to Javier's throat.

When he had pressed through the skin, Javier ground his teeth together, but made no sound. He'd endured several years of bone-crunching torture already in First Ritual, so a little puncture wound barely registered. Still, he had not buzzed Roman but a handful of times, and the sensation was unpleasant to say the least.

Maybe that was it; perhaps Roman was testing him.

Javier sighed, wondering if he'd ever complete the Ritual. The average Rakum graduated at seventeen and Javier passed that mark three years ago. Even as Canaan pressed his lips to his throat, Javier wondered how much longer he'd have to wait. Roman promised he'd meet Father Damien while in New York. Meeting one of the Fathers was one of the last things a Rakum did before graduation.

Javier pushed against Canaan again a little more forcefully, but was held securely in place with one hand behind his neck and the other around his shoulder. The Rakum showed no sign of letting up and Javier did not want to lose too much blood. After another few long seconds, Canaan hadn't let up and Javier returned to his thoughts.

Perhaps he would soon be on his own. If he graduated, Roman would put him out, set him up somewhere, and let him start a life on his own. His own Cows, his own interests, his own brethren to carouse with.

Lightheaded now, Javier grunted and pushed Canaan with real zeal. The larger Rakum's mouth slipped from his skin and he stood back, rolling his eyes.

"Javier," Canaan grinned and swallowed dramatically, his handsome face shining with something akin to revelation. "Buzzing only from an Elder...it makes a difference."

"Fine and well for you, brother," Javier began, putting his fingers to his healing throat wound. Canaan held up his hand and wagged his finger in Javier's face.

"I have dinner waiting for you inside." Canaan crossed to the door and picked up the oil lamp. "Elder Roman says begin the tour, so I will show you my favorite floor."

Javier stepped to the door, shook off the dizziness that threatened his balance, and followed Canaan across the moonlit yard to the hospital rear entrance. He was frowning, but the Elder took no notice of his expression. Javier pondered the Rakum's behavior.

Canaan should make an excellent Elder. He was fair and even-tempered, like Roman, yet as bloodthirsty as the Fathers.

Canaan's grin returned and he chortled softly as he walked beside Javier to the basement access. Javier blushed and shook his head.

Telepathy.

Must be nice.

4: Roman & Javier Move to New York, Part III

“Isabella”⁴

“**T**he lunatic ward is in the basement. Come, I will introduce you to my Isabella.”

Opening the narrow service entrance, Canaan led Javier down an unlit hallway. The hospital was quiet and the lighting minimal as they descended the staircase underground where the odor of ammonia and human waste stung Javier’s nostrils. He winced visibly and Canaan laughed, shaking his head.

“In here, use the keys,” Canaan said, and whipped out a full key ring. “Practice opening locks elsewhere.”

Javier nodded, but wondered why the oddball rule was in place. Like all Rakum youth, he’d learned how to mentally manipulate the mechanisms of the locksmith and no door would ever bar him. But Canaan continued without pause and offered no explanation. When he opened the door, a wall of new aromas slammed against Javier’s senses as Canaan walked in seemingly unaffected.

“You *eat* down here?” Javier asked, unconvinced.

Canaan didn’t answer and led him down an empty hallway to a door that opened up into a large circular room with stark and filthy walls. The floor was without furniture and snoring bodies slumped everywhere. Unable to stop himself, Javier began diagnosing illnesses until Canaan touched his sleeve and distracted him.

“You can use your powers of healing upstairs. Down here, they remain as they are, understand? The lunatics are free food for as long as you want. These rooms...” Canaan gestured to the padlocked doors that surrounded the ward. They were approximately twelve feet apart, with a small barred window at the top of each. “...are for the violent ones. But over here,” he led Javier to a door on their right, “I stashed a little treat for myself.”

Javier stepped over the sleeping form of a pregnant woman with a gray casted arm and entered the room after Canaan unlocked it with a wave of his hand. Javier looked at him sideways, recalling the decree of moments before, but Canaan again offered no explanation of his actions. Javier shook his head and followed the man’s lead.

Inside the smelly ten-by-ten cell, sat a soiled cot and a full toilet basin. On the rough stone floor beside the cot was a woman, short but pretty if he could imagine her without the grime that clung as if a second skin. Her black hair had been shorn off and because of the dank condition of her cell, dozens of angry red welts puckered and glistened on her extremities. Canaan

⁴ The story of Isabella plays into Javier’s actions and reactions in all three Rabbit novels.

approached the woman and stood over her.

“With these people, you can be yourself,” Canaan said and grinned, showing white teeth. “They can report vampires all day long, and no one will give them a listen. I take my fill, sew her up, and come back the next week. She never runs dry.”

Javier nodded with understanding.

“So you’re hungry, right?” Canaan bent, grasped the woman by her upper arms, and lifted her to her feet. She came awake slowly and as soon as her eyes focused, she prepared to scream. Canaan covered her mouth and trained his eyes on Javier. “Taste this one. She came in for a broken arm and a concussion two months ago. I found her on my rounds the night they cased her.”

Javier stepped close to the girl and looked into her terrified pale green eyes. Canaan removed his hand from her mouth and she pressed her lips together tightly, her initial startle response quieted. She shook and perspired, but didn’t struggle as Canaan continued his story and Javier considered her throat. He put his hands on her shoulders and stepped forward. When he took blood from the Cows and prostitutes Roman provided, they were seasoned donors. Plus, Roman always took from their arm or wrist. Canaan was a throat guy. Hoping to impress the older Rakum, Javier put his hand to her cheek and moved her chin aside.

“I intended to heal her arm and send her on her way,” Canaan continued, “but look at her, Javier. She is exquisite. And innocent, barely sixteen.”

Javier blinked at her age as he pressed his thumbnail to the taut skin just below her jaw. He usually used a knife, but a fingernail was handy too. He was learning new things in New York.

“I had her transferred down here. She cemented her fate by telling them she was frightened of vampires. Beautiful, eh?”

Javier’s nail broke through, but it took much more pressure than he expected and the girl gagged and recoiled at the sensation. When he pressed his mouth to her and began to draw of the trickle that leaked from the insufficient laceration, he almost choked with surprise. Canaan was right; the girl was different. Her blood caused his head to rush and his gut to tingle with pleasure. He no longer noticed the awful smell of the basement ward.

“That is her consent you taste, little brother. *Her consent*,” Canaan emphasized thoughtfully and Javier barely heard him. “She wrestles with herself, not us.”

Javier grunted a reply, the rules of drawing blood from females not on his mind at present.

“I’m leaving her to you, Javier,” Canaan whispered, holding the girl against his chest from behind. “Isabella, this is your new master. Treat him well.”

The girl squirmed half-heartedly until Javier reluctantly ceased feeding. It wasn’t easy to quit her, but she was small and Roman taught him to be aware of how much he drew out. Drinking them to death was called taking a dying

buzz, a crime worthy of severe punishment.

Overhearing his thoughts, Canaan laughed. “Indeed, little brother. In a hospital, with little threat of interruption, it’s easy to drink too long. Be very careful.”

Javier nodded and covered Isabella’s wound with his palm until it healed.

“Visit her once a week and she’ll last several months. Visit her once a month and she’ll last several years. Keep her locked up, innocent and untouched by the others, and her blood will always be this smooth. Understand?”

Javier nodded, his head still fuzzy from the pleasure of the meal. He watched Isabella’s face as Canaan lowered her onto the rumpled cot. She didn’t make a sound, but watched him with sorrowful eyes.

“I’ll keep her as long as I can, Canaan.” Javier gave the girl a grin which she ignored and he nodded to his brother. “I’ll make her last, and Roman has to have her. I’d like to know what he thinks.”

“Fine, but this hospital is full of Isabellas. On the second floor, there is a charity orphanage. Children and infants. Whatever you are in the mood for. Take a tiny bit from each one, heal them up, you’re in paradise, Javier.”

Javier tried to imagine what Canaan was describing, but it was unfathomable. His host abruptly moved to the door and motioned for him to follow.

“Come, Elder Roman is waiting for us in the Lobby to begin the tour.”

“And Kilmeade?”

“Probably not,” Canaan said and fell silent.

He was being mysterious again and Javier didn’t probe. Something odd was afoot and Roman was deadly serious about him staying out of it. So, as Javier trailed Canaan up the stairs, his thoughts danced on the future. For one year, he would have all the blood he wanted from any number of helpless donors. And a locked up princess named Isabella.

Javier laughed aloud, and self-consciously glanced at Canaan. He was smiling too.

5: The History between Roman and Kilmeade

“A Brother’s Weakness”⁵

Roman left Javier alone with the junior Rakum and pulled open the side door leading into the attached dwelling. His superb sense of smell picked up Kilmeade’s scent right away and he had no trouble locating him in the sprawling residence. He and Kilmeade were born of the same mother on the same evening, three minutes apart. Among Rakum, no familial ties were acknowledged, and the boys were kept apart until their teens. But when reunited at the close of First Ritual, the two 17-year-olds became inseparable.

Being fraternal twins and first-rate telepaths, they were able to keep their blood connection secret, and for decades they traveled the world as Rakum comrades. Life was good. But politics among the brethren being as they were, when they were both promoted to Elder months apart, they were separated by the Fathers to settle different areas of the North American Continent. In 1838, at 200 years old, Kilmeade was sent to establish a Rakum presence in New York City, and Roman to the villages and forests of Canada. Now it was 1897 and Roman hadn’t seen his brother since their split nearly sixty years earlier.

“Enter, brother.”

Roman recognized the voice on the other side of the closed door. He wondered what he’d see in his brother. The Fathers warned him that Kilmeade had been taking the dying buzz and had been horribly disfigured by the effects. A heinous crime among their people, Kilmeade’s punishment would be meted out in private in the wilderness of Montreal. Kilmeade was slated to move into Roman’s forest cabin as he and Javier assumed his situation at the hospital. Now as he opened the door and approached his brother, Roman readied for anything.

“Roman, having you here gives me great pleasure.” Kilmeade spoke facing away from his guest, and Roman stepped up, waiting for him to turn. “I hope you’re as strong as ever, big brother. I’ve been up to no good here at the hospital.” Kilmeade turned slowly and met Roman’s eye, a glint of humor shining deep down, and a smile playing on his lips.

Roman’s eyes widened, but he returned the smile and tilted his head to the side. “You’ve looked better, my brother.”

Kilmeade laughed aloud and leaned against the wall behind him. Roman marveled at his countenance. Kilmeade was naturally tall, like Roman, but where Roman was slender, Kilmeade had always been broad shouldered and thick-necked. Now, he appeared more muscular and hunched over by inches. Since his youth, he’d worn his auburn hair at shoulder-length, but now it

⁵ The problem with the dying buzz is explained here and we get a glimpse into the life of the mysterious Elder Kilmeade, whose participation in *Rabbit Redemption* is key.

drizzled down his chest on either side as long as a woman's. His formerly smoke-gray eyes were an unnaturally bright robin-egg blue, and his lips ruby red. Roman snickered and gestured toward his brother.

"Please don't show this face to my pup, Javier. He'll have nightmares for years." Kilmeade returned his grin and nodded.

"You read my mind. Let's go see him right away—" Kilmeade stopped abruptly, lost his grin, and looked off to the right, no doubt telepathically spying on Canaan and Javier. Roman chuckled, knowing what Kilmeade was about to remark.

"Ohhhh," his brother dragged out the word and looked back to him, smiling. "You are devious. You'll make a fast friend with Canaan that way. That boy will drink anything."

"Canaan is not my concern," Roman scoffed. "Javier, on the other hand, has a lot to learn."

"I want to meet him. That pup of yours is special, isn't he?" Kilmeade's eyebrows went up with interest, but Roman artfully changed the subject.

"This is because of the dying buzz?" He gestured to Kilmeade's face.

"Nice, eh?" Kilmeade smiled wider and revealed his eye-teeth, now extended several centimeters and sharpened to a point. "Check these out."

Roman walked up to him and putting one hand behind his brother's head, he put the other in his mouth. The tip was serrated and Roman's flesh was nicked as he made contact.

"Those must come in handy. Wrong or not, I could use teeth like that."

Kilmeade laughed and ran his tongue over and around his teeth. "I'll miss them. If they go away, that is."

"They will. The Fathers will put you in isolation. You will drink only Rakum blood for a year. You'll be restored completely, trust me." Roman spoke confidently, rehashing the same story the Fathers told him when he was ordered to report to New York.

"That Canaan is gung-ho to save me," Kilmeade giggled and covered his mouth. "Pardon me," he snickered, "another effect is joviality. Feels good, Roman."

"Too good." Roman assumed a serious expression and waited for his brother to do the same. When Kilmeade finally quieted, he sighed and continued. "When you reach the cabin, there are a few small things you'll need to tend to. I regularly pay the village brothel keeper fifty dollars a month in silver. He doesn't know about our people." Roman lowered his voice. "He thinks Javier and I are vampires." Resisting the urge to smile, Roman pulled up a chair. "But he is agreeable. The woman at the brothel who knows our people is Agatha, and I have told her to watch for you. I didn't know about Canaan, so please inform him."

"They won't allow me human blood for at least twelve months, and as for sex—do you think Agatha would mind this face?" Kilmeade was joking and Roman didn't answer.

“Tell Canaan. I shouldn’t have to.”

“So serious,” Kilmeade laughed and reached for an old-fashioned bell-pull. In the basement of the house, Roman heard a tinkle of brass as his brother yanked it twice. “Let me introduce you to my Cows. They’re quite disgusted with me, so forgive them their insolence.”

“Because you haven’t used them?” Roman waited for him to nod, the idiotic smile still in place. “I hope you haven’t coddled them, Kilmeade. I do not suffer humans.”

His brother stepped up, slapped his chest, and headed for the door. “Relax. You can retrain them. I have no doubt you will.”

Roman steeled his jaw at the sound of heavy footfalls in the hallway. Kilmeade pulled open the door and two men ambled in, barely looking in their master’s direction. Instead, they fixed their eyes on Roman and stopped ten feet away. Kilmeade shadowed the men dramatically and then stood behind them, a hand on each man’s outside shoulder. The theatrics wore thin and Roman cleared his throat.

His brother began the introductions. “Poppy Jaster.”

The man on Kilmeade’s right removed his cap with one quick nod. He seemed tame enough and was a sturdy man, built for labor.

“He’s in charge of the grounds. Poppy, this is Elder Roman, your new master.”

“I’m your servant, Master Roman,” Poppy mumbled sincerely and lowered his eyes. Roman indicated his approval and looked to the other man.

“And this is Kelly O’Brien, Hospital Administrator.”

The second man was older by twenty years with the same height and thick build. His main oddity was a bulbous deformity of the nose and the diagnosis hit Roman with no effort at all.

“Your tumor is cancerous, O’Brien. If you don’t have it removed soon, the disease will spread to your facial tissue and you’ll die within months.”

Kilmeade’s eyebrows went up and he touched the man’s nose from behind with one elongated finger. “Oh, how about that.”

Dodging Kilmeade’s poke, O’Brien took the news in stride. “Thank you, master. I’ll have the doctors look at it this week.”

“Good. Now let me set the ground rules so that our time together will be as pleasant as possible.” Roman had their full attention. “Do not touch me or my pup, Javier. And if I touch you, keep your hands to yourself. I prefer Cows to untrained mortals, so I will use you often. But Javier will use the human patients here. Help him in choosing who to tap and who to avoid.”

“I vow to do this for you, master,” O’Brien said and dared a peek over his shoulder where Kilmeade stood. “And I’m glad you’re here.”

Kilmeade ruffled the man’s oily white hair jovially and then made a fist against his scalp, pulling his head backward. “Been lonely, have you? I could tap you now, you old goat. I long to do it. Just grab on and not let up until you—”

“Elder Kilmeade,” Roman said sternly, addressing his brother formerly before the Cows. Because of his condition, Kilmeade’s behavior was unpredictable and he decided to finish up. “You men may go. Report to me tomorrow night at sundown.”

Both men nodded and waited for Kilmeade to dismiss them. Roman’s brother opened his hand on O’Brien’s hair and patted it down as if stroking a kitten.

“Bye now, old Cow,” he cooed and bowed low, snickering as they scooted around him and left the room. Roman frowned.

“You’ve really lost it, brother.”

“I know, but oh, I feel good.”

Roman commiserated with a small grin, but then flinched. The Fathers were sending him instructions and he held up his hand and closed his eyes. Recognizing the moment, Kilmeade was silent and waited several seconds before Roman sighed and nodded to himself.

“When was your last human blood meal, brother?”

Kilmeade’s eyes grew round. “Fourteen days. I haven’t relapsed since the Fathers called me on it.”

Roman sucked his teeth and shook his head, pondering the capricious nature of their leaders. They wanted him to buzz his brother. Why? It didn’t matter; probably for their own entertainment. Roman unbuttoned his cuff and rolled up his sleeve.

Kilmeade didn’t need a formal invitation. He closed the distance between them, grasped Roman’s forearm and jerked it to his mouth. Roman looked away and counted the seconds. Sixty should do it. As he neared the time, he faced his brother and placed a hand on his frizzy hair.

“Come see me when you are well, brother. I’ve missed you.”

Still pulling blood as hard as he could, Kilmeade responded in Hungarian telepathically. “*A bátyám. Barátom.*”

My brother. My friend. How appropriate.

Roman smoothed his hair and gave him an extra minute. Why not? What were brothers for?

6: Javier Meets Father Damien

“Like Father Like Son”⁶

1898

Waiting for Father Damien to arrive was torture. Javier sat in the house, at the front window, and watched the road. Their quarters had blacked out windows on the second floor, but downstairs, thin sheers covered by thick velvet curtains adorned every window. Javier assumed that was for the cleaning staff’s comfort, but since he never came downstairs during the day he didn’t give it much thought. Right now, though, he had pushed the cloth wide so that he could see the entire driveway and the first eighth of a mile up the main thoroughfare. Roman was away to allow Javier private time with their visitor.

The clock behind him struck eleven and Javier heard horses before he saw the carriage. His arms broke out in gooseflesh as he realized he was actually about to look upon, speak to and possibly touch one of their ancient ones.

Father Damien was reportedly born in 12AD, chosen and proselytized by High Father Abroghia as he taught philosophy to the Greeks of the day. The facts regarding the Ten Fathers’ origins were hazy, but the Rakum were taught the basics. High Father Abroghia was the first Rakum and he selected nine brethren along the way with whom to build their superior race. All ten Fathers were powerful, insatiable, and wise beyond anything a normal Rakum could ever imagine.

And Javier was going to meet one of them in minutes.

Javier got to his feet and watched a four-horse dress carriage enter the circular drive, pulled by immaculately groomed black Thoroughbreds. A mortal sat in the driver’s seat and a Rakum hopped down from beside him to open the door for their passenger. Javier’s throat closed as he suddenly forgot every last bit of protocol his Elder had taught him. Should he stay put and let the Father come to him, or should he run out and meet him at the carriage? Javier held his breath and tried to remember. Thankfully, a gentle telepathic whisper filled his mind and he sighed with relief.

“Go out to meet him and welcome him into the house.”

Roman’s timely telepathic reminder was much appreciated. Javier jumped to the door and walked swiftly out, heading for the coach. He stopped ten feet from the open door and watched as Father Damien emerged, dressed head-to-toe in black—pants, shirt, suit coat and cape. Only his pale skin reflected the light of the gas lamps on either side of them. He was tall, with

⁶ In *Rabbit Legacy*, Javier mentions a prophecy Father Damien shared with him a century before. Here is how that played out.

sturdy shoulders and a tapered waist with brown hair that reached his collar and was combed behind his ears. Assuming all of the Fathers were bearded, Javier was surprised to find Damien clean-shaven, with high cheekbones and a general bearing that belied his aristocratic history.

The Father didn't acknowledge Javier standing by, but hopped to the ground and gestured for his escort to return to his place. The Rakum peeked at Javier and smiled, as if saying, *you're in for a treat*, and then jumped up next to the driver. As they pulled off toward the stable, Javier stopped breathing and became a stone figure just feet away from his blood father. His heart-rate increased and as his pulse beat in his ears, he waited to see what Father Damien would do or say. After what seemed an eternity, the old Father tilted his head a few degrees and met Javier's gaze, his hazel eyes shining.

Javier was supposed to say something.

What?

His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth and his lungs burned for lack of oxygen. If he didn't speak or breathe or move soon, he'd pass out, then what would Father Damien think of him? The Father smiled and raised his eyebrows, nudging Javier to play his part. Then, as soft as a feather on his ear, the Father spoke in his mind.

"Yes, little Javier? Have you something prepared?"

Javier sucked in a lungful of air and nodded.

"I'll accept anything. Just say something."

"Father Damien, I—" Javier slumped the ground as the world went white and then black.

When he returned to consciousness, he was being carried into the house. Mortified, he covered his mouth and the Father looked down on him and smiled, lips closed. Javier suppressed embarrassed tears as the Father set his feet on the ground in the lushly-appointed den and stepped back. He was still waiting for a proper greeting and Javier bowed low.

"Father Damien, it is a tremendous honor to meet you. I trust your journey was pleasant." Javier's cheeks burned bright pink as he admitted the next part. "I'm sorry I fainted. I deserve to be chastised."

Javier stayed low, arms bent, hands clasped together, and expected a reprimand. He sensed Roman spying on them telepathically, but was glad he hadn't witnessed Javier's weakness first hand. The Father rumbled in his chest and Javier lifted his eyes a bit to see.

"Chastise you for what? For being ecstatic to meet me?" Father Damien chortled, his voice deep and filling the corners of the room. "Javier, stand up."

Javier did so, and the Father's eye was soft.

"You have grown into a fine young man. You are intelligent and ambitious. Your propensity for emotionalism does not offend me. You are your father's son."

Javier smiled cautiously, amazed at what he was hearing. Did Father

Damien just compare himself to a reckless and feckless Rakum who was pushing 21 and still hadn't completed First Ritual?

Damien put a hand to Javier's shoulder and stepped close. "Let us speak privately, Roman," he said aloud, and Javier recognized the sensation of his Elder disentangling his thoughts and fading out. "Now, Javier, what do you lack in your Ritual training?"

"Elder Roman's approval is all that remains. I have completed all of the physical and metaphysical testing." Javier found comfort in the Father's gaze and he was confounded at the realization. Roman had been warning him for years to be wary of the Fathers, that they were unpredictable and sometimes outright cruel. But Father Damien's demeanor was gentle, even more so than Roman's. As Javier pondered these things, Father Damien nodded his head and gestured for a nearby couch.

"Let us sit, Javier." They sat side-by-side, but facing each other so that one knee touched. "The other Fathers do not approve of my nature, son, but it is what I am. For almost two thousand years I have walked this earth and do you know what I have found to be truer than anything else?"

Javier shook his head, mesmerized by the Father's intense gaze.

"To thine own self be true."

"*Hamlet*, Act 1, scene 3," Javier whispered without intending to speak aloud. Father Damien nodded with approval and chuckled.

"You can use your empathetic tendencies to your good, Javier. The time for molding is over. Roman has done all he can to make you into a proper Rakum. Now, embrace what you are and move forward. You will graduate First Ritual before sunup."

Javier's jaw dropped as his chest swelled with joy. They were still speaking privately, so Roman didn't know what the Father was promising.

Father Damien smiled and shook his head, answering Javier's thoughts. "Roman would have graduated you at 18, but he doubted himself and frankly, he wasn't ready to see you go." Damien put a finger to Javier's lips and offered a conspiratorial smile. "But never tell him I said so."

"Father, you see the future." Javier was emboldened by the Father's familiar attitude and he dared to ask a pressing question. Damien answered him before he completed his query.

"You will suffer a tragedy before you leave the hospital, but when you settle in your first situation as an adult Rakum, you will find life easy. You'll never be without Cows and Elder Roman will remain at your disposal for as long as you live. Your bond is stronger than any I've seen amongst the brethren. My advice?"

Javier nodded eagerly when he realized the Father was awaiting a reaction.

"My advice is this: Be easygoing and do not seek trouble. When trouble finds you, Roman will protect you. One day, you will get in over your head and if you're not careful, you will take everyone you call friend down with

you.”

Javier frowned as his life’s predictions turned sour.

“When will this happen?”

The Father shrugged. “Not for a long time, little Javier. So live your life to the fullest and to thine own self be true.”

“Yes, Father, I promise,” Javier replied, feeling confident that the Father’s vision of his downfall was considerably distant.

“There is one more thing I want to share with you, Javier, but as a blood father, not as a Rakum Father. Can I do this?”

Javier was confused. Roman had drilled into his head the past thirteen years that Rakum held no family ties and if they did, they kept it to themselves. To do so was to admit weakness because the humans lived by their community attachments, and Rakum were proudly opposite the mortals in every way possible.

“Javier, when this happens, this thing that I have seen in a vision, a promised one will simultaneously emerge.” Father Damien proceeded without Javier’s response, his expression grave and his voice low. “It will come to pass that High Father Abroghia will father the last Rakum and imbue him with the combined power and might of the Ten Fathers. He will be called Yitzhak, and he will take over the Rakum for a time. He will be bloodthirsty and deadly, and if you do not beware, he will kill you.”

Javier didn’t know how to respond so he nodded. Damien smiled, sat back, and put his hand to Javier’s shoulder.

“Our business is complete, little Javier. Now show me to your hospital. I thirst.”

Still hashing over his life’s prophecies, Javier stood and led Father Damien to the front door. He’d show him the second floor. It was cleaner than the lunatic ward and most of the patients were unconscious. It had occurred to him to allow Father Damien to visit Isabella, but a twinge of jealousy prevented him from doing so.

Javier glanced at the Father as they walked across the quad. Father Damien would have overheard his last thought, but his face didn’t show it. Such a remarkable creature. Javier was happy Damien sired him, honored to share blood with such a Father.

Damien ruffled Javier’s hair and chuckled. “You will do well, Javier. I will be watching you.”

Javier beamed and didn’t try to hide his joy. And of all the Fathers, Damien was the one who wouldn’t expect him to.

7: The Death of a Treasure

“The End of Isabella”⁷

Javier stared into the wood-framed full-length mirror, lost in thought. In four days, he and Roman would abandon their situation at the hospital to another Elder/proselyte team and his feelings about leaving were a mixed bag. On the positive side, he’d finally be set up on his own. Roman would pair him with an older Rakum and extract himself from his day-to-day life. Javier wasn’t sure how it would feel, experiencing his nights without Roman in his head monitoring his every thought. He appreciated the attention, protection, and friendship the relationship with his Elder provided, but it was time to grow up. He felt it as sure as Roman was ready to put him out of the nest. The only reason for trepidation regarding the move was what to do with Isabella.

A week after they’d moved in, he’d transferred her from the lunatic ward to the house. She lived on the second floor and was not permitted to go downstairs. The cleaning staff was told she was a mentally-deficient family member and they steered clear of her, and whenever Javier was home, he spent his free time with her in her room. He was fond of her, but what was the harm in that? Roman admitted that there was no firm law prohibiting such relationships. So what was the problem?

Javier looked into his own eyes several long moments until the familiar hum crept into his consciousness. It was a simple stress reducer, to hypnotize oneself, and Javier found it useful whenever he had things to sort out. There was simply no denying that he was fond of the girl, and it wasn’t clear what Roman would allow him to do regarding her future. As an autonomous First Ritual graduate, he might be allowed to make the decision regarding her fate. If that was the case, Javier would like to bring her with him.

“As a mate?”

Javier whirled around to meet his Elder’s gaze. Always the stealthy one, Roman stood in the doorway, arms crossed, and his expression sour.

“Pardon?” Javier asked, buying time. He hadn’t even begun to explore women sexually so Roman’s intrusive question took him off guard.

“Bring her along as what, Javier? She’s not a Cow, so you must consider her something else. Yet there’s only one other role for her to play.” Roman’s tempered tone did not disguise the fact that Javier was being chastised.

Javier sucked his teeth and didn’t answer. Isabella not a Cow? Technically, no, because Canaan falsely institutionalized her, enslaved her, and then gave her to Javier as a gift. Cows were an entirely different breed—voluntary donors that sought out Rakum like bees sought honey. Was Roman saying if she came along, she’d be Javier’s mate? With him only 20 years old?

⁷ The tragic death of Javier’s first love haunts him for the rest of his life. Here is how she died.

Roman shook his head. “It’s of no matter, Javier, because she’s neither. She’s an obsession. Am I such a poor teacher that you don’t know the proper Rakum response to this predicament?”

Javier lowered his gaze and faced the mirror once more, eyes on the reflected hands that hung at his sides. Roman had two solutions: Kill her before they left, or give her to the incoming Rakum duo. Neither set well with Javier and Roman knew it.

“I will be severely disappointed if you don’t see reason soon.” Roman looked as if he may say more, but being a man of few words and even less emotive tendencies, he turned on his heel and left Javier with his thoughts.

Javier licked his palm and smoothed his wavy black hair. It reached his shoulders now, lazy curls more evident the longer it grew. He peered once more into his own eyes and brooded on Roman’s evil discourse. A soft noise and the odor of lavender caught his attention and he snapped awake. Isabella was headed toward his room and he looked at the door as she appeared.

“Master,” she whispered as their eyes met, *is everything okay* was written in her gaze. Javier nodded, and motioned for her to enter and stand beside him. She was interminably dressed for bed since he was only up at night. Her white cotton gown touched the floor, but the scooped neck hung lower than she probably liked. Roman had given her the clothing he found on the premises and she had little choice of wardrobe. When in place, he gestured for the mirror.

“What do you see, Isabella?”

After an uncharacteristic nervous pause, she asked his reflection, “What do you mean?”

Isabella was one to speak her mind and tonight she was more contemplative than usual. Had Roman spoken to her already? Did he place the blame on her, when she was as innocent of wrongdoing as the day they met?

Javier placed his palm to the back of her neck and pulled her closer. She didn’t flinch, so accustomed she was to his touch, but her eyebrows arched and her lips parted.

“What do you want to hear?”

Javier sighed, unsure of what he wanted her to say. “I’m curious. A year has passed,” Javier shrugged. His feelings for the girl were complicated indeed, and he couldn’t fathom what went through her head each time he went to her and took her blood. Roman had a point—she wasn’t a volunteer. Yet, she consented readily. He started again. “Isabella, you should be forthcoming. It’s all right. What do you see?”

Isabella left his reflected gaze and looked him up and down in the mirror. Javier smirked at being scrutinized. When her liquid eyes met his once more, he marveled at how she’d matured over the past twelve months. Wasn’t she more a woman now than a girl? Canaan gave him a treasure of a youngster, fresh from her mother’s lap, but now a year later the 17-year-old Isabella had blossomed into a young woman, and without the helpful influence of other

females. Javier maintained the side-ways smile and awaited her reply.

“Master Roman said you will depart soon. Why haven’t you mentioned this?”

It wasn’t unusual for her to answer a question with a question. It fit the girl’s strong, independent personality that irked Roman to pieces. Javier lowered his gaze, watching her in the mirror and squeezed his fingers at her neck. The corners of her mouth turned up and she offered a reply to his original question.

“I see a prince of darkness. Blessed, but cursed. Lonely, but never alone. Deadly, but gentle as a lamb. Will you one day take a wife, master?” Isabella spoke without emotion, but there was danger in her eyes. If Javier’s answer didn’t please, those eyes would water. Javier shook his head, holding her attention in the reflected surface.

“No.” He maneuvered her to stand before him now and then lifted his free hand to touch her soft-as-butter cheek. “A mate, perhaps, one day. But a wife? Never. And never in the way you imagine.”

Surprisingly, Isabella didn’t cry, but hardened her gaze. “Weeks ago, when you came to me in my room and had me undress—”

Javier lowered his hand from her cheek and shot her a warning glance. Pure inquisitiveness had driven him that night. Not lust or avarice, just boy-meets-girl curiosity. Javier had seen a dozen prostitutes in various stages of undress, but never Isabella, a chaste innocent. She’d been petrified, working herself into a fervor wondering at his intentions, when all he wanted to do was look. Ultimately, her fear response triggered his bloodlust and the night ended before he was able to complete his investigation of her mysteries.

Isabella took his hand then and lifted it to the exposed skin of her upper chest. “Your master—”

“Elder Roman,” Javier mumbled, his eye on their reflected contact.

“He came to me last night.” Isabella’s gaze wandered far away, but Javier came to attention.

“Say again?”

“We spoke of you.”

“And?” Javier breathed his reply and monitored his responses. Jealousy was an ugly attribute. It proved his devotion to her which was something the Rakum despised.

“You’re not too young to know a woman.”

“What?” Javier lowered his hand, but still held the back of her throat with the other. Isabella gently reached for his hand again and repositioned it on her skin.

“Your master said it was for the best.”

“What’s for the best?” Javier ceased looking at her reflection and she looked over her shoulder and met his direct gaze. From a few rooms away, he sensed Roman was on top of their entire interaction and he waited to see if he would interrupt.

As if following a vaguely delivered order, Isabella turned into him and put her hand to the back of his head. When she pressed her lips to his, he was still awaiting Roman's intervention. When none came, he had to assume Roman was throwing him another test. Without any idea how to proceed, Javier lifted Isabella off the ground and took her to her bedroom. If Roman had any objections, he didn't voice them, aloud or telepathically.

Javier did his best to figure it out alone.

Dawn crept toward the house as Roman slipped into the girl's room without a sound. Javier hadn't left her bed and the two of them slept soundly. Isabella face up, the sheet drawn to her chin and Javier face down, one arm draped across her middle. It would be most convenient if the boy had returned to his own quarters, but Roman didn't have the luxury of time. This day, before the sun rose, he would put an end to Javier's obsession with the girl they held prisoner in the second floor of their house.

Javier hadn't achieved the easy detachment all Rakum possessed regarding the mortals they preyed upon. Canaan did them no favors presenting the girl to Javier as a gift. She had wormed her way into the youth's already weak conscience and grabbed him by the jugular.

Roman had warned him repeatedly that his too-human involvement with the girl would not be tolerated by the Fathers. After eight months of advice whispered into deaf ears, Roman began to receive threatening telepathic messages from their leaders regarding the way he was handling the situation. Two days ago, even Father Damien chimed in and told Roman to do whatever he must to deliver Javier from the spell of the beautiful maiden. So, Roman decided to kill two birds with one stone. Javier would learn his way around the opposite sex decades ahead of schedule and at the same time, cope with tragedy and despair.

The lingering aroma of the girl's spilled blood affirmed what he'd hoped would transpire. Javier had discharged his duty as a Rakum by filling his gut before they fell off to sleep. It was proper and good because when he awoke at sunset, he'd assume he was responsible for her demise.

Determined, Roman stepped up to the pedestal bed and placed his hand above Isabella's chest. Killing came as easily as healing, and Roman didn't have to make contact to work his will on her heart. Javier's rhythmic snoring proved that even as the girl went into cardiac arrest, she didn't wake or move against him. When Roman stood and crossed his arms at his chest, Isabella was dead.

Roman smiled and backed out of the room.

The Fathers were happy, news of Roman's solution was already being spread among the telepathic brethren, and Javier would awake a better Rakum. One not tied down by human emotion.

Roman headed to his own bed and fell off to sleep, not a care in the world.

8: David Walker

“Peculiar Origins”⁸

David Walker was born in 1935, graduated First Ritual at 17, and was excommunicated at twenty. Such a thing was unheard of in his clan, but in his faults, he was incorrigible: David enjoyed watching the sun come up.

Much to the violent chagrin of his elders and fellow disciples, David could think of little else that gave him more pleasure than to see the night turn to day, the sky go from black, to purple, to pink, and then bright white. David enjoyed supernatural resistance to pain which gave him the ability to remain in the light longer than his brethren. But his infatuation with the movement of the sun made him the laughingstock of his group-lair, and earned him more than a few offensive nicknames. His people had no use for sentimental weaklings, no matter that David denied being either of those things. Still, it only started with the sunrise.

By the time David was 13 and headed for First Ritual, which would eventually graduate him to full Rakum, it was obvious that he would not fit in anywhere among his brethren. Because he was impervious to painful stimuli, he found the physical tests of the Ritual a breeze. But when it came to exercising his superiority before the cattle with whom they shared the planet, David failed repeatedly. When he graduated the Ritual, his group proctor recommended him to Tomás, a brutish Rakum Elder of some renown in Miami.

“*Tomás will make you strong, David, trust me,*” the proctor told him as he packed his one bag for the trip south. But it wasn’t meant to be. Elder Tomás hated David from the start.

Recognizing his inability to assert himself, Tomás renamed him Snake as an ironic joke and then did everything he could to force him to comply with the rules of the pack. David couldn’t bring himself to kill, maim or destroy anything much less, *anyone*. By the time he was 20 years old, his Elder sent him north to Gainesville, Florida, as an experiment; to see if living alone would toughen him up.

A college town, Gainesville was populated with students and David had little trouble fitting in appearance-wise. He was young and slim with reddish

⁸ In the novel *Rabbit: Chasing Beth Rider*, Rakum David Walker joins Beth Rider and Michael Stone just before they are violently confronted and attacked by Elder Jack Dawn. David’s peculiar origins are part of the plot and here you will get a glimpse into his past.

brown hair and friendly dark green eyes. But finding lodging as a penniless and friendless Rakum wasn't easy. David lived decades on the streets, hidden in boiler rooms and abandoned housing, fearing the sunrise instead of loving it.

Yet he persevered.

Eighteen months ago, he was approached by the person who fed him at the moment. His people referred to these voluntary donors as Cows, and this man was his first. Many of his brethren held four or more Cows in their respective cities and David had been longing for such a find since he'd been sent here. But it took maturity to develop the sensibility required to attract these odd characters, mortals whose greatest desire was to give blood to a mythical being they only thought they understood. Since then, David became adept at seeking them out. Finally.

So here he sat, fifty-five years after Elder Tomás sent him away, in the professor's bedroom, drawing blood directly from his wrist and ignoring the moans of delight from the old man beside him.

David didn't look a day over 18, and a year and half ago, Professor Benjamin Oppum followed him into an internet café. The educator struck up a conversation that eventually moved outside, and finally into the professor's white BMW.

David wasn't bothered that the man was gay. He was wealthy, and more than anything, David wanted a steady place to call home. Once the professor understood what kind of creature he had found in David Walker, he opened his home *and* his veins to the kid he now referred to as 'master'.

Eyes closed, David ended his meal and pressed his tongue to the incision he had made. His saliva would accelerate the clotting process. It was not nearly as impressive as the touch-healing some of his brethren possessed, but it was helpful nonetheless.

"Master, I—" Oppum began, but David grunted to remind him to be quiet. It was one his few pleasures, allowing the blood to settle into his system, and he had warned the old guy many times to be still.

"*Sorry,*" he whispered, and David leaned forward over his knees. They were sitting side-by-side, on the edge of the man's roomy bed, and when he bent forward David sensed the professor's urge to touch his back.

"No," he mumbled, and the man's hand went back to his lap. David had not developed much of a sex-drive at his young age—many of his people didn't until they reached the century mark. Nonetheless, no human was permitted touch a Rakum uninvited. It was a tenet he was taught early on and he agreed with it whole-heartedly.

Moments later when the delightful tingle had faded to a memory, David turned his head to the side and waited to hear what the old Cow would say. Oppum looked at him with sleepy gray eyes, milky with cataracts.

"I need to tell you something," he mumbled, as if the blood loss was affecting his speech. David knew better. The guy wasn't anemic, he was

aroused. David left dead air and allowed the old man to fill it with his explanation.

“Tomorrow night at six, I’m having company. The Dean closed the Student Union for six months to renovate, and all of the kids are spreading across campus and will be meeting at their professor’s homes.”

“Oh, yeah?” David sat up and leaned back, resting on his hands. Oppum hadn’t had a visitor since he moved in and now he was going to have over a crowd. Could be interesting if Oppum didn’t ruin it by acting weird.

Which wasn’t likely.

“So what do you think?” the professor asked as he eyed him.

David didn’t tolerate his touch, but longing gazes were expected. After another moment, Oppum continued in a husky tone.

“I understand if you want to lay low while they’re here. I haven’t said anything to anyone about having a guest.”

“Tell them I’m your nephew,” David offered, but Oppum laughed.

“Of course, my nephew. They’ll believe that.”

“Then tell them whatever you want. I don’t care. I’ll probably stay up here.” David rose to his feet and headed for the door. Oppum was right behind him, keeping up despite his hefty size.

“Would you like to watch some TV?” The professor reached for the knob. “Or we could rent a movie?”

David shrugged and then shook his head. “No, thanks, Professor. I’m going for a walk. See ya later.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later,” Oppum called after him and even as David stepped lightly down the carpeted stairs, he could feel the man watching him go.

It wasn’t the most desirable way to garner lodging, but it was free. Oppum modified a bedroom for him upstairs, with blacked-over windows and soft ambient lighting. Since the old guy was busted sneaking into his room one day as he slept, David now had a deadbolt and the only key in his pocket. After all, he was a light sleeper, and he couldn’t have the professor creeping into his room only to be broken in two by a surprised Rakum.

David chuckled and rubbed his middle. A walk would do him good, and he set out to see what the neighborhood was up to.

By seven-thirty the following evening, the meeting was coming to an end and David headed downstairs to catch the kids leaving. Oppum would prefer he stayed in his room, but David was curious. For over an hour, he’d eavesdropped on the conversation and question-and-answer session that closed the meeting. Now as he reached the landing, all eyes turned to him and he smiled shyly.

“Oh,” Oppum began and cleared his throat. “Everyone, meet my nephew, David. He’s staying with me for a while.”

David nodded and stepped into the throng of seventeen college students. He read suspicion in a few of the kids' eyes, but most of them were openly happy to meet him. Each one greeted him with a handshake or a smile as they gathered their various belongings and headed for the exit. When David had reached the back of the crowd and the last student stepped up to him, the kid stuck out his hand wearing a huge grin.

"Weezer, right?"

David's eyebrows went up. "Weezer?"

The kid laughed and shook his hand. "I saw you at the Weezer concert last summer. You were next to the speakers. Am I right?"

David smiled, impressed. "I was there."

"I knew it. Man!" The kid pulled David aside to the kitchen without releasing from the handshake. "I'm Terrence O'Henry. It's nice to meet you."

"O'Henry, eh?"

"Yeah, like the candy, but not as rich," Terrence laughed and allowed the kitchen door to close behind them. "Probably not as sweet either," he snickered and finally released David's hand.

"I'm sure you're sweeter than you think," David replied without thinking and the kid smiled wider. Terrence was his height, but heavier with a soft middle and rounded shoulders. He wore his wavy brown hair long enough to cover his ears and had bangs partially obscuring his hazel eyes.

"I never in a million years thought I'd see you again. Or like this." He gestured around him. "In my professor's house, just out of the blue."

"I'm afraid I don't follow," David said, sensing already that the boy had made him as something unusual. Some humans saw what others refused to see.

"You're going to think I'm nuts, *but I thought you were a ghost!*" Terrence whispered the last and laughed nervously into his hand.

"Did I look like a ghost?"

"Well, sort of. You were surrounded by this halo of white light, and from where I stood, I thought you were transparent. Hah," Terrence laughed again. "But my date didn't see anything like that, so I guess I imagined it. Whew!" Terrence leaned against the counter behind him. "Was I thrilled to see you tonight. You have no idea...you've been stuck in my mind since then. I thought I was freaking out. Like I was a psycho. Huh."

"I wish I'd seen you," David began, but the kitchen door opened and Oppum poked in his round face.

"David, everything all right?"

David didn't reply, but motioned to Terrence with his hand. "Come on up to my room and I'll show you my Weezer poster. Every member of the band signed it."

"You're kidding!" Terrence stepped off the counter and tailed David past the frowning professor and up the stately staircase.

"David? Mr. O'Henry?" Oppum called to them as they reached the top.

The other kids were gone. David gave Terrence a look that they should

ignore the professor and he giggled. Once inside his bedroom, David turned the deadbolt and threw Terrence another look that he understood immediately.

“Professor’s kinda attached to you, huh?” Terrence said and David returned a small smile.

“There’s the poster, I met the guys after the show. Pretty cool, huh?” David pointed to the only wall-hanging. He attended plenty of concerts, mostly to vicariously enjoy the life of the crowds, but the alternative rock band Weezer had a road manager who was a Cow to an amicable Rakum. Sometimes connections came in handy.

Terrence studied the signatures a moment and then turned to look around the room. “Nice digs, David. You really Oppum’s nephew?”

“Nope,” David answered flatly. “So, why didn’t you approach me at the concert?”

“Mostly, I was afraid,” Terrence said with a shrug.

“Are you afraid now?” David stepped forward and Terrence stood his ground.

“No, I don’t guess. Are you a ghost, David?”

“Am I glowing?”

Terrence chuckled. “No, but there’s something different about you. Am I crazy or are you more than just a college kid hanging with Professor Opossum?”

“You’re not crazy.” David lowered his head. “I’m not a kid. I just play one pretty well. Very few mortals can see me the way you do, Terrence. That makes you my new best friend.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.” David continued forward until they were only a few feet apart.

“So, what are you?”

“A Wraith, Terrence. I’m not human. You’re right about me.” David put his hands in his jeans pockets and watched the kid’s expression. The word Rakum would have absolutely no meaning for the kid, and he never used the word vampire even though once the Cows got to know him they invariably labeled him as one.

Terrence’s mind was very open and more than once, David overheard thoughts regarding how wonderful Oppum’s houseguest was. Telepathy was a handy talent to possess.

“I… I don’t know what that is. A Wraith? Isn’t that a type of ghost?”

“No, my people are called Rakum. I’m immortal and I drink human blood.” David spoke matter-of-factly and Terrence’s eyebrows went up.

“Like a vampire.”

“Yeah.”

“Weird.”

“Yeah,” David said again, smiling.

“Do you drink Oppum’s blood, then?”

David shrugged. “He’s easy enough to control.”

“Wouldn’t you rather have a younger person’s blood? Someone who hasn’t almost killed themselves with bad liquor and cheap cigarettes?”

David smiled. “Know anybody like that, Terrence?”

Terrence blushed. “Actually, I do.”

“Introduce me,” David joked and Terrence put out his hand.

“Terrence O’Henry, nice to meet you.”

David smiled, took his hand and pulled him closer. “I usually draw from the arm. Is that okay with you?”

Terrence nodded and shrugged simultaneously. “As opposed to the neck, like Dracula?”

“Dracula killed people, Terrence. I like to keep my donors alive so I can visit again.” David took the kid’s arm in both hands now and Terrence watched with wide eyes.

“You have more donors than Oppum?” Terrence asked in a soft voice.

“I have four now. You’d be five. Is that all right?”

“Sure, why not?” he mumbled, finally responding to David’s gentle hypnosis. “What do you want me to do?”

“Sit on the edge of the bed and relax.”

Once Terrence was in place, David set about slicing his forearm with his pocketknife and the kid flinched without making a noise.

A knock sounded at the door. David rolled his eyes and ignored it. Oppum was jealous. He’d chastise the old goat later. But for now Terrence O’Henry was doing his part to make David’s life more enjoyable.

And as it turned out, the kid was a lot sweeter than he gave himself credit.

9: David Walker, Part II

“To Worship a Rakum”⁹

Terrence was late.

David checked his watch and sat down on the stoop, hoping the professor would honor his promise to stay inside. He kept the old guy in line, but had to watch him more closely than his other Cows.

“David!”

David got to his feet and looked up and down the quiet street. It was a half past midnight, and he heard the call for help in his head, not in his ears. Wherever Terrence was, he was scared to death.

David stepped to the sidewalk, listening for any clues as to his friend’s location. Terrence couldn’t receive him; it took years for a Cow to learn how to listen for their Rakum master’s telepathic voice, and David had only been visiting the kid for a little over ten months.

“David, please!”

David frowned and concentrated on the last transmission. He had no idea from where Terrence was calling, so he took a wild guess and turned east, jogging at a good clip. He’d always had excellent instincts.

David ran for two blocks under the decorative shepherd’s hook street lamps, and when he came to the T-junction, he stopped. It was a major thoroughfare, but on a Tuesday night nearing 1 a.m., it was deserted.

“Library!”

“It’s about time,” David mumbled, and turned right, happy that in his panic, Terrence remembered to offer him a location. He’d be in front of the library in less than a block. He listened for Terrence as he covered the distance incredibly fast.

Skidding to a stop in front of the locked building, David heard the sounds of a struggle coming from behind. Rounding the western corner of the huge white stone edifice, David came face-to-face with a thug exiting the alley at top speed. The guy tried to avoid him, but they collided violently, and the guy went down. Unaffected by the blow, David stood over him and looked for his friend.

Off to his right, Terrence yelped, and then slumped against the wall, his face bloody. Had he been mugged? Robbed? David was about to check on him when the ruffian came to his feet, and threatened him with a short switchblade.

⁹ This scene occurs a couple of years before *Rabbit: Chasing Beth Rider* novel time and reveals that the Cows utterly worship their Rakum Masters.

“What’s it to you, buddy? You want a piece of me?”

The man gestured with the knife and lunged into David’s space. David easily dodged him, but the guy was manic, swerving and cursing, his eyes wild. He recoiled and lunged again, thrusting the knife with vicious intent as David feigned to the side once more.

“Get him, David! Get him!” Terrence called from the wall, cradling an injured arm.

David glanced his way and the attacker took another swipe, nicking his forearm. David felt no pain, but his mind raced with possibilities if the fight progressed. He couldn’t fight a mortal. How could he be sure he didn’t accidentally kill the guy?

Terrence shouted again and David frowned, holding up his palm to shush him. Terrence knew better. The anonymity he required hinged on staying out of the eye of the authorities. David would rather be stabbed than retaliate and perhaps kill the guy. He backed away from the maniac and hoped he’d turn and run off, but his blood was up. He stepped forward and tried to trap David against the cool stone wall.

David considered his options. He had to incapacitate the guy without injuring him. His choice made, David reached forward quickly to grab both of the man’s wrists and head-butted him, not sure how much power to exert. David’s skull would heal if fractured, but too much oomph would put the attacker’s lights out for good.

The thug’s gaze went soft and David released him to stumble backwards and hit the ground. He would live, no bones broken. David sighed with relief.

“Finish him, David! He tried to kill me!”

David shook his head as Terrence pushed himself up the wall to a standing position.

“Let’s go, Terrence.” David reached his side. “You know better.”

David pulled on his friend’s arm and helped him begin to walk away. When they passed the mugger lying on the ground, he rolled onto his back and gestured toward them.

“I’ll get you! Both of you!”

David ignored the man, but Terrence called out insults as he limped away. When they were safely on the sidewalk in front of the library, David tugged his friend to a lamppost and examined his injuries.

“What did that guy want?” he asked as he checked Terrence’s cheek laceration. It was deep, but had stopped bleeding.

“He’s been tailing me for weeks. Thinks I have a lot of money. Tried to rob me.”

David examined his friend’s injured arm. The guy’s blade was dull, but had inflicted a three inch gash on the inside of Terrence’s elbow. David applied pressure to the seeping wound with his palm.

“That doesn’t make sense, Terrence.” David looked up and down the deserted street and pulled his friend out from under the lamp and into the

shadows of the neighboring building. “This guy wasn’t after your money. What did he really want?”

“What do you mean?” Terrence asked as David pulled his knife wound to his lips.

“This has something to do with drugs, Terrence,” David said before unceremoniously pressing his tongue against the leaking wound. It wouldn’t clot without stitches and David’s saliva would accelerate the kid’s natural healing.

“You gonna lick my face next, David?” Terrence remarked smirking, trying to change the subject, but David didn’t fall for it.

“Your face is fine. What does that guy have on you, Terr?” David dropped his friend’s arm, the cut sufficiently closed.

Terrence lowered his head.

“I’m not going to ask you again,” David threatened him, beginning to feel the first pangs of anger. His life depended on a precarious set of variables that he had to maintain. If one of his Cows stepped out of line, the rest of his world could easily tumble down around him.

Terrence still hadn’t answered him and David placed a heavy hand on the youth’s shoulder. “I love you Terr, but you must remember our agreement. You do, don’t you? You want to honor our agreement?”

Terrence nodded his head and sniffled. “Yes, David, I’m sorry.”

David cleared his throat, hating to exert his superiority, but he knew he must.

“Yes, master, I’m sorry,” Terrence mumbled.

David could count on one hand how many times the kid had called him master, and each time it was because he’d stepped out of line. David waited to hear an explanation.

“Marijuana. I bought some Marijuana from him and he let me have an extension on my loan...and today I came up short.”

David bit his lip and forced down a few unkind words, furious on many levels. Not only had the kid endangered his own life by inviting an altercation with a drug dealer, but he endangered David’s way of life, too. Worse, he transgressed against his master by defiling his blood.

“*Marijuana?*” David whispered, trying to maintain calm. Life had been sweet the past three years. Was it about to end? Would he have to move on? The situation with Oppum was not perfect, but he was safe. He had plenty to eat, a roof over his head, and five worshippers at his beck and call.

“Terrence, do you hate me so much?”

“No!” Terrence released the air from his lungs and began to bawl. His chest heaved with emotion and after a few seconds he fell into David and wrapped his arms about his waist. “I didn’t take any drugs. No, I was just trying to make some extra dough. I was re-selling it, I was desperate. David, I’d never do anything to hurt you. I’m...I’m...”

David stood motionless, arms out awkwardly, and absorbed the pain

wracking his young friend's soul. He intuited his sincerity and in another moment, overheard telepathically what Terrence had not yet admitted. The kid lost his scholarship and was being kicked out of school.

"You've been suspended?"

Terrence nodded his head and sniffled again, wiping his nose on his sleeve before resuming the one-sided embrace. "I couldn't keep my grades up. It's been coming for months, and I just never could face it. I don't want to leave you, David, but without school, my parents insist I move back home. I don't want to live without you, David. Not ever."

David nodded and patted Terrence's back. "You should've come to me in the beginning. I'll always do what I can to help you. Don't you know that?"

"But this is my fault. I just didn't study hard enough. I kept thinking it'd get better on its own."

"Get off me," David said, his tone uncharacteristically harsh. Terrence slowly released him and stood back. "Come live with me and Oppum. He has plenty of room. Get a job, tell your folks you have a place to stay. This really isn't a problem, Terrence. You overreacted."

Terrence blew his nose and wiped his hands on his jeans. "Oppum would go for that? He hates me."

"Look who you're talking to, Terrence." David waited for the kid to meet his eye. "I messed up befriending you guys like I did. That's my nature. But you don't respect me for what I am, do you? I am master to Oppum. His *master*. He won't make a move without me. I'm disappointed in you."

"No, David..."

"I'm disappointed in myself," David mumbled the last and turned away.

"No, David, you're right. It's my fault. I lost perspective. I lost faith. I'm sorry. I should have believed in you more. I should have known that you would do everything in your power to keep me by your side. It's my fault, not yours."

David shook his head and took a few steps down the sidewalk. Terrence caught up to him and took his elbow.

"You proved yourself to me over and over the past year. Friend, teacher, master—you're everything to me, David." Terrence pulled David's arm until he turned. "I don't have eyes for anyone else, David. You noticed that, didn't you? I stopped seeing Tammy six months ago. I just can't be with anyone, because you're all that matters to me."

David turned his mouth to the side and regarded the kid's treatise. Terrence was a good kid, honest and loyal, and apparently, more devoted than David gave him credit. He hadn't noticed the boy stopped dating; his other Cows still carried on their outside relationships. Without realizing it, David had accomplished what he was trained to do as a youth: Acquire a servant who truly revered his master.

True worship.

True faith.

David offered Terrence a small smile and put his arm about his shoulders,

pulling him in tight. “Okay, forgiven all around, right?”

Terrence nodded, relieved.

“Let’s go wake old Oppum and get him to fix up the spare room.” David pulled Terrence along with him and they headed home. “He has two houseguests now.”

Terrence smiled and touched his painful cheek. “And I’m sorry about Masher. I’ll pay him tomorrow. He won’t bother us again.”

“Masher,” David chuckled, “that’s a good name for him.”

Terrence laughed aloud, and the sound was music to David’s soul.

10: David Walker, Part III

“David and the Dying-Buzz”¹⁰

A week after Terrence’s run-in with the friendly neighborhood drug dealer, David sat in Oppum’s living room watching TV. The professor graciously provided four large pizzas, several liters of pop, and the latest *Die Hard* DVD. David provided the company.

He’d had invited the whole group; each man who let blood for him, each Cow he also called a friend. Terrence sat on David’s immediate right on the overstuffed sofa, leaving Jerry on the far end, while Maury and Luke sat in chairs to either side of the couch. Oppum sat in the recliner catty-corner to the big-screen television, but he wasn’t interested in the show. He mostly ate pizza and watched the kids watch the movie.

The boys were very dissimilar and David enjoyed the differences between them. Luke was tall and broad, a football player at the High School. He was 19, but had been held back one year for bad grades and a worse attitude. Jerry, an African-American, was smaller than Luke, but just as tough. He ran track and was a freshman at the college. A drop-out, Maury completed the set, slight and mousy, with dirty brown hair that hung in his eyes. With Terrence’s doughy physique and Oppum’s obese frame, David felt he had collected for himself a motley and delightful bunch of companions.

Half-way through the movie, as David laughed with abandon at the outrageous stunts on screen, the doorbell rang. A hitch in his breath from the effort, he saw Oppum check his watch before rising from his chair. His small beady eyes found David’s and he raised his meticulously plucked eyebrows.

“*It’s sort of late.*” He mouthed the words, really asking permission to go the door. Smiling, David gestured for him to answer it. The old gentleman pushed his bulk out of his chair and walked the short distance to the door. An explosion on the screen caught David’s eye and he looked back in time to see the protagonist kill a helicopter with a police car. Then all hell broke loose.

Before David could come to his feet and reach the foyer, the front door burst in and Oppum fell back, landing hard on the stairwell. Two dark-skinned, hooded men had entered and the skinnier of the two dead-bolted the front door. Behind him, one of the kids squealed in fright.

Ignoring the intruders, David ran to the Professor’s side and knelt beside him to check his condition. He’d been stabbed in the gut and bright red blood seeped through his white dress shirt. David pressed his hand to the wound.

“Terrence! Get over here!” he shouted, but the intruder closest to him pulled him to his feet by his collar and forced him around. It was Masher,

¹⁰ This peek into David’s life not only explains some of his history from *Rabbit: Chasing Beth Rider*, but also rounds out a major plot point in *Rabbit Legacy*.

Terrence's drug dealer, and he was insane with fury.

"I told you I'd find you, and I'm gonna kill you all. Then I'll make myself at home in this little fairyland of yours." Masher's putrid breath fell on David's cheek as he cursed in his face.

David looked into the four faces watching with wide eyes a few feet away in the living room, and then to his other side where Oppum lay sucking in his last breaths on the stairs. The drug dealer's partner moved into the living room then and pointed a long open switchblade in Maury's face. The stench of urine filled the room. David had had enough.

With barely a thought, he put the heel of his right hand on Masher's chin and his left on the base of his skull. The guy managed to drive his knife into David's middle, but after that, was unable to do anything at all as David nearly twisted off his head.

His friends screamed at the sight and only Terrence came forward, dodging the maniac's partner who still threatened Maury with a wary eye on David, shouting, "Masher! Hey! I'll gut you for that!"

David took one step toward the remaining thug who stepped back, still barking threats. But it was enough of a distraction for Terrence to reach the stairs. David gestured toward Oppum.

"Press your hand into that wound. You have to stop the bleeding!" David yelled, facing the lone bad guy across the room. As Terrence knelt and did as ordered, David pointed toward the intruder. "Drop the knife, or end up like your friend here."

The man backed one step toward the door, but continued to brandish his blade at the boys. David stepped up to him in a blink, and the guy's eyes widened in surprise. It was about to happen and David couldn't stop himself. He reached out for the man's face and snapped his neck with no effort at all. Poor Maury, already weak, and at 17 the youngest of the bunch, fainted then and crumpled onto the sofa.

David eyed Luke and gestured to his pal. "Take care of him."

He then turned to Oppum and Terrence. The professor's face was paling quickly and David whipped out his cell phone. He tossed it to Jerry who dialed 911 without further instruction.

David raised his voice and addressed the boys. "Everyone listen up! You just saw Terrence break this man's neck in self-defense. Then Luke jumped the other guy and did the same. Do you understand?"

David wished his voice was calmer, but his heart was going ninety miles a minute. He couldn't for an instant be connected to the deaths of the drug dealers, no matter if it was self-defense or not. If he became involved, he'd have to skip town, and he'd warned them all in the past of this danger. David caught each boy's eye and they nodded with understanding. David turned his attention to the old man.

"Oppum! Professor!" he called. The bleeding showed no sign of letting up and David didn't have the ability to heal him. He checked the position of

Terrence's hand and indeed, the kid was doing the best he could to stem the flow.

David leaned down close to Oppum's face and touched his cheek. "Ben? Ben?"

"*Master...*" Oppum mumbled, his tongue thickening with shock.

David wiped the sweat from the professor's forehead with his palm and smiled down on him. Professor Benjamin Oppum was sometimes obnoxious, but he'd been a good Cow and maybe more importantly, a good provider for David for over the years.

"Yes, Ben, how're ya doing? I can't stop the bleeding. I'm sorry," David whispered back. Oppum's eyes shone with pain, but he managed a tiny smile just the same.

"Master, would you..." Oppum paused and grimaced as pain overcame his tongue. Then his eyes reopened and he fixed his gaze upon David's. "Let it be you, master... David...you do it. Please. Please."

David shook his head. "No, Ben, it's no good. It's not good. Shhh..."

Oppum eyes filled with tears and David looked behind him at the faces of the boys. Had he shared with all of them the pros and cons of Rakum drinking from the dying? Terrence knew, of course, but what of the others? David looked back to Oppum and he was hanging in, probably stubbornly, just to get his way.

"Please, Master...*just this one last gesture...my life for you...*" Oppum's voice broke at the last and David knew he might not have the strength to speak again. In the distance, but still a good four minutes away, David heard sirens.

Four minutes. Not much time to drink from a dying man. The effects could incapacitate him. Not to mention that it was forbidden by the Fathers.

"*My life...*" Oppum mumbled and fell silent.

David reached into his pocket and yanked out his knife. Without further ado, he pushed the tip into the professor's throat and covered the wound hastily with his mouth. The blood rushed into him at first and he drew it out as fast as it would go. But as the seconds ticked by, the volume decreased, Oppum's heartbeat slowed, and the sound of the sirens approached the neighboring street. With supreme effort, David stopped the impromptu feast and rolled off Oppum's chest.

He lay back on the steps, not aware of the discomfort of the carpeted stair jutting into his back. The dying professor's blood was doing exactly what his teachers had warned him it would. A Rakum his age, who never drew a dying buzz in the past, would seize, and David couldn't move a muscle. On the opposite side of the mountainous Oppum, Terrence reached for David's arm.

"The medics are here, David. Get upstairs!"

He hissed his words and David made an effort to roll onto his side. Terrence called for assistance and soon, strong arms pulled him to his feet and supported him as they climbed the stairs. Two of the boys, likely Jerry and Luke, heaved him toward his room, with Terrence following behind barking

orders like a drill sergeant.

“Get him in his room! Hurry! They’ll be here any second. Come on, Luke! Get the door open!”

David heard the commotion through a haze of pure pleasure, his every nerve alive and tingling, and his mind buzzing with delight. The blood of the dying was packed with adrenaline, and that very same ambrosia titillated him to the core.

David was dropped onto his bed and Terrence shouted for the two boys to head back down and greet the paramedics.

“Oppum’s dead!”

A voice from downstairs. Maury, poor little Maury. He wouldn’t soon forget this night, David mused absently.

Terrence busied himself with frantically straightening David’s arms and legs and tucking him under the covers. David turned to meet the kid’s gaze and he smiled, not even aware of his expression. Terrence’s eye widened and he gasped.

“I’ll be downstairs, don’t worry about anything,” Terrence said while backing up, his face ashen and his mouth open. “I’ll take care of everything.”

Then he was gone. He pulled the door to and it locked automatically.

David rolled his eyes closed and rubbed his stomach lethargically. Seventy years and never had he drank from a dying man. His teachers warned all of the young Rakum to avoid the experience at all costs.

And not because it was dangerous.

David ran his tongue across his teeth and smiled. His canine teeth had elongated and were now sharpened to a point.

No, the Rakum no longer drank from the dying because it caused them too much pleasure, because it caused them to desire too much death.

Several minutes had passed and the buzz continued.

David lifted his hands to his face and examined them. His once manicured fingers now ended in inch-long claws.

Sharp teeth, claws, no wonder Terrence left in such a state.

No... David mused to himself, smiling. Rakum no longer drank from the doomed because it caused them to regress into monsters.

David sucked his teeth and rubbed his eyes with his rough fingertips. Yeah, it was probably wrong.

But it felt so right.

11: Jesse and the Tennis Pro

“A Day in the Life of Rakum Jesse Cherrie”¹¹

Jesse opened his eyes to watch Atlanta fade into his past. Like clockwork, every Tuesday at sundown, he left his comfortable apartment in New York City for JFK, hopped a 747 to Atlanta, and then a regional jet to Montgomery. The Rakum-owned NCJ was his second choice—Jesse preferred comfort and the human jets had the best amenities. So, he headed south at least once a week—all to check his holdings in the Southern Companies, and of course, to visit Michael Stone.

Jesse and Michael went way back, practically to the beginning. Only three years apart, they were dumped in the same lair-house and paired up soon after by the group proctor. They were a perfect match. With Michael’s natural brawn and Jesse’s mystical gifts, there was nothing they couldn’t accomplish together. Delivered over to Elder Jack Dawn for Ritual training, they were made tough and successful. The duo graduated at the head of their class over a century ago.

Thankfully those days were far behind them. Since then, they settled into separate and comfortable lives, co-existing with the cattle that populated the planet, enjoying what mankind had to offer in the way of luxury and comfort, while avoiding the traps that befell the humans as a matter of course.

Jesse smiled to himself and turned up the volume on his iPod. It wasn’t so much the music, he’d listen to most anything, but it was the distraction. He had an hour-long flight ahead of him and if no one spoke to him or vied for his attention, he’d be on cloud nine. Tonight, it so happened he was listening to the Moody Blues, and he cranked up the volume to nine, readjusting his briefcase in the seat next to him. He always purchased two seats to assure his privacy, and he always flew first class.

Jesse nodded his head along with the second tune and thought about the night ahead. He would try to get Michael to hit the town with him again. Last week, they’d gone to a bar frequented by twenty-somethings sipping dainty cocktails and fruity wine-coolers. What Michael saw in the place, Jesse couldn’t fathom, but it was more than boring. Mike probably liked looking at the girls—he was a bit of a horn-dog. But none of them were touchable, and none of them reliably alone. Jesse made him promise they’d avoid that place in the future. So tonight, what could he talk his old friend in to?

¹¹ This scene takes place a few weeks before ‘*Rabbit: Chasing Beth Rider* novel time’ and gives the reader insight into the Rakum Jesse Cherrie, friend of Michael Stone.

The song ended and in the quiet break, someone clucked at him. He opened his eyes, turned to the aisle, and pulled out the ear bud on that side.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, sir, but we’ve had a little accident two rows back. Would you be so kind to allow this passenger to sit with you for a few minutes while we clean her seat?”

It was the petite blonde flight attendant who’d seated him with a gigantic smile earlier. She was seriously not Jesse’s type and he made an irritated noise as he pulled his case out of the seat to tuck under his knees. Blondie smiled, all dimples, blushing bright pink, and stepped aside for another person to pass.

Jesse was rearranging his case when she stepped in, so the first thing he saw was a toe-to-knee cast. The woman maneuvered carefully into the space, crutches, purse, and briefcase making the job a truer challenge. When she collapsed gratefully into her chair, Blondie left them alone.

“I am sorry to barge in on you like this.”

The woman stuck out her hand and Jesse shook with her, easily masking his distaste. He didn’t welcome physical contact, but to fit the role he played, shaking with them was expected.

“My neighbor spilled his coffee in my seat when I stepped out to the restroom. How he could be so clumsy, I’ll never know.”

Jesse nodded his head and offered her a tight smile, but didn’t meet her eyes. If he could survive the intrusion for ten minutes without getting to know the woman, that would suit him best.

“Pardon me, but I notice you wear your watch on the right. Are you left-handed?”

Jesse stifled a sigh. “Yes.”

“I thought so,” she replied, and held up her right hand to show that on her slender wrist dangled an expensive and feminine Rolex. Jesse smiled, appreciating her taste in watches, as he wore the same brand and she had already noticed the coincidence.

She readied to make more small talk and he prepared for it, now allowing himself to study her eyes, her face, her mouth. Why not? She was barging into his private world and fair game to a little scrutiny.

The woman had copper-colored hair, cropped close and spiked with product, and she looked at him with confidence in her bright hazel eyes. Because of an organizational emblem on her purse strap, Jesse surmised that she was a tennis player and maybe a pro by the looks of her athletic build. But today she was dressed in a business suit, dark gray slacks, matching blazer, and a low-cut deep red silk shirt. A diamond and white-gold tennis racket adorned her lapel and her briefcase was very similar to Jesse’s. She made a comment about it as soon as she noticed his interest. He nodded and she launched into more conversation.

“I am buying a restaurant in Prattville. Is that where you’re headed?”

Jesse smiled and shook his head. As he expected, he’d spent enough time with the woman now—a good four minutes, sitting close enough to reach out

and touch her—that he wanted to try her out. She wasn't wearing a wedding ring, and that was a good first sign.

“No, Montgomery,” he offered, slowly taking in her figure in such a way that she would notice. She didn't cringe or seem offended in the least. She waited until his eye landed on her injured leg and she placed her hand on her bare knee, just above the plaster.

“I was rear-ended last week.” She rearranged the folded pants leg that made way for the cast and when Jesse met her eyes, she was watching him the way he was watching her.

As far as she knew.

“What's your name?”

“Oh, sorry,” the woman laughed and put her knee hand now to her breast, knowing Jesse would follow with his eyes. “Kelly Jacobs. Where are my manners?”

Jesse smiled wider and she blushed. He had her now.

“Jesse Compton. Nice to meet you, Kelly.”

It was an alias he used often with women. Jesse Cherrie was a man you could Google. Jesse Compton was nobody he knew.

The woman accepted the name and batted her eyelashes as she looked away. They were so easy. And he was the luckiest Rakum he knew. Unlike Michael who situated regular blood donors all over town, Jesse had only two where he lived. He preferred to pick up his dinner on the fly. The variety and excitement gave him more satisfaction, which was of course his main goal.

Blondie returned just then and offered to help Kelly Jacobs back to her seat. Jesse held up his hand and invited her to stay with him.

“Oh, thank you, Jesse,” she cooed with a coy smile.

Jessie sent the irritating tot away, relaxed into his seat and stretched his legs. The tennis pro watched his every move, as he knew she would, and he could see he was her type.

“When we land in Montgomery, will you join me for a drink?” Jesse asked, giving her a glimpse of his killer smile.

She interpreted his gaze as a come-on and blushed again. Jesse waited until she consented with a tiny nod. She was playing innocent, but she'd been around.

Jesse listened to her small talk with one ear, and the end of the Moody Blues album in the other, his plans for the night set. Take Kelly Jacobs to his hotel room and get that drink. Then he'd send her on her way, his stomach full. He was the luckiest Rakum alive.

12: How Michael Met Jeremy

“Rakum Michael Stone Wrangles a New Cow”¹²

At Dannelly Field Regional Airport, Michael unbuckled his firearm and tucked it away in its custom case. The new janitor had followed him into the locker room and once again, Michael ignored him. There was an art to cultivating such a relationship and Michael had years of practice. The guy was a good candidate—healthy, young, male, and in a hopeless state of awe.

Michael arranged and rearranged his belongings as slowly as possible to give the little guy a chance to get closer. Three days ago, the airport’s newest employee caught wind of Michael strolling down the concourse checking doors between arrivals. Michael barely gave him a glance that first night. The second and third nights, the kid watched him with an expression Michael had seen countless times before, a hopeless and unidentified longing.

No doubt the janitor was confused and embarrassed that he experienced such a draw for another man, but Michael was glad for it. It was the way he chose all of his Cows.

Or more correctly, how they chose him.

Most Rakum sought out the oddball humans who lived to let their blood, but a few, like Michael, attracted the donors with no effort on their part whatsoever. And this, the fourth desperate night, Michael decided to toss him a bone. Tonight, as he stood looking into his chest-high locker, the janitor came up alongside him and inched forward, until he was an arms’ length away. The kid was short, maybe five feet, with spiked black hair that belied his Hispanic heritage. He was cute in a puppy-dog way and Michael had no trouble seeing him as a future pet. He slammed the locker door to watch him jump and tilted his head, meeting the kid’s eye.

“What?” Michael asked, playing coy.

“Officer Stone? My name’s Jeremy,” the kid said without an accent. He paused after stating his name and licked his lips.

Michael knew that he had no idea what to say. He regarded Jeremy with a long look and then gave him the smallest smile.

“Jeremy, what’s up?”

“I...well, I...” Jeremy stumbled over a reply and then reached into his pocket, his eyes glazing over.

As Michael watched, he pulled out a retractable box cutter, pushed out

¹² This scene takes place a few years before “*Rabbit: Chasing Beth Rider* novel time” and gives the reader insight into how Rakum Michael Stone acquired his endearing and hyper-active Cow, Jeremy.

the blade, and put it to the soft rise of his palm below his thumb. The guy was hooked and Michael hadn't even lifted a finger. With a grunt, Michael reached forward and snatched the blade from his hand.

"Not here, Jeremy."

"Oh, I...I'm sorry. I..." Jeremy stuttered and blinked his eyes several times in succession. Michael gave him a reassuring smile and leaned toward the kid to tuck his blade back into his coveralls.

"Meet me in the employee parking lot at 10:45."

Jeremy nodded, his huge brown eyes watery and dazed.

Michael smiled and chuckled, amazed at his good fortune. All over the planet, his brothers were bending over backward to find two or three crazy humans to donate blood for free, where for Michael it was easier than taking candy from a baby. What was it about him that attracted the freaks? He had no idea, but the saying among his brethren was "easier is always better." So, he accepted his lot. He had seven Cows already, and this young man would make a nice even eight. What else could a Rakum lieutenant ask for?

At 10:45 p.m., Michael approached his Saab and noted a familiar figure standing by the right quarter panel.

"Hey, Jeremy." Michael nodded to the kid and gestured to the car. "Get in."

The kid pulled open the passenger side door without hesitation and slipped into the seat. Michael was seated behind the wheel and as they left the airport, Jeremy sighed. Michael looked over at him briefly and tipped his head.

"What?"

"Where're we headed, Officer Stone?"

"Call me Michael for now, Jeremy."

Jeremy nodded his head and then unbuttoned his collar. He was no longer wearing his gray work coveralls, but a green-striped dress shirt and black jeans.

"I feel weird," he mumbled, watching Michael's profile as he drove.

Michael smiled. "I'll bet."

"I gotta get outta this shirt." Jeremy pulled at the second button and then the third as Michael chuckled. Underneath, he wore a white T-shirt stained with sweat.

"Hang in there, buddy." He laughed again, and shook his head. "Where do you live?"

"Martha Street."

"You live alone?" Michael had no desire for an audience when he took the young man's blood. The kid lowered his eyes.

"I'm crashing with my cousin. I'm sorta between places right now."

"Is your cousin likely to disturb us?" Michael glanced over for a brief second and Jeremy looked at him, unblinking.

"He'll be asleep. He has to work at four. He sleeps pretty hard."

“Good.” Michael nodded his head and turned onto Madison. Once he was a few streets over from Martha, he caught the kid’s eye again. “You feeling better?”

Jeremy shrugged fully out of his over-shirt and shook his head. “I don’t feel bad...just weird.”

“I can only imagine,” Michael smirked and pulled up in front of Jeremy’s house. What else would it feel like? An otherwise normal man suddenly has an urge to let his blood as soon as he can to a guy he just met? It must be the strangest sensation in the world.

Michael followed the kid to the door and listened out for signs of movement inside. By the time the front door was open, he heard snoring in an adjacent room and was satisfied that the kid’s cousin was indeed fast asleep. Standing in a cluttered foyer, he put his hand on Jeremy’s shoulder.

“Where do you sleep?” Michael asked in a whisper, and Jeremy gestured to a door at the end of the hall. Michael nodded and followed him in. Once inside the bedroom, he closed the door and turned to the kid, his hands on his hips. “Where’s that knife?”

Jeremy fumbled through his pocket and this time retrieved a small folding knife that he pulled open with care. He put the sharp edge to his palm as he did in the locker room, but once again Michael stepped forward and removed it from his hand.

“No, Jeremy, never cut your hand. I’m not a healer, so whatever you cut will have to heal naturally.” Michael reached for the boy’s wrist and pulled his forearm out toward him.

“What does that mean, ‘not a healer’?” His voice was faraway, but Michael answered him nonetheless.

“Some of my people can heal with their touch, but I have other talents.” Michael positioned the tip of the small blade in the crook of the kid’s arm and met his eye.

“Other talents...I’ll bet,” Jeremy cooed and fell into Michael’s gaze.

“Focus on my eyes and this won’t hurt—ready?” Michael pressed the point in a few centimeters and waited for the go-ahead from the kid. When Jeremy mouthed “okay,” Michael held his gaze and pressed the knife nearly an inch through the skin, creating a generous puncture wound that he immediately brought to his lips so not a drop was wasted.

Jeremy gasped, but never looked away. Even when Michael closed his eyes to concentrate on his meal, Jeremy continued to watch him with wonder in his child-like gaze.

After four deep pulls on the young man’s arm, Michael realized what a treasure he had discovered. Jeremy’s blood was pure, untainted. Of all his Cows, none carried such ambrosia in their veins. When he sensed his balance being affected by the pleasure of the moment, he moved the two of them to the untidy daybed against the wall. His people referred to the experience as a *buzz*, and Michael was buzzing like crazy. He sat heavily and Jeremy plopped down

against him. Just before the kid lost consciousness, Michael let up and pressed his handkerchief against the wound.

“Oh, Jeremy,” Michael moaned quietly as he leaned over his knees, his head spinning. The boy’s blood centered in his belly, warming him head to toe. It had been decades since he’d enjoyed the like. It was several minutes before his head cleared and he opened his eyes with effort to look at the kid beside him. Jeremy leaned against him, eyes closed, his breathing steady.

“Jeremy.” Michael jostled his shoulder to rouse him. “Hey, kid.”

“Michael...” Jeremy whispered without looking up.

“You okay?”

“Yeahhhh...” Jeremy dragged out the word.

“Good.” Michael was nearly back to normal and he turned at the waist to tie his handkerchief securely around Jeremy’s elbow. “What do you eat, Jeremy? Your blood—it’s perfect.”

“Hah,” Jeremy laughed and looked languidly into Michael’s face, only inches apart on the small bed. “I’m a vegan, Michael. How ‘bout that?”

“Me likey,” Michael replied, and the boy smiled.

“Me likey too, Michael. I can see things so clearly now...”

“Like what, Jay-Jay?” Michael put his right arm behind the kid supporting him.

“Paintings, Michael. I’m going to make a million dollars with these new ones. And I owe it all to you, Michael...all to you, my new friend.”

“An artist, eh?” Michael looked around the dank, dimly-lit room. He was keeping this one, and he would take no chances on losing him to economic shortcomings. “An artist needs a studio, Jeremy. I want to put you up in a loft downtown. How would you like that?”

“Put me up?” Jeremy opened his eyes and focused with effort.

“Exactly. You’ll stay there rent-free until you sell enough paintings to pay. Sound good?”

“Yes. Yes.” Jeremy sat up, more awake now. “Yes. Yes.”

“But there’s one condition.”

“Anything, Michael, anything. What can I do for you? I’ll do anything for you. You are my *muse*, Michael. I’ve been waiting for you for so long...”

“I’ll keep you to myself, Jeremy. You’ll meet more of my brethren, but you belong to me, got it?” Michael waited until he nodded, not fully understanding, but willing to obey. “I’ll move you into the loft on Friday night. Be ready.” Michael reached for his wallet and pulled out three crisp hundreds. “Quit your job at the airport by phone. Don’t go there during the night, got it? Take this money to carry you through.”

Jeremy nodded again.

“One more thing.” Michael stood up from the bed and Jeremy remained where he was, looking at Michael in reverent awe. “When we’re alone, call me Michael. But anytime my brothers are present, refer to me as ‘master’. Got it?”

Jeremy nodded, a shy smile playing across his face.

Michael stepped toward the door and tossed Jeremy a parting grin. “You’re a good kid, Jeremy. I’m glad we’re friends.”

“Best friends, Michael. Best friends.”

“Indeed,” Michael winked, put his hand to the knob and had one last thought before he exited. There was something else about the kid that purified his blood. Something that wasn’t outwardly noticeable. Michael inclined his head to the kid and whispered his next question.

“Jeremy, do you have a girlfriend?”

“No time for girls, Michael. Gotta paint.” Jeremy grinned and flashed pearly white teeth that contrasted his coffee-colored skin. “I’m a good Catholic, Michael. I don’t fool around.”

“Good,” Michael nodded, his gaze serious. “For me, for the blood, keep it that way, okay? Can you do that, Jay-jay? Will you stay pure for me?”

“Yeah,” Jeremy nodded, blushing.

“So, I’ll see you Friday. We’ll move you into the loft.”

Jeremy nodded and waved, a silly grin on his face.

Michael chuckled and left the house silently. What a fortuitous find, a kid who was dying to give blood, who didn’t pollute his body with processed food or meats, and who hadn’t given his body over to lust. He was a true virgin. Michael was surprised, Jeremy had to be at least twenty-one. *But easier is always better...*

Michael headed home, smiling the whole way.

13: Selene and Yosef

“Becoming a Rakum Elder’s Mate”¹³

Selene

He’d kill her next time.

Selene touched her face and winced. A lacerated cheek was the only outward sign of her latest altercation with Ira, the bruised kidneys and perforated uterus not as apparent.

She was safe for the moment. Unlike the last two times he corrected her, tonight she wound up in the hospital. The doctors and nurses treated her like a princess, just as she was meant to be treated. Her father told her she was of royal blood, related to the Kings of Ethiopia, but Ira saw in her only garbage. What could she have done differently? Selene closed her eyes and choked back the millionth tear.

Her marriage to Ira was arranged by her uncle. Papa passed when she was 15, and as soon as he was in the ground, her mother signed custody over to her dad’s oldest brother. Uncle Mojosa was an African native who moved into the house before the last funeral flowers wilted. Mom was busy and stressed out, Selene understood, but Mojosa? He’d never cared for his niece – at least not in the way he should – and when he had the legal right, he all but sold her to the highest bidder.

Ira Montana’s family paid mightily for the less-than-chaste bride of 17, blemished by her uncle Mojosa during the waiting period for the wedding day.

But back to the original question.

How could she have avoided tonight’s beat-down?

Ira was angry with her for so many things and nothing at all. Tonight he came home drunk, and drew her into an argument about her inability to conceive. All he wanted, he reminded her, was a son to carry on his name. They’d been married two years, and 19-year-old Selene wished more than anything to fulfill his request. But how could a woman force conception? Selene had cried as he yelled, and her sobbing fueled his fury. He punched her across the jaw more than once and when she hit the floor, he kicked her unconscious.

So, she was here.

In a private room.

Oh, the beauty of medical insurance. Ira was a louse and a wife-beater, but he was wealthy. He owned three diamond franchises, two in New York,

¹³ The bare facts of this Loose Rabbit are incorporated into *Rabbit Legacy* to provide insight into Selene Cherrie’s personality.

and one in Los Angeles. Selene opened her eyes and pressed the nurse call button. She wanted a special meal brought in.

Money had its privileges.

Elder Yosef

The Chaplain gig was just that; a gig.

Yosef sauntered down the long, smelly hallways seeking out the helpless, the lame, and the indigent. Mercy General had more than her share. She was the richest hospital in the city, thus she took in the poorest patients to cover her sins of overindulgence. One of his Cows ran the place, an efficient if not repulsive administrator named Hickey, so Yosef came and went as he pleased. Tonight, he pleased to roam the fourth floor where the lunatics were stashed and sorted. He reached the elevator from the lobby and was joined by a nurse he didn't recognize. Once the doors closed and the car headed up, she noted his hospital badge and turned to face him.

"Chaplain, I have a patient you should see on the second floor. She was beaten by her husband and I think she needs someone to talk to."

Yosef didn't roll his eyes, but he wanted to. Sometimes the gig came with responsibilities. He was playing a role among the mortals, and he nodded to the woman morosely.

"Thank you. Her family's Orthodox, okay?"

Yosef nodded again.

"Her room, please?" he drawled, affecting a Bronx accent.

"207."

The doors opened then and the nurse hurried out, her missions for the evening only just begun.

Yosef exited the car and strolled down the hall. It was quiet, nearing midnight, and only a few orderlies passed him as he approached Room 207.

Yosef stood at the closed door, took a deep breath, and prepared himself mentally to play his part. Satisfied that he could put his fourth-floor fun off a few more minutes, he knocked twice, grabbed the patient's chart from the bin, and pushed open the door. Closing the distance to the stark white-sheeted bed, Yosef's eyes grew wide. An angel had fallen from heaven and landed in his hospital.

Yosef scoffed at his mental processes and approached the bed. If this woman was angel, she was beat to a pulp on her way down to earth. Her perfect face was bruised and a bandage covered what he knew to be a deep laceration on her cheek. Yosef shook his head and reached the woman's side. Concentrating on her injuries, and scanning her body from chin to toe much like an x-ray machine, Yosef determined exactly what had been broken, fractured and damaged in the woman's flawless body. It was bad, but not so bad he couldn't help.

As he peeked into her chart one more time for her name and vitals, she

awoke and regarded him with clear, bright brown eyes brimming with intelligence. She was an African princess, he had no doubt, and he gave her a smile.

“Mrs. Montana,” he said quietly, no longer using the New York accent he normally used among the mortals. She regarded him with curiosity and blinked once.

“Selene, please,” she replied finally.

Yosef nodded, his head swimming. It was his gift. One of his many Rakum gifts. He foresaw the immediate future, and as he met the young woman’s eyes for the first time, he knew he would have her, and that she would give herself to him voluntarily.

“He worked you over, yes?” Yosef kept his voice soft and put his hand out toward her face. Selene didn’t flinch, but watched his hand until his fingers made contact with her cheek. When she winced, Yosef uttered a soft-spoken promise.

“I’ll take that pain away, Princess.” Yosef concentrated only a millisecond and the contusions left her cheeks and the laceration closed up under the bandage. Selene recognized what was occurring and she took a deep breath of surprise.

“Rabbi? What power is this?” she whispered, moving her jaw back and forth.

“No, not rabbi. Call me Yosef.” He bowed slightly at the waist and allowed his fingers to slip down the nearest forearm until they clasped hands. “You do not belong here, Princess.”

The woman’s eyes watered and she wiped away a tear with her free hand. “I really don’t, do I? What am I going to do?”

Yosef gave her a wry grin and released her hand. He positioned both palms over her abdomen and maneuvered them underneath the sheet to rest heavily on the thin cotton hospital gown. Sending silent commands to her flesh to heal, knit and be restored, Yosef watched her eyes. She knew what he was doing. Somehow, the teenager in the semblance of a woman recognized him as something more than a hospital chaplain. And it wasn’t because of the miracles he performed. She read it in his eyes. She was seeing their future together as clearly as he was.

“I have mended all of your injuries, Princess. You know this, yes?” Yosef brought his hands back and crossed his arms. He wanted to feel her fingers in his again, but he was now playing the game. Selene instinctively knew her role as well. She reached out her arm and grabbed his sleeve.

“Please take me with you, Yosef. I’ll be good to you. I’m not garbage. I know I’m not...” Selene begged, pleading with her eyes.

Yosef nearly relented, but he had a method and was not one to deviate from it. He garnered a ruthless reputation among the brethren because of his strict rules.

“Remain here until tomorrow night. We will see then what we will do with you.” Yosef pulled his arm from her grip and her eyes filled with tears. Still, she didn’t cry. She was a strong woman, even though still a child in many ways. “Good evening, Princess.”

Yosef bowed low and backed out of the room. He replaced the chart in the bin outside the door and walked away briskly. The African princess would be dealt with tomorrow. She couldn’t possibly feed him tonight and he needed more time to woo her properly. She was to be his mate; he’d seen it in a vision. And he hadn’t had a mate for many decades.

As for Ira Montana, he was history. Foregoing his visit to the hospital asylum, Yosef made a beeline for the elevators. His first lieutenant was easy to find telepathically and he fed him Montana’s information. Dimple was a loyal servant and as ruthless as any of the brethren. He’d break the wife-beater in two and be home before sunup. That would leave his African princess a single woman.

It was turning out to be a glorious evening.

14: Beth and Michael

“Can You Love a Rakum”¹⁴

Keeping her distance wasn't easy. He wasn't only her knight in shining armor, but her idea of the perfect mate. Except for the part about him not being human. Not really. Not yet.

Beth checked her watch and licked her lips. Michael was accompanying her to a dinner party thrown in her honor by her publishers and he was five minutes late. Had he changed his mind? Three months had passed since her actions effectively destroyed the entire Rakum race—how could he forgive her? After all, he hadn't transformed into a mortal like the other guys. Did he, deep down, hold it against her that she turned his world upside down? And if he didn't, how could he be so altruistic? As far as she knew, benevolence wasn't a Rakum trait.

It's because he belongs to God; he just doesn't know it yet.

Beth smiled at that last thought and peeked out the window. Michael's aging Saab turned into her lot and pattered to her door. He grinned ear-to-ear as he left the car and approached, a bouquet of roses in his hand. Ashamed at her inclination to assume the worst, she crossed to the door and opened it as he arrived on her stoop. Suppressing a girlish giggle of excitement, she smiled and watched his handsome face light up when their eyes met.

“Perfect roses for a perfect beauty.” Michael bowed with flourish. Beth accepted the flowers and blushed. One quick glance at the clock behind her and she gestured for the car.

“Let me just pop these into some water.” Leaving Michael at the door, she rushed to the kitchen and dropped the flowers in a clear vase before rushing back. “Okay, I'm ready.”

Michael made way for her to exit and he carefully placed his left hand on her elbow to walk her to the car. Beth was wearing a sleeveless below-the-knee dress and a thin lacy shawl, but the contact was electric. When he opened her door, she slid in and was relieved to have him disconnect.

Back when she was in danger, under attack and the delicious prey of any number of Rakum, she barely gave her companion a thought. She'd noticed how attractive he was, but never really had time to let her mind wander down paths considering any future they might have together. Now, since his people disbanded, he'd been visiting her every night, and her heart toyed with the idea of keeping him around. She wanted to touch him and be touched, but he was

¹⁴ This scene takes place in the gap between Chapter 56 & the Epilogue of *Rabbit: Chasing Beth Rider*. It's not expounded upon until *Rabbit Legacy* in Chapter 2.

still a Rakum and his people were blood-drinkers.

“What are you thinking about, Beth?” Michael asked as he pulled away from her apartment complex. “Are you thinking about Last Assembly?”

“Is that what they’re calling it?” Beth asked, wondering if she was blushing and apologizing to the Lord at the same time for letting her mind wander.

“Yes.” Michael reply was cryptic and Beth looked at his profile.

“How about you? Are you okay?”

“Sure. I spoke to Jesse tonight. He and Selene are quite an item now, a legitimate couple, and they’re coming down to visit soon.”

“They’re visiting you or me?”

“Both, I suppose.” Michael glanced at her then back to the road. “Jesse is confused about what has happened. Maybe you can explain it to him.” Michael cleared his throat. “To us.”

“Do you mean, about how some of the Rakum are now human or how God handled the entire situation?”

Michael sucked his teeth and thought over his reply. Finally he sighed. “Both, I guess. Look, Beth,” he glanced her way and gave her a weak smile, “am I going to be human soon?”

“Well, Michael, you might be. I mean, the reason they shrugged off their Rakum spirit was that they chose God over Abroghia. If you stay around me, eventually, you will either leave or come to know God.” Beth’s throat tightened at the prospect of him leaving her side.

Michael shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind being human. If I magically turned into a human today, I’d be okay with that. If you were with me, that is.”

“Oh, Michael, thank you for saying that.”

“I have no scruples, Beth, remember? I’ll always say what I think. Please return the favor and keep giving it to me straight. How long will it be before I become human?”

Beth chuckled good-naturedly. “Michael, I don’t know. It doesn’t happen just because you say so, or just because you want it. There’s a heart condition attached to the change. It will happen inside you—between you and God.”

“Could it happen tonight?” Michael asked, and whether he meant to or not, his eyes scanned her body head-to-toe.

Beth blushed again as the thought of spending the night with Michael hit her mind unexpectedly. So far, they had refrained from anything more than casual physical contact, and she figured he had a notion she was holding out for his transformation.

“Well?” he pressed when she didn’t answer.

“Tonight, tomorrow, next week, next year. You’ll just have to take it a day at a time like everyone else,” Beth said apologetically, and then under her breath, “I’d like it to be tonight.”

She instantly regretted the remark because of its potential double entendre, but there was no erasing it now. Michael smiled and she wondered

if he was thinking along the same track. Both of them allowed silence to fill the small space for the duration of their short trip to the Stein's ranch.

Dinner was a succulent roast chicken with rice curry and green salad, and afterwards, the guests were invited to the dance floor. A young Hispanic DJ played Burt Bacharach with a sneer of distaste, but Beth loved the music choices. Since the party was for her, she assumed Carol had chosen things she knew Beth loved. Smiling, Beth led a slightly nervous Michael to the spacious darkened floor.

"Is this okay? Carol knows I love this kind of music. I thought it might be nice to dance." Beth grew quiet, but decided to finish the thought anyway—Michael said he was above scruples. "I wanted to dance with you."

Michael smiled and nodded approvingly. "Nice."

Beth blushed and positioned her hands appropriately. "Do you have a lot of experience dancing, Michael?" Beth asked without thinking. Michael's face darkened a millisecond and his smile returned.

"Not all of my past is appropriate or pleasant to recount."

"Of course, I'm sorry." Beth's stomach flopped and she kicked herself inwardly. "I'm such a goof. I should think about what I'm asking before I ask it."

Michael shook his head to have her quiet down. "I'm making new memories with you. Good ones. One day, I'll be able to release my past altogether."

"You're too good to be true," Beth sighed and dropped her right hand from his to land on his shoulder. He followed suit and had both hands now on her hips as they swayed to music from a bygone era.

"I have grown more fearful of losing you, Beth, these last few weeks." Michael's voice dropped to a whisper and his words fell like feathers on her hair.

Beth lost any awareness of the other couples swaying nearby and she concentrated instead on the sound of his heart as she pressed her cheek to his broad chest.

"I've never felt this before—an ache deep inside. What do you make of that?"

"It sounds like you're in love, Michael," Beth whispered.

"Is that all?" Michael countered and Beth huffed, smiling. Michael bent down to whisper in her ear. "I want to take you home and dance all night. Can I take you home?"

Beth closed her eyes, enjoying the closeness, the way he adored her. Her past with men was sketchy at best. Before she fell into the clutches of Jack Dawn three months ago, it had been five years since her last boyfriend. In college, she dated the perfect man. Became engaged, set the wedding date, and began planning her future. The week before the wedding rehearsal, she slept

with him. It was her first time, but he was her husband—practically. Three days later, she visited him without warning and caught him in bed with someone else. The entire time she'd been dating and planning with the guy, he'd been sleeping with his high school girlfriend. Beth recovered and grew closer to the Lord, vowing to stay pure until marriage, even if said event was years away. Now, standing in the arms of the most amazing man she'd ever met, Beth was flush with emotions she had forced way down years ago.

Somehow, intuiting her thoughts, Michael whispered again above her head, "We belong together, Beth, I know this. Can you love a Rakum?"

Beth swallowed back a tear that threatened unexpectedly. Loving a Rakum meant letting blood—something Beth knew she was not capable of, not for any reason. She would wait. He would have to wait, and work toward humanity. It was the only way.

As she didn't reply, Michael stopped dancing and pulled back a few inches to look into her face.

"Let me take you home."

Beth said okay with her mouth, but he wasn't really asking to drive her to her house. He was asking her to join him, be his mate, *before* his transformation. He didn't want to wait any longer.

Beth followed numbly as Michael led her off the dance floor, past their table to pick up her purse and his jacket, and then toward the exit. All the way to the car, she held her tongue. She needed to be plain with him and not send mixed signals. He wouldn't understand the feminine mind games with which she was innately proficient. He needed to hear her opinion out loud, that if they were married and if he were mortal—then they would consummate their relationship, and not before.

Michael got her seated and then settled into the driver's seat, periodically checking her expression with a sidelong look. Beth kept her eyes forward and her gaze soft. He would get her home, come inside and wrap his strong arms around her and never let go.

It was what she wanted, but not yet.

Not yet.

Beth worked hard at forming the words and finally put her hand over her mouth. Her heart burst inside her, but she couldn't speak. Closing her eyes, Beth prayed silently that God would give her the strength to resist her flesh and speak words of Light to her hero.

And she prayed Michael would understand.

15: Beth and Michael, Part II

“Michael and his Maker”¹⁵

Once inside her apartment, Beth watched Michael shut the door and throw the deadbolt. He crossed to her, took her into his embrace and she responded instinctively. The butterflies she bottled continuously in his presence had escaped and she was going numb. If she didn’t speak soon, it would be too late. She hadn’t a long list of romantic partners, but she remembered what her body was capable of when properly aroused.

Michael began whispering in her ear and his words made her shiver as heat rushed to her every extremity. Finally her lips parted and she spoke in a low voice.

“Michael, I can’t. I...”

Michael kissed her mouth, interrupting her efforts to express the panic that wrestled within. Just before she fainted dead away, she pushed him violently and stumbled backward into the couch. Michael stayed where he was, a look of confusion in his eyes.

“What? You can’t what?” Michael stepped forward and Beth held up her hand.

“Go home, Michael. Please, go home now. I’m not sleeping with you tonight, or any night, so long as you’re a Rakum. I just can’t.”

“You want to,” he mumbled.

“Of course I want to, I’m human.” Beth glared at him then and he probably didn’t deserve it. She softened her tone. “But it doesn’t matter what I want. Please, go home.”

“I promise not to take your blood, Beth. You can trust me.”

“Oh, God—” Beth clutched her arms together at her chest. “Just go home. I can wait. You can wait. Trust me, you can. You can...”

Michael’s hands clenched and she could see him consider his reply carefully. Slowly he shook his head.

“Is this about control? You have controlled me ever since we met, Beth. Do you realize this?”

Beth shook her head, her eyes wide. “That’s not true, Michael, I’m just me. I don’t want to control anybody, especially you. I love you, Michael. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“This power—” Michael held up one hand, palm out and balled his fist toward her, “this power you have over me turns my heart to stone. It twists my gut. What is that? And please don’t say, ‘love’.”

¹⁵ This evangelical Loose Rabbit shows in detail how a Rakum can have a change of heart and become a new man. The basic facts of the portion involving Harriet found its way into *Rabbit Legacy*, Chapter 2.

Beth wiped a tear that slipped down her cheek. “But it is, Michael.”

He tensed up as she answered and turned for the door. Storming out, he barked out a sentiment she half expected.

“Then you can keep it!”

Beth covered her face and cried as Michael’s aging Swedish auto screeched away from the complex.

God watch over him, she mumbled. *And please bring him back to me.*

When he was human, of course.

Michael put his forehead to his knuckles as they gripped the steering wheel. He hadn’t visited Harriet in months, but she’d been on his rotation for years. She, Norman and Jeremy, plus a few others. Before the Last Assembly, Jack killed Norman, Jeremy, and a newer Cow named Charlie. But Harriet was still here.

Michael peeked miserably toward her front window and knew she was home. She would have heard his car pull up, his loose fan belt belying any Rakum stealth he might wish to utilize. She was likely shivering with excitement; the Cows were like that—desperately attached to their Rakum masters. But what good was it now? The system was shutting down, their race in anarchy.

Michael sighed as Beth’s face came to mind for the millionth time. Yes, she was responsible. No, he didn’t hold it against her.

But he *was* angry.

The porch light came on, then flicked off again.

Harriet.

Michael sighed and shuffled out of the car. Harriet Bissell was 32, mother of two teenage boys that lived with their father across town, and a gambling addict. She spent her days at any of the local Indian-run casinos, and her nights at home hoping Michael might jump schedule and visit. She had good reason to expect him—before the episode at the Cave that split up their people, he often slipped in to visit Harriet between donation periods. She was a single woman who was extremely grateful for Michael’s attentions. Tonight, frustrated and frankly shaken up, he hoped a few minutes with the consenting Cow might lift his spirits.

Michael walked up to her door and squared his shoulders. One thing he didn’t want was for her to see his weakness. The door opened as his toe touched the fake straw welcome mat.

“Mikey,” she cooed and opened the door wide. Her sheer purple negligee contrasted starkly with her doughy complexion. Michael entered, his head slightly lowered, and stopped at the door to the living room. Harriet bolted the front door and turned to strike a pose and he did his best to not grimace; Harriet looked different tonight.

“You changed your hair,” he mumbled, buying time. He needed to orient

himself, clear out the cobwebs spending time with Beth had caused. Harriet fluffed her bottle-blond curls provocatively and shook her head. Michael looked about the foyer and sniffed the air. Her house smelled different too.

“What Mikey? Something wrong? Why you been gone so long? You got another girl? You wouldn’t be tradin’ up would you?” Harriet walked toward him until she could place her hands on his chest. “I been expecting you. You haven’t missed with me since we started this love affair. I’m hurt you didn’t call...”

Michael barely heard her. The room was close now, pressing in. Whatever he had intended to do with Ms. Bissell was now pushed to the bottom of his list. Harriet leaned closer and put her hands around his neck, attempting to pull his face to her level. Michael came back around and grasped her wrists.

“It’s over Harriet, you’ll never see me again.” Amazed at his words, Michael pulled her off easily and stepped toward the door. He reached for the knob and her arms encircled his waist from behind.

“No! No!” Harriet sobbed. “What are you talking about? Mikey, you can’t just leave me. We are stuck together. We’re supposed to be together forever. Mikey, I love you!”

Michael unlocked the deadbolt, the urge to flee the house overtaking him from the inside out.

“Harriet,” Michael whispered as he gripped her forearms more cruelly than necessary and peeled her loose. “Release me.”

“But Michael!” Harriet wailed and slid to her knees, hands clasped in front of her, openly begging at his feet. The door was open now and the neighbors no doubt overheard her histrionic display. “Michael! I can’t live without you! Michaeeeel....!”

Michael jerked his shirttail out of her grip and trotted across the porch and to his car. She followed him outside, oblivious to the fact that she was practically naked, and pounded on the hood as he closed the door and cranked the engine.

Michael caught a glimpse of her puffy face, distorted with anguish, and wondered how he’d never seen her before. Not really. It was like Jeremy’s paintings...poor, deluded Jeremy. But Michael could see now. He saw Harriet’s desperate, barely-hanging-on countenance and her unseemly attachment to him.

Michael gunned the engine and drove away, leaving her in the road. In his rear-view mirror, he watched her slump to the ground as if dead.

Cows.

What made them do it? Why did they voluntarily let their blood and give over their bodies to his people? Was it like Beth said? Were they crazy?

Beth’s face popped into his memory then. Her face as he last saw her—weeping quietly. Her tears were not shed on her own behalf, Beth cried for *him*. For *his* benefit.

Michael’s heart swelled with emotion and he coughed forcefully. Pushing

the car to its limit, he sped toward her apartment. If he didn't see her immediately, he thought he might die.

"Beth—" speaking to the air, he choked on his words and felt his face grow hotter by the second. His eyes began to sting and an unfamiliar pressure formed in his nasal cavity. "Wait...wait."

Michael moaned and slapped his face repeatedly. It had never happened before, not in a hundred and thirty years, but it was trying to happen now. Michael was about to cry.

He yanked the wheel hard as he approached Beth's unit and slammed the brakes, hopping the curb in the process. Stumbling out of the car, Michael tripped over the edge of the sidewalk and reached her door as she opened it inward, her lovely face aghast.

"Michael! What is it?" Beth said as he pushed past her and fell into the house.

Michael went to his knees and she closed the door behind him. Anguished, he buried his face in the seat cushion on the couch.

"Michael, please, let me help you. Please..."

Beth was on her knees, tender arms draped across his back, her hand now in his hair, stroking him, calming him. Michael pressed his face into the cushion further.

"Michael, what's wrong?"

"I *see*, Beth," Michael sputtered into the sofa, knowing she wouldn't be able to make out his words. "I see. I'm a monster."

"What? You're a what? Michael," Beth laid her hand to his head and pushed at the same time, bringing her face to his. "Talk to me, Michael. What? You're a what?"

Michael did not resist her touch and he lifted his head enough to speak, jagged as it was as the pain of emotion scorched his soul. Being a Rakum was easy—he was never concerned about anyone but himself. Since he'd met Beth Rider, he had been slowly learning how to care for others and it was killing him.

"I am a monster, Beth. I stalk the living, steal, kill, and destroy what is good in them. To get what I want, I will do anything, say anything. Jeremy was a *kid*, Beth, an innocent. I changed poor Jeremy into a... I killed him, Beth. I did it. I made him worship me. I'm the reason Norman is dead. I took Harriet and turned her into a crazy woman. She wasn't like that when I met her. I'm no good for anyone. I have only brought death to those I meet. I am an enemy to the human race, Beth. How can you stand me? How can *God* stand me?" Michael heart fractured and he tumbled to his side, his hand pressed to his sternum. Beth was there, too, and she placed her warm fingers over his.

"You see what's happened, Michael? Do you see what this means?"

Michael opened his eyes and searched Beth's. She smiled and his breathing hitched in response.

"You can see. You can see what God sees."

“What? I don’t understand?” Michael croaked, hand still pressed to his heart.

“The first step to knowing God is to see things the way He sees them. You’re seeing your sin, Michael, for the first time.”

“Make it stop,” Michael begged. “I’m dying...”

“No, just relax, Michael. Do you trust me? Shh. Shh. Relax and go with it. God’ll hold your hand, but you have to stop resisting. Relax...”

Relax? How could he relax when his life was slipping away? Michael held his breath and felt water seep from his eyes. He was weeping, for the first time in his life.

“Let go,” Beth whispered now, leaning over him, pressing into his chest, as light as a bird. Then she kissed his forehead and his cheek. “Let go. He’ll catch you. Believe that He’s there waiting to catch you, Michael. Go ahead. I’ll stay with you...”

Michael imagined himself hanging onto a wire high above the ground. Below him was a net. Was Beth saying that this net was God? If he let go of the wire, would the net be strong enough to save him?

“You won’t die, Michael, I promise. Do you trust me?” Beth wiped her hand across his brow and her encouraging smile gave him hope. In his mind’s eye, he looked back to the net—it beckoned him, called him, ready to catch him. Michael closed his eyes and exhaled, simultaneously releasing the wire.

In the blink of an eye, he was in the net, as waves of warmth coated him from head to toe. Michael took a cautious breath and air as thick as honey slid down his throat and filled his lungs as they’d never been filled before. The warmth grew arms, hands, and fingers and ran through his hair, across his cheek and then interlaced with his own. The sound of Beth’s laughter reached his ears and he swam to the surface, opening his eyes to see her still there; hovering, embracing and silently promising that she’d never let him go.

“How do you feel?” Beth asked, her breath minty and soft on his face.

Michael took stock of his body in a heartbeat and furrowed his brow.

“Well? How does it feel?” she asked again.

“How does what feel?” Michael raised himself up on his elbows and brought forth his hand to cup her cheek. A curious popping sound issued from his over-strained joint and Beth inclined her head.

“To age, Michael. You’re sixty seconds older. How does it feel?”

“Are you saying?” Michael stuttered and he struggled to a sitting position. He stretched his arms out and studied his hands. They were familiar, the same. Weren’t they?

“Yes,” Beth sighed, and sat back to cover her smile.

“He did it? I’m—”

“Mortal, Michael. You trusted Him. You believed He would catch you, and He did. I knew you were His child. From the moment I first laid eyes on you, I knew it in my heart.” Beth squealed then one short burst and hopped to her feet. “Stand up. See what it feels like. Tell me what’s different.”

Michael rolled to his knees and pushed off the couch to stand. Every movement took effort, every muscle moved slower than before and each response took more time. Michael looked about the dimly-lit room and squint. He saw no detail in the corners, none at all. But Beth was never more beautiful. And he never felt more alive—truly alive.

Michael took her in his arms and kissed her cheek.

And as soon as his head stopped spinning, he asked her to be his wife.

16: Beth and Michael Part III

“Newly Human”¹⁶

Getting away for dinner and a movie was a rare experience, and to have Jesse and Selene along, even rarer.

Beth stood against the brick wall with the willowy African beauty as their husbands bought their tickets. Michael and Jesse laughed, and although she couldn't hear their exchange, it was obvious they were in great moods. Why shouldn't they be? Michael and Jesse both were mortal now and things had been becoming progressively easier for them as time passed. They tried to get together at least twice a month for Bible study since neither man was mentally ready to attend church. At these bi-monthly gatherings, Selene would serve up snacks and Beth would share God's word and attempt to teach them how it applied to their new lives as mortal men.

Tonight, they left their toddler daughters at the Stone's new home in east Montgomery under the care of Larry, a young man who was a Cow before he began to follow God's ways. All four parents agreed that having a Rakum-savvy babysitter was best because every now and then, a Rakum wandered to their house for theological counseling. Since God was introduced to their people, the Truth spread like wildfire through their ranks and many could not approach God without assistance. Beth provided that help and Michael provided physical protection (armed now with a pistol) and prayer cover. Tonight, Larry and his girlfriend, Emma, watched the children so the Stones and the Cherries might have a quiet night on the town.

Beth smiled as Michael and Jesse approached tickets in hand. Full from a sumptuous Italian dinner, all four disdained the concessions stand and headed for the theater. Michael walked beside Beth, his right arm draped across her shoulders. She stood more than a head shorter and was very comfortable under his wing.

With her three-inch spiked heels, Selene met Jesse's height and he walked close behind her, his hands on both of her shoulders, whispering in her ear along the way. Beth thought they made a lovely couple, being as they were both beautiful people. They turned heads wherever they went, and tonight was no exception. Beth elbowed Michael gently as two teenage couples passed them going the other way, four pairs of eyes glued to their two companions. Michael smirked amiably and led them into the darkened theater.

“Don't forget to pocket your phone, Michael,” Beth whispered as they

¹⁶ This Loose Rabbit is for all the readers who ask me what it was like for Michael and Jesse in the early days after their transformation. As you can imagine, it would be very strange, to say the least!

wove their way to the middle of the last row. Months ago, they had devised a plan to execute if there was an emergency with the kids while they were away. Larry's job was to notify the guys if there was any trouble, and the guys' job was to have their phones on the ready when away from home. Michael popped his phone out of his belt carrier and slipped it into his pocket so he'd feel it when/if it vibrated. Beth smiled and settled down between her husband on her right and Selene on her left.

"I read online that this movie was number one last weekend," Beth told Selene quietly. Selene batted her long eyelashes, her smile to the side.

"The ladies at the salon said it stinks, big time. But Jesse wanted to see it, so..."

"How can it stink when it stars two of the biggest stars in Hollywood today?" Jesse jabbed Selene's arm and winked at Beth.

They were married almost four years ago and engaged in word-play that to Beth sounded like insults and mocking. Selene's response to Jesse's teasing was to swish her long hair off her shoulder and humph loudly. Jesse smiled at Beth with a victorious glint in his eye and faced front. From the corner of her eye, Beth saw him place his hand on Selene's knee and she covered it with her own. They had their own way of expressing themselves and that was fine.

As the previews began, Michael draped his arm about Beth's shoulders and snugged her into a hug. The first trailer was for a psychological thriller starring several veterans of the genre. The second trailer, though, began with a curtain of what looked like blood pouring down the screen. A blood-curdling scream from the surround-sound erupted and Beth's hair stood on end.

"What if you're the only one who knows..."

A moonlit park bench. A handsome young man walks up behind a distracted blonde perusing a map.

"What if you're the only one who sees..."

The woman is oblivious to her stalker, even though he is only inches behind her. He opens his mouth and sharp fangs are evident.

"And no one believes you when you tell them who the killer is..."

The stalker plunges his teeth into the woman's neck and holds her tight against him. The scream erupts again and the screen goes red.

Michael removed his arm and Beth looked his way in the darkened theater. He had averted his eyes and was looking into his hand. Beth grimaced and put her hand on his thigh.

"I'm sorry, Michael!" she whispered. "Are you okay?"

"What are you sorry about? You can't control the previews," Michael whispered back. "Or can you?" He laughed and Beth squeezed his leg.

"I'll sure try!" she said and gave him the wait signal as the movie trailer continued. Beth turned to check Jesse's reaction, but he and Selene were giggling like children. Beth looked away, embarrassed when Jesse buried his face in his wife's neck and she squealed.

Selene had let blood to Jesse earlier in their relationship, when he was a

Rakum, and she didn't know, or want to know any more. The thought of any of the Rakum, even her Michael, supping away from her veins turned her stomach, and besides the one night that they kidnapped her and took her blood forcibly, she never let it happen again.

Beth gave Michael the all-clear when the next trailer began, but he jumped and pulled out his cell. Across the lit screen, she saw what he did: 911. It was Larry; the Rakum were at the house.

Michael jumped up, reached over the women's heads, and popped Jesse. His cell now blaring the same silent code, Jesse got to his feet and pulled Selene to hers.

"What is it?" Beth said without whispering and followed Michael out of the theater and into the hall. "Call him back!"

Michael was already on it. As the foursome trotted down the long hallway, into the lobby, and out the front doors, Michael speed-dialed Larry who answered on the first ring.

"We have visitors, Michael."

"Do you know them?" Michael asked as they jogged toward Jesse's BMW.

"No sir, but they look young. Maybe early twenties in human years. One is in the car and the other knocked on the door. I gave him the spiel and called you guys."

"Good. Tell him I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Beth watched him hang up and he opened his hand for Jesse's keys. His friend tossed them over and the men slipped into the front seat as Beth and Selene fell into the back, their nice, quiet evening coming to an abrupt halt.

As soon as the BMW pulled into the driveway, Beth spied the figure of a man leaning against one of the front columns. She glanced at the curb, making note of the blonde-haired youngster behind the wheel of an idling Chevy Corsica. Michael was the first out of the car and he and Jesse simultaneously reached their visitor. As Beth climbed out of the car and headed after them, the Rakum stood off the column to greet the men with a nod.

"Michael, Jesse," he said with a Spanish accent, "I'm Manuel and that's Kim." He gestured for the Chevy, but the man in the car trained his eyes away.

Michael considered the reluctant Rakum and sent him a shooing gesture. "You, leave." He turned back toward Manuel and pointed toward the door. "You, come inside."

Beth reached the huddle as Larry pulled open the door and allowed them entrance. Manuel was almost six feet, with muscled shoulders and a narrow waist, wearing a sweat-stained T-shirt and grimy jeans. His wavy black hair curled over his forehead and he kept his eyes down and his hands deep in his pockets. Emboldened by his humble body language, Beth scooted around the men and welcomed Manuel in herself.

“Manuel, I’m glad you came. We’ll do whatever we can to help you.” As Beth’s last word left her mouth, Kim revved the car engine, shouted an epithet, and peeled away. Beth frowned, but Michael reached her side and put his arm around her shoulders.

“Manuel, let’s go into the kitchen,” Michael said and waved for Jesse to stand down. Usually their Rakum guests were pretty tame, and this kid seemed harmless. Jesse took Selene’s hand and led her to the living room as Beth led the way to the kitchen. Larry tagged along behind, watching Manuel with a curious expression.

“Thanks, Mr. Stone, Mrs. Stone,” Manuel said softly and settled into a chair by the table. “I’m sorry about Kim. He was gung-ho a few hours ago, but I guess he lost his nerve.”

“That’s okay, Manuel. Maybe he’ll try again later. For now, tell us why you felt compelled to come here?” Beth asked the questions and settled across from their guest.

Michael reached for a platter of cheese and fruit that Larry and Emma must have been eating, and placed it before the visitor. He noshed immediately and burped into his hand.

“Sorry. I haven’t eaten in days.” Manuel ate a few more chunks of cheese and sipped a half-full glass of water Larry moved in front of him. “Thanks. Hey, don’t I know you?” he asked Larry, who looked aside and stood to his feet.

“Uh,” Larry gulped and the air filled with an eerie tension. Beth guessed what was going on and she gave him a smile.

“Larry, why don’t you go see what Emma’s up to?”

Larry nodded, gave the three of them a crooked smile, and hastily left the room. Manuel put down his drink.

“Is he okay? Did I say something wrong?”

Beth shook her head and smiled, not sure how to put it. Michael pulled out the chair between them and reached for a slice of apple off the tray.

“That guy used to be a Cow. You might’ve met him in the Pop,” Michael said and shrugged, referring to the holding pen for voluntary blood donors at the Rakum’s headquarters. Manuel humphed nonchalantly and ate another block of cheese. Beth cleared her throat.

“So, why did you want to see us, Manuel?” she asked, her tone as friendly as possible. This Rakum made the tenth or eleventh one since the Last Assembly who had come by to learn about God. Manuel finished chewing and leaned back in his chair.

“Yes, ma’am, I’m sorry. A month ago, I broke down and read your book, *The Judging*.” Manuel gestured vaguely toward the far wall where a frame surrounded a mounted copy of her novel’s book cover. “A lot of my friends read the book and became human. I read it, and I haven’t changed. I don’t understand why.”

Beth smiled and looked at Michael, who gave her the nod to continue the

questioning.

“Who was your Elder, Manuel?” she asked, meeting his eye. He looked frightened now, and she wondered why. He looked to both of them and then the door before he answered.

“Elder Tomás,” he whispered, and then held up his palms. “He doesn’t know I’m here. I guess Kim will be telling him soon enough.”

“You’re safe here, Manuel,” Michael said and grabbed a carrot off the tray. Manuel nodded, but his eyes said he was still afraid.

“Manuel, one more question before we get to the bottom of this,” Beth said, her tone serious. “Before Last Assembly, how did you feel about your Elder? How did you feel about Jack Dawn?”

Manuel looked them both in the eye and lowered his gaze. “I was hoping to step into my Elder’s shoes one day, if that answers your question.”

Beth nodded, but gave him a warm smile when he looked up to meet her eye. Tomás was a true devil and she knew that first hand. If this kid was even half as awful, he’d have a greater climb out than many of his pals.

“It answers a lot, actually,” Beth offered. “Okay, let’s start from the beginning.”

Beth leaned back in her chair and starting with Creation, she began to share the miracle of God with the former monster who nibbled gouda at her kitchen table. Michael listened and nodded when appropriate, his presence appreciated more than she could ever express. No matter how many Rakum God drew to their house, as long as Michael was by her side, she knew she could do whatever her Maker required.

Explaining their perfect Creator to a man who thought *he* was god his whole life was an exhilarating experience. Beth talked until her throat was dry, but her words had an observable effect on the Rakum. As the clock chimed the midnight hour, his fear had turned to hope, and his frown, to a grin of anticipation. Before the sun rose, he was going to offer his life to God. Beth knew this as well as she knew her own name, and she knew God wouldn’t have it any other way.

Michael squeezed her hand and gave her an adoring look. Beth marveled at the wondrous ways of God and walked Manuel toward his Creator.

17: Canaan and Westley

“A Cow in a World without Cows”¹⁷

Canaan parked the Caddy in the underground garage and made his way to street level. His pace was forward and his step light; an evening with Westley always put a smile on his face. The Shell Zone was a quiet bar for men situated on the lazy end of a popular Nashville by-way. In a world without Cows, Canaan had found a young man there six weeks ago who let his blood eagerly, as if those days hadn’t—like his whole way of life—gone the way of the Dodo. It was Tuesday, midnight, and they had a standing date.

The most delightful thing about Westley was his hardiness. He could be visited every two weeks without suffering any of the weaknesses of most Cows. In the old days, they rotated Cows on strict schedules, sometimes going up to eight weeks without seeing the same donor again. To Canaan’s delight, Westley was one of those rare youngsters who’s constitution loaned itself readily to Canaan’s visits and responded well to his healing and rejuvenation efforts. He could draw an entire pint off the kid, sew up the wound with his touch, and then give him a restorative jolt, all in the space of five minutes and every fourteen days.

Then again, Canaan didn’t like to hurry. Tonight, if everything went according to plan, he’d take it easy. A live buzz went down best when drawn off slowly and Westley was extremely patient.

Canaan left the shelter of the U-Park and turned up his collar to the wind that whipped between the buildings. The traffic on Church Street was intermittent at that hour and he crossed the wide road at a leisurely jog.

The club was too small for an official bouncer, but one of the original patrons, a towering black individual named Orion, manned the door most nights of his own accord. He was fond of Canaan and waved as he approached.

“K-man! What’s up?” Orion wiped his palm on the black Tee that stretched across his over-pumped pecs and shook hands.

“Same old, same old, Orion,” Canaan replied, amused that the identical script replayed every visit without fail.

“I hear ya. Westley ain’t here yet. You goin’ in anyway?” Orion hooked

¹⁷ This takes place after Last Assembly and describes Elder Canaan, an important character in the two remaining Rabbit books.

a thumb to the entry behind him and Canaan nodded. “You one brave soul, Kay. One brave soul.”

“What makes you say that?” Canaan asked with a laugh. Orion chuckled and shook his regal head.

“Just get in there if you’re goin’.” Orion stepped to the side and pushed open the chipped wooden door. “Jill’ll protect you. Don’t be afraid.”

Canaan grinned and headed in, making a beeline for the bar. He met a few glances from the dark recesses of the room, but acknowledged none of them. He’d wait for Westley, and all of the regulars knew better than to distract him from his mission. The only customer who had the stones to approach him was a jellied tub named Cawley, and although Canaan could smell him on the premises, he was nowhere in sight.

Jill the bartender was one of the few females in the establishment and she didn’t care for Canaan one bit. But that didn’t faze him; her personal feelings were of no interest whatsoever. He checked his watch, clucking. It was 12:03 and not like Westley to be late. Canaan slipped onto a cushioned stool and tapped the bar.

“What’ll ya have, Canaan.” Jill drawled like a member of the Johnny Cash clan and offered no smile, her terse tone clueing Canaan in that she was beyond perturbed.

“Budweiser. Why are you hatin’? If looks could kill...” Canaan whistled jovially, but the woman didn’t lighten up. She turned without a word and drew his beer. When she dropped it to the counter, a small amount sloshed out, which Jill wiped up with a towel and turned away. Canaan thought about her behavior a millisecond more and put it out of his mind. Women were tedious, troublesome, and emotional, and he avoided them as much as possible; the only exception being his mate of forty years, Marcy Haddle. Being the perfect woman, she never gave Canaan a moment’s grief and because of it he treasured her above all things.

“Hey, Canaan, how’s it hanging?” A coarse baritone sounded behind him and Canaan didn’t turn.

Christian Cawley had entered the main salon to once more try his luck. Canaan never minced words with the guy, but was still forced to physically deflect his advances every time. Last week, Orion dragged a dazed Cawley outside after Canaan slugged him. With a low-burning rage building in his middle, Canaan made plans to finally kill the man. How to do it? Getting away with murder wasn’t easy with the Fathers out of the picture. He was on his own and he didn’t want to get pinched.

“Heard your little twerp girlfriend can’t make it tonight. That’s a shame.” Cawley lifted his triple digit mass into the next stool and slapped his empty shot glass down on the bar top. “Jilly! Whiskey! One for me *and* for Canaan, my illustrious wall-flower friend.”

Canaan swigged his beer a long five seconds and then set down the empty glass. “Cawley, what happened the last time you sat next to me at this bar?”

Have you such a short memory?” Canaan didn’t meet the man’s eye, but looked at him in the mirror that covered the bar wall.

“Oh, I forgive you,” Cawley smiled and straightened the knot on his too-wide tie. “You were drunk. So, how ‘bout it? Goring’s not coming. I overheard Jilly telling Sol about it before you came in. Car trouble or something.”

Canaan looked Jill’s way, but she’d already set down two shots and crossed clear to the other side of her station. The thought of not seeing Westley turned Canaan’s already precipitous mood decidedly sour. He pushed Cawley’s peace-offering away and started to slide off the stool. Cawley put a meaty paw on his shoulder and squeezed it playfully.

“I just don’t get what you see in that waste of space. He’s not here. I’ll happily pay you some attention tonight. Hell, I’d *pay* you period.” Cawley downed his shot and reached for the one Canaan disregarded. He never made it.

Grasping the fat man’s hand with his left, Canaan lifted it up while simultaneously stepping behind him. The judo move left the gelatinous fool pressed hard against the bar with his arm pinned painfully in the small of his fleshy back. Cawley yelped and Jill called for Orion.

“I want you to listen to me real close, Cawley,” Canaan whispered into the man’s ear from behind. “I don’t like you and I’ve warned you before. Do you remember what I told you would happen if you ever touched me again?”

Cawley grunted, his chest pressed into the sharp bar edge by Canaan’s weight pushed against him. Canaan didn’t care to hear a response. He was angry now and it had more to do with Westley not showing up than the miserable insect he was about to crush under his boot. Orion lumbered in and Canaan gave Cawley’s arm one more good upward shove and backed away.

“Come on, Christian, get.” Orion stood four inches taller and his bulk was muscle unlike the blubbery Cawley’s. Canaan straightened his clothes and met the man’s reddened gaze as he acknowledged Orion’s command and shuffled off the stool.

“Ya’ll pamper that jerk,” Cawley hissed under his breath as he passed Canaan’s position and headed for the door. “I guess a pretty face will buy you a free ride every time. This place sucks.”

Canaan’s rage still simmered deep down and Westley came to mind as he caught Jill’s eye.

“Why didn’t you tell me Westley was held up?” He made an effort to control his tone, but as he spoke to the woman, she shuddered nonetheless. “Jill? Answer me.” Canaan picked up the odor of nervous perspiration and she backed away, even though the bar itself kept them apart.

“Leave him alone, Canaan. Please, just leave him alone.” Jill’s voice wavered, captured as she was by Canaan’s icy blue stare.

“So, you sabotaged him?” Canaan didn’t read humans, but her intentions were obvious. She was, after all, the kid’s big sister.

“Can’t you choose someone else? I mean, he’s just a dumb kid. He

doesn't know what he wants. You think you picked him up here? He was visiting me, did you know that? Bringing me a package from home. He's not a customer here—he's pretending for your sake."

"I know all that, Jill," Canaan said, already bored by her histrionic display. It didn't matter what Westley did with his free time, so long as he didn't miss their date.

"He can't even choose his own clothes, Canaan." Jill crossed her shaking arms and ignored a patron who called for her down the way. "I just about had him in college before you showed up. He picked out his classes, paid his tuition, and then bam! He meets you here one night and is like a man possessed!"

"He's 25 years old, Jill," Canaan bantered back. "Isn't it about time you pushed him off the teat?"

In the back of his mind, Canaan pondered the other patrons he'd noticed when he came in, calculating the likelihood that any of them would measure up to Westley. With the snap of a finger, any of the lonelies that lined the far wall would follow him to the over-sized washroom and beg to make his night. But how many of them would voluntarily give up their blood and keep it to themselves? It was tough to say. Plus, Westley worshipped the ground he walked on. That was a hard act to follow.

"He thinks you're some kind of superman," Jill whispered, and even leaned in a few inches, probably in an effort to protect her brother's reputation. "He's got you way up on a pedestal, Canaan. If you cared about him at all, you'd walk out of here and never come back."

Canaan chuckled.

"Well, Jill, I am quite a catch," he replied and gave her a wink. Certain that none of the goons behind him were going to do the trick, Canaan was finally fed up. Hardening his gaze, he put both hands on the bar, palms down.

"Give me your address."

"Canaan!"

Sounding like a meek Elvis Presley and looking like a young George Hamilton, Westley Goring burst into the room. "Oh, my god, I'm sorry! My car wouldn't start and I had to take a cab. Have you been waiting long?"

Canaan turned to meet the kid's eye and he melted like jelly.

"Please, don't be mad. It won't happen again. Dang, I don't know what's going on today. It's been just one thing after another!" Westley reached the bar and paused before sitting down. Canaan stood up and he had his answer—no time for chit-chat.

"Well, it was touch and go for a few minutes there, Wes." Canaan ruffled the kid's hair and put an arm around his shoulders. "Almost got picked up by Christian Cawley. It was a close call," Canaan joked and Westley paled noticeably.

"Oh, you'd never go with him, would you, Canaan? Please don't hold this against me. I couldn't stand it if you were mad at me."

“Grow a pair, Westley!” Jill said a little too loudly and then lowered her voice. “You sound like a little girl. God! When will you grow up?”

Westley looked at his sister, dumbfounded, and Canaan tugged him away from the bar.

“Come on, buddy,” Canaan spoke in the kid’s ear, leading him to the semi-privacy of the bathrooms. “It’s wayyyy past my dinner time, and I’m almost mad with you for keeping me waiting like this.”

Jill continued to berate the both of them as they left the room, but the boy wasn’t listening. All he could hear was the sound of his master’s voice. If he was a Cow, he’d call Canaan master, but those days were long gone.

Canaan listened to the boy’s apologies all the way to the stall where he would draw his blood. The other occupants paid them no mind as they passed through their midst and retreated into the tiny space. Westley begged to be forgiven until his tongue grew numb from blood loss, and he fell silent.

When Canaan had drawn off all the boy could afford to lose at one time, he healed his wound and held him up under his arms. The boy was a looker and with his head lolling back and his eyes at half-mast he could have been a teenager.

The minutes wore on and Canaan supported him and watched the pulse through the skin at his throat. Finally, his respirations evened out, he regained his own feet and looked up languidly to meet Canaan’s eye.

“Cawley tried to get you, huh?” His Southern accent was even more pronounced when running low on fuel.

“I’m going to kill Cawley, Wes.” Canaan spoke low so only Westley heard. “He’s crossed me for the last time.”

A plan formed, he now knew when, where and how he’d dispose of the obese ox, and he looked forward to the adventure of it. Since the Rakum disbanded, it was no longer easy to manipulate the mortal authority. He’d have to commit the perfect murder and throw in enough supernatural clues to thoroughly baffle the Nashville cops. His plan was good, but there would be drawbacks.

“That means I won’t come around the bar for a few months.”

Westley’s eyes widened and Canaan continued before the boy could become hysterical.

“I can meet you at your house until then. Just give me the address.”

“Oh, thank you, Canaan. Of course, at my house.” Westley spoke in little gasps, but his gratitude shined through. “Thank you for sticking with me.”

Canaan smiled down on him and allowed him to stand on his own. His knees knocked a little, but he wavered only twice and stood tall. Placing his palms on either side of his face, Canaan waited for the boy to acknowledge he was ready. As soon as Westley nodded, Canaan willed a portion of his energy into the boy. It didn’t take much and momentarily he stood straight up and exhaled as the contact was severed.

“Okay, so next time, your place, same time,” Canaan whispered and

Westley nodded with enthusiasm. “If your sister is home that night, we’ll make other plans, but she usually works Tuesdays, right.”

“Yes, sir, yes.”

“Okay, see you then, Westley.” Canaan unlocked the door and stepped into the room. Many of the other patrons glanced at him approvingly and then at the young man who followed behind, but Canaan didn’t notice, his mind now on murder.

A full gut will do that to you every time.

18: Damien and his Maker

“Lorna Bigelow”¹⁸

Father Damien flipped on the front porch light and made his way to the den. It was a stay-in night and he grimaced at the thought of stuffing his face with microwave pizza instead of his very favorite meal. As much as he hated it, he had to stay under the radar. Drained corpses drew too much attention, and partially-drained survivors had the potential to attract scrutiny if they weren't Cow-like enough to keep a secret.

Damien cursed and fell into his recliner. Before the Rakum race disbanded, he resided at the Cave with the other Fathers, and food was brought in from the Population. No humans died, no Rakum complained, it was a perfect system. Now that all of the remaining brethren were scattered to the wind, there was very little opportunity to sip from the mortals around them.

Still, Damien realized he was better off than the average Rakum on the run. As a Father, he retained much of the power that his inferiors lost when Abroghia deserted them all. But because of his infatuation with all things spiritual, he'd separated himself from the remaining Rakum, and gone into hiding. He couldn't attract attention, and utilizing his power too often would flash like a beacon in the somewhat muted Rakum collective subconscious. His best recourse was to lay low, seek out blood when and where he could, and try to avoid contact with any and all of his brothers.

So far, it was working. He hadn't been in contact with any other Rakum for over two years which was a sign that his hiding skills were sufficient. Also, he was finding new ways to get the blood he desired without raising alarms. Most recently, he discovered how to turn the bloodletting experience into a dream. Case in point, his next door neighbor—the single, widowed, and lonely Mrs. Chelsea Caldwell.

Three nights ago, she approached him as he collected his mail and welcomed him to the neighborhood. Her flirtatious come-ons piqued his imagination enough that by the end of the evening, he'd invited her into his house where he served wine and cheese and lulled her to sleep with hypnosis. The woman was a healthy specimen, mid-fifties, Caucasian, who wore contemporary fashions stretched too tightly over a portly frame. As she drowsed on his sofa, semi-conscious, he carefully opened his favorite vein in her wrist and took off a pint of her blood. He let her sleep two hours, then woke her slowly and pretended she'd dozed off.

Damien's stomach grumbled and he muted the television. It had been

¹⁸ Although not mentioned in *Rabbit: Chasing Beth Rider*, Father Damien was on the stage when the Rakum race was disbanded. A major player in the next two novels, this chapter informs us of the days just before Damien became human, as portrayed in *Rabbit Legacy*.

three days—was Ms. Caldwell home tonight? He smiled and shook his head. A sure way to ruin his situation was to over-hunt the locals.

No, she left thinking they'd had a lovely evening; that her handsome new neighbor had a crush on her, and maybe next week, they'd go on a proper date. He would need another victim.

In two days.

Damien growled, sorry that he'd put himself on a five-day feeding schedule. It wasn't ideal and it wasn't comfortable, but it was do-able. He didn't *need* to drink blood at all, but he certainly wouldn't voluntarily go without.

Knock, knock, knock.

Damien cocked his head to the right, but didn't immediately rise. It was a little past six, the sun had been down a half-hour, and he wasn't expecting any visitors. Plus, he'd already been welcomed by his neighbor.

The knock sounded again and he rose for the door. The smell of cooked cheese hit his nostrils as he touched the knob, and then a soft aroma of a floral perfume filtered in. His visitor was a woman and she was bringing food. Looking through the door's large glass insert, he noted his visitor's shapely figure, stylish clothing, perfect bone structure, and shoulder-length blonde hair. She was probably fifty, and likely a beauty queen in her day. Damien smiled, pulled open the door, and put on the best mask he could fabricate.

Lorna held the dish out in front of her and smiled at her new neighbor. Chelsea warned her that he was handsome in a distinguished, sexy-professor way, but she still blushed when their eyes met. The tall gentleman stood in the doorway, smiling down on her and making appreciative gestures toward the food she'd brought.

"Good evening. This smells delicious," he cooed and reached for the Pyrex dish. Lorna cheeks reddened still more.

"Oh, let me carry it in. It's very hot. Right out of the oven." Lorna wiggled the thumbs of the hot-hands she used to carry the item.

"Please, by all means," the man said, backed up, and gestured for her to enter. He bowed low as he introduced himself. "I am Damien Lucian. I surmise you've been speaking with Mrs. Caldwell."

Lorna laughed. "Yes, Chelsea's my sister, and yes, she told me that you love pasta. I'm Lorna Bigelow and this is my specialty: three-cheese lasagna."

"You cooked this for me?" her host asked, showing her to the kitchen.

"Well, I wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood. I've been out of the country and just got back." Lorna avoided his gaze and hoped she didn't seem to be flirting. In the back of her mind, she wondered if they'd met before. He wasn't familiar, but something about him...

"Welcome home, then, Lorna." Damien placed a trivet on the marble countertop and stepped back, giving her room to pass.

“Thank you,” Lorna said, and avoided meeting his gaze for the moment. She didn’t know him—she’d taken another quick look before he met her eye—but still. She cleared her throat. “I live in the yellow house across the street.”

“Oh, wonderful,” the man said and watched her set down the dish and peel back the foil. “Oh, that looks as wonderful as it smells,” he said sincerely and Lorna smiled. “Please, will you eat with me?”

Her host pulled dinnerware from a cupboard as he spoke and Lorna removed the oven mitts. She had an urge to leave, but stuffed it down, calling herself a coward. Chelsea had made some strange claims about the man, and hadn’t she really come to check them out?

“Lorna,” Damien said, speaking low. He wouldn’t continue until she met his eye. When she did, he smiled and she felt weak. “My dear woman, I will not take no for an answer. I will serve.”

Damien began to portion out the lasagna on two plates and then pour red wine into two glasses he’d added to the table without her noticing. Lorna swallowed and looked for an exit. She needed a moment to pull herself together, to think about what was happening, and to pray.

“Thank you, Damien. Show me to your powder-room first, okay?” Lorna was proud of the way her voice remained strong. He smiled and gestured through the kitchen and to the right. She forced a smile, scooted past him, and closed herself up in the small room.

Leaning against the door and looking at her reflection in the gilded wall mirror, Lorna thought about Chelsea’s claims. Her sister said they ate, drank a little wine, played a few rounds of cards, and then retired to the couch where she promptly fell asleep. Her sister’s dream was what caught Lorna’s attention. Reportedly, in her dream, the aristocratic Damien made a puncture wound in her right arm and sucked her blood for several minutes. Chelsea was convinced it was a dream because not only was it ridiculous, but when she awoke, she had no wound on her wrist. Still, the story raised the hairs on Lorna’s neck.

Thirty years ago, she’d had a similar dream, and the nausea mixed with elation she felt when she looked into Damien’s eyes was very similar to that she felt back then.

A knock sounded on the door and Lorna jumped.

“Are you all right, Lorna? You seem upset.”

Lorna looked into her reflection, lifted up a prayer to God, and then washed her hands in the sink. “No, I’m fine. Just a second.”

When she opened the door, Damien allowed her to pass, but steered her to the living room instead of the kitchen.

“Sit with me a moment. Something in your eyes tells me that you and I have much to discuss.”

Damien’s tone was as polite as before, but Lorna knew he was telling, not asking. She allowed him to lead her to the nearest sofa and she sank into the cushion. Damien sat down right beside her, their knees inches apart. He turned partly her way and took hold of her hand.

“Lorna Bigelow, what do you want to ask me? I will answer you if I can.”

Lorna swallowed, surprised. She expected him to interrogate her, and she didn't have any idea what she should ask. She put her hand to her middle and hoped her nausea would pass. It did before...

“When, Lorna,” Damien asked, not releasing her from his gaze. “When did you feel this before? And was it only the one time?”

Lorna's mouth opened and she wondered if he was reading her mind. Surely that was impossible, but even as she worked to figure it out, he shook his head slowly.

“I'm not reading your thoughts, Lorna.”

“Then, what—”

Damien chuckled and interrupted her. “I read your countenance. I've seen this before, many times, as you can imagine.”

“I can't imagine anything,” Lorna began, but he cut her off with an upheld palm.

“No games. When?” Damien lowered his voice and his head, waiting for her to respond.

Lorna thought back. She'd been in college and on a trip to New York City with a group of girls in her sorority. The memories were hazy, as though she blocked out a large portion of her trip. Damien sighed with impatience and she frowned.

“I was in college. I really can't remember the rest.”

Damien's brow furrowed. “Maybe this will remind you.” He'd been covering her right hand with his and he lifted it to his face. Watching her expression, he turned her arm over so that her wrist met his lips and lingered there several seconds.

Lorna gasped and yanked back her arm as her last night in the Big Apple flooded back in a rush. It hadn't been a dream, for her then or for her sister now.

At the last club they hit that Saturday night, the one on 57th, she'd been approached by a dashing Bruce-Lee-type who asked her to dance. Afterward, he had taken her to his place. Lorna gasped again and tried to stand, but Damien held her down with a hand on her shoulder.

“You consented, didn't you?” Damien asked, a smile touching his lips. “Where did this happen?”

“New York,” Lorna whispered, every detail of that night pouring back to her weary mind. She'd suppressed all of it and hoped never to think of it again. “You're a Rakum.”

Damien's eyes widened. “Do tell.”

“I went home with a man I met. He took my blood. He healed my wound afterwards, and when I asked, he told me that he was a Rakum.”

“He must have thought you'd be around a while,” Damien said wistfully. “My children would never share our name with a Cow who they would only see once.”

“I am not a Cow!” Lorna said, indignant and the memory of what that meant trickled in. Yes, she consented. Yes, she’d been similarly attracted to the guy. But, unlike then, now she belonged to God and He would never allow her to fall into trouble with a Rakum. Lorna sat up and Damien’s hand slid from her shoulder. “I was a dumb kid. I’m a new person now, Damien, and I can’t, no, I *won’t* be your Cow!”

“It’s Father Damien, if you must know.” Damien stood as she did and put his hand to her arm.

Lorna’s jaw dropped a second time. The Rakum she’d met had been very talkative. He shared about the Fathers as well as many other details of their people. Her host was probably correct to assume that her one-time Rakum lover expected to see her regularly. Lorna stiffened her spine and closed her eyes to collect herself.

Damien squeezed her arm gently. “You know of the Fathers, then?”

Lorna nodded. Damien smirked.

“You enthralled one of my sons, did you? Thirty years ago, you swooped into his life and worked your magic on a hapless Rakum looking for a mate.”

Her host did not release her arm and stepped closer. Lorna put both hands to his chest.

“You are still a very bewitching creature, Lorna Bigelow.”

“Please, Damien, I need to go home,” Lorna said, still avoiding his gaze. Her mind raced to think of a proper prayer for such a situation, but she came up empty.

“Lorna, look at me,” her host said, his voice lilting. Lorna shook her head. “Please, Lorna. I want to see those dazzling hazel eyes of yours before you go.”

“Damien, I’m not that same little girl I was then. I have a new master now.”

“You called him master?” Damien chuckled and continued, “You saw him more than once, Lorna.”

Lorna inhaled as more memories trickled in from where she had suppressed them. Two, three, four, five; how many times did she see him? *Dae Kim*; his name came to her in a rush and she looked into Damien’s eyes by reflex. He smiled wide, victorious.

“Which one of my children was it, Lorna? I know them all. One hundred thousand of them. Shall I guess?”

Lorna swallowed, unwilling to answer her host’s arrogant query. His claim to know a hundred thousand Rakum personally made her queasy again and she shook her head.

“New York City, thirty years ago...hmmm,” Damien murmured, still smiling wistfully down on Lorna. “Two names come to mind. Was he Caucasian?”

Lorna huffed, “what does it matter?”

“It doesn’t, but it amuses me. I guess it was Dae Kim.” Although Lorna

attempted to maintain a lax expression, Damien read her anyway and smiled wide. “He is quite the lover boy, I know.”

Lorna’s throat went dry at the thought of him still around somewhere, remembering their time together. Oh, how she prayed she never ran into him again.

Damien caressed her forearm with his fingers. Lorna did not pull away, but steeled her expression. The man was trying to lull her and she had to stay on her guard.

“He is still alive, Lorna. I know him well.” Damien placed his free hand over his chest. “I can locate them all.”

Lorna had had enough and she pulled her arm from his gentle grip. “I don’t care about Rakum anymore, Damien. I haven’t in a long time. I was a kid then, a dumb, feckless brat who’d do anything she could to embarrass her parents.” Lorna pressed her lips together, resolute and Damien nodded with something akin to approval.

“You are feeling better now?”

Lorna nodded and sighed audibly, “*Praise God.*”

“Praise God?”

Lorna tilted her head a few degrees. “Yes, God.”

“Are you a believer, Lorna?” Damien had taken on a new tone and his eyes widened with curiosity. For the first time since she met him, he dropped the superior-being act and was truly interested in what she might say.

“Yes,” Lorna said softly, “I believe in God, Damien.”

“The God of the Bible?”

“Yes. How about you?”

Damien nodded slowly. “I know He exists. I’ve been seeking him a few years now.”

Her host lowered himself into the couch and asked with his eyes if she’d join him. Lorna sank down, this time several inches away and turned to face him. “I don’t understand. Why are you interested in God?”

Damien paused and rubbed his face before answering in a halting voice. “I am 2000 years old, Lorna, and only recently have I pondered my own existence. The God of the mortals is calling me to do something and I don’t know what He wants. Do you hear Him when He calls you?”

Lorna nodded, beginning to discern the miracle taking place right in front of her. God was about to use her to bring a very monstrous creature close.

“Then, will you pray for me?”

Lorna nodded and took both of his cool hands in hers. In a soft voice, she began to pray. She asked God to show Damien the way, to open his ears, his eyes and his heart to God’s message, and most importantly, to make Damien right with his Creator.

“Ask Him to allow me to see you the way He does, Lorna,” Damien said, his voice and his hands shaking. “*I am so hungry and all I see is blood,*” he whispered and averted his eyes.

Lorna's heart jumped in her chest, but prayed again, this time for his specific requests. When she was finished, several minutes had passed and she opened her eyes to see the ancient Rakum weeping.

Leaning forward, she wiped a tear from his eye. "You'll hear Him more clearly now, Damien. I'm going to leave the two of you alone, but I'll check on you tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow night," Damien corrected her, and wiped his tears himself.

Lorna smiled and nodded, but deep down, she still thought it would be morning. Somehow, someday, God was going to deliver her new friend tonight, before sunrise. She gathered her things to leave and kissed his cheek as she stepped out the door.

He might be a centuries-old vampire for the moment, but in the morning, he might very well be a man. And Lorna hoped God would let her see what that looked like.

19: Abroghia Calls Theophilus

“A Man Named Salvation”¹⁹

32 AD Galilee

The time had come to share his rule and he had the first man picked out. Abroghia nodded to the inferior Rakum to his left and sent him off on the night’s mission. Ionious was already in place, now it was only a matter of timing.

Abroghia shifted his weight to his other foot and peered at the crowd gathered on the hills, sitting around small fires, some laughing, some crying, and others tossing lots for baubles and Caesar’s coins. Few of the mortals that peppered the Galilean landscape knew what Abroghia knew: that arriving any minute was a walking God. Thankfully, the majority of the men and women that mewled and tittered on every side were blissfully unaware of the change coming upon their world. Abroghia aimed to do his best to keep them uninformed.

One hundred yards away on the next rise, silhouetted by a Gibbous moon, Markus gestured with a slight movement of his head and sent his message telepathically. *“One hundred paces north, master. The Man from Nazareth approaches.”*

Abroghia straightened his spine and stepped from behind the acacia. He had no intention of being seen by the traveling Rabbi, he knew enough about Him to stay out of His way. Abroghia had his eye out for a certain red-headed and fascinating man called Theophilus, expected to approach the Man when he arrived.

Hailing from an orthodox Jewish family and squatting in a small village near Athens, Theophilus had traveled with a large group to reach the City of David in time for Sukkotⁱ. Abroghia was aware of all of the Pilgrim Festivals and made the best of them by picking off stragglers as they came through his Samaritan valley. A dozen nights ago, Theophilus’ convoy wound its way past Abroghia’s home, carved as it was into the hillside. They pitched camp only a stone’s throw away and as the men folk reclined about the fire telling tall tales and swapping lies, Abroghia listened intently from the shadows.

When the conversation turned to the Son of Joseph canvassing the countryside, teaching repentance and calling people to return to the Torah of Elohimⁱⁱ, Abroghia’s ears pricked. Many believed the Man fulfilled enough prophecies to warrant closer scrutiny—Abroghia was one of these. He wasn’t

¹⁹ In *Rabbit: Chasing Beth Rider*, Larry tells Simon that Father Theophilus is Jewish and that he once sat at the feet of Jesus of Nazareth. These next two chapters will delve into those days almost two thousand years ago.

one to take chances with the Creator. He was given a measure supremacy and he knew his parameters. As long as he played by the rules, Elohim would hold up His end of the deal.

The red-headed Hebrew recounted a story he'd heard about the Nazarene, calling Him the Messiah they'd all been waiting for. He shared several second-hand accounts of miraculous healings and deliverance from demonic beings. Then he swore to every man in the clearing that if he could only speak to Jesus, he would follow Him to the ends of the earth.

"I have thrown a fleece out for Elohim. If this Man is our Messiah, then He will speak to me when we meet. If I am instead lost in the crowd, I will know He is a fraud."

The young firebrand said those words to his brethren and Abroghia smiled. Now, the night had come and the twain would finally be in the same place at the same time. If Elohim showed Theophilus that this Man was the Messiah, Abroghia was going to do his best to steal him away. It was his main mission—to foil the works of the Creator for as long as he was able.

Across the way, Markus pulled his cloak over his head and turned away as a gaggle of men hurried past his position.

"Stay out of sight or you'll be sorry." He sent the eager youth the message and proceeded to walk through the sand toward the crowd. His leather sandals kicked up the loose earth and his rough linen robes swished and scratched at his thighs. It was doubtful the Man would harm Markus if He saw Him, but this was no night for maybes. Abroghia had one shot and this was it. After tonight, the caravan of devotees would head for Jerusalem and he had no desire to enter that spiritual hornet's nest.

"Twenty-five paces and you'll see them crest the far hill," Markus sent over without looking Abroghia's way. The crowd had already gotten wind of the Rabbi's arrival and began to shift and shove, stand and move toward the far rise. Abroghia pressed between a hefty couple and fell into a slow jog to parallel the Man when He reached the zenith. He'd already pinpointed Theophilus' position and now wished only to observe their interaction, if any. Would the Man called *Salvation* stop long enough to speak to a man whose name translated to *Loved by God*? Abroghia hoped so.

For two thousand years, Abroghia had painstakingly experimented with the human flesh that populated the planet; molding, killing, pillaging—whatever was necessary to create a Kind unto himself. He had the power and authority to do almost anything he set his mind to, so long as the mortals he toyed with were unclaimed by their Creator. And there were plenty who spent their entire lives outside of the protection of Elohim.

At present, he had collected nearly five hundred underlings, almost all of which were born to women. One hundred were temporary Wraiths he animated himself to serve his purposes. The spirits he compelled to do his bidding were happy to have a body to inhabit, even if it was temporary and false. The shells started out as corpses, so Abroghia had only a few months' use out of them

before they fell completely apart. He was extremely powerful, but maintaining cohesion on one hundred separate entities stretched his abilities to the max. Several nights ago when he looked into Theophilus' eyes, he knew the time had come to distribute his reign among nine others. The Rakum Race was ready for official leadership.

Theophilus would be the first called to Father the new race of beings that Abroghia fondly named Rakum, after his true name, Ta'avah Rakha, or *Vain Lust*. A joke perhaps to the Creator, but the name meant power to Abroghia. The name represented his reputation and his renown and finally the time to build his empire had arrived.

“Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of Elohim...”

The Rabbi's words floated on the wind and carried much further than a normal man's would. Abroghia reached his watching post and crossed his arms, training his gaze on the Man fifty paces downwind.

“Blessed are you who hunger now for you shall be filled...”

A ruddy cheek, a flash of a bright orange beard, and stepping between the low fires and toward the Man, Theophilus moved to test his fleece. Rabbi Yeshuaⁱⁱⁱ, as the locals called Him, faced east, arms wide as He spoke words that soothed some and abraded others. Theophilus was ten paces behind and closing in. Several primary disciples surrounded the Rabbi, watching for trouble as much as listening to His words. The Greek-speaking Jew pressed on.

“But I say to you, love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you...”

Abroghia arched his eyebrows and looked at the faces on all sides. For the most part, they were entranced. Mouths agape, hands either hanging limply at their sides or upraised to the heavens above. It would make more sense if the crowd laughed, but not a single soul found the Rabbi's words amusing.

Theophilus was one man away from the Rabbi from Nazareth. Abroghia watched as he stretched out his hand and touched the disciple directly before him.

“Love your enemies. Do good and lend, hoping for nothing in return...”

The Man turned then and as He spoke He reached around the wild-eyed black-haired man guarding Him, and bid Theophilus near. The stunned Pilgrim stumbled forward and stopped an arm's length away only to be pulled into a one-armed embrace. Jesus looked into Theophilus' eyes and smiled before continuing.

“If you do this, your reward will be great, and you will be sons of El Elyon^{iv}, for He is kind to the unthankful and evil...”

“But Rabbi,” one in the crowd called out, “the Torah allows one to collect from those who owe us. Are we to go poor so our enemies may eat?”

The Rabbi's smile went to the side and he squeezed Theophilus' shoulder. “Just as you want men to do to you, you also go and do likewise to them.”

With that He released Theophilus who stepped back as if freed from a

spell. His face shone with revelation and even as a brutish disciple called Kefa caught him and pulled him out of the way, the red-headed Jew was smiling.

Abroghia nodded to Markus who in turn motioned to Ionious with one finger. With triangulated precision, they closed in on Theophilus lying peacefully on the scrub that covered the arid hills. Jesus and His people moved off as Abroghia and his men moved in. By the time they reached the red-head's side, the crowd had shifted fifty paces away and Theophilus was alone.

"Now to make him mine," Abroghia mumbled and knelt to his side. The time had arrived and he was ready.

Oh, was he ready.

20: Abroghia Calls Theophilus, Part II

“The Promise of Power”

“Theophilus, come. I need you,” Abroghia whispered, kneeling over his target, his two men flanking his position. The man recognized him from their previous meeting, when Abroghia had introduced himself in private outside the travelers’ camp. It was then that Abroghia knew he had found the first Father of the Rakum race. “I need you to rule beside me. Teach these younglings what you know. Help me to grow a great nation of men who live to serve their leaders.”

“Why me, Abroghia?” he asked, still lying flat on his back. “I’m a tailor, not a leader. I’ve never married nor owned land. I have seen the Son of God and I want to follow Him.” Theophilus met Abroghia’s gaze and didn’t give Ionious or Markus any notice. His face still glowed from meeting the Rabbi and Abroghia turned up the heat.

“You have no choice, Theophilus. You have been chosen to help me raise the Rakum race from the dust. You are the first of nine that I will call. You will help me choose the others. You will father thousands of sons directly from your loins. Through your seed you will do a great service to the world.”

Abroghia had hit a nerve; Theophilus had secret dreams of grandeur. Fantasies of bringing the nation of Israel out of bondage all by himself.

“Come,” Abroghia said, “say not a word until I show you what I am capable of. Rise up, and come.”

Markus lifted Theophilus off the ground and when he found his feet, the Rakum steered him to follow Abroghia across the now-empty field. Within minutes, they reached the trees and Abroghia pulled a full-sized sword from a sheath at Ionious’ side.

“You will serve a master who can never die. Thrust this blade through-and-through, Theophilus,” Abroghia said. He held out the sword, but didn’t expect the man to take it. When Theophilus began voicing his doubts, Abroghia handed the blade to Markus who shoved it into his middle without a thought.

Theophilus exclaimed and rushed to his aid. “Stop! Abroghia!”

Turning side-to-side twice, Abroghia demonstrated how the sword penetrated, making certain Theophilus saw the blood oozing from both sides of his body before he put his hand to the hilt and drew it slowly out. As Theophilus watched, Abroghia ripped the already torn tunic wide so he could witness the closing of the wound in the bright moonlight.

“Impossible!” the red-head gasped.

“With man, perhaps, but not with me,” Abroghia chuckled. “I cannot die, Theophilus. I am a powerful god and I need you to help me with these young ones.” He gestured to Markus, who stood obediently by awaiting command.

“We will populate the earth with men who are stronger, smarter, and longer-lived than the world has ever seen.”

“Who do you follow, Abroghia?”

“I have inhabited this earth in different forms for four thousand years. I have power beyond your imagination and if you join me, I will lend that power to you. You could never imagine what you will be capable of once you devote your life to my purposes.”

Theophilus considered his words, looked at the two young men on his either side, and then back to Abroghia.

“And the Elohim^v of Yisrael?”

“Who do you think gave me this power?” Abroghia replied. “Will you come? I will prove myself to you a million times over, but you must consent. You must submit to my authority. I will reward you. You will never be without fine food, luxury, and all the pleasures of life.” Abroghia paused. He allowed the silence to fill the world around them before whispering, “And, Theophilus ben Ya’acov^{vi}, you will *rule*.”

The red-head pondered Abroghia’s promises several seconds before sighing from deep within. He nodded his head a fraction and lowered his eyes, saying, “If you can do all you say, then yes, I will follow you.”

The light that emanated from Theophilus’ visage as he left Jesus’ side began to ebb and Abroghia smiled, grasping him by both shoulders.

“Good. You will never regret it, my son.” Abroghia held onto Theophilus tightly as Markus and Ionious stepped closer. “Answer me this. The life is in the blood, correct?”

“Er, yes. So says Elohim^{vii}.”

“Then it stands to reason that if I pour my life into you, you will take on my attributes. Yes?”

Theophilus furrowed his brow, nodding slowly.

“Tonight we begin the process of making you over into a god, Theophilus.” Abroghia produced a small bone knife from his sash and sliced deep his wrist. He thrust it toward the man’s face and his eyes widened. “Take my life into you, Theophilus. Then you will know power like you’ve never imagined. Do it now.”

Markus stabilized the man with a palm to his neck and Ionious stood by with a hand on his chest. Theophilus didn’t pull back when the blood rushed into his mouth, spilling over his lips and down his beard. Abroghia was aware that it would pain the man greatly, and within moments, the two youngsters were supporting a thrashing new leader in their strong hands. For five minutes, the Greek Jew seized in their grasp, gagging and coughing spittle tinged red with mingled blood. When the effects passed, Theophilus hung in Markus’ arms, gasping for air. Abroghia waited until his eyes were clear once more and took his chin in two fingers.

“From this moment on, you are Father Theophilus, a powerful force to be reckoned with. And these men are your servants,” he said, gesturing toward

the Rakum behind him. “Greet your Father, pups.”

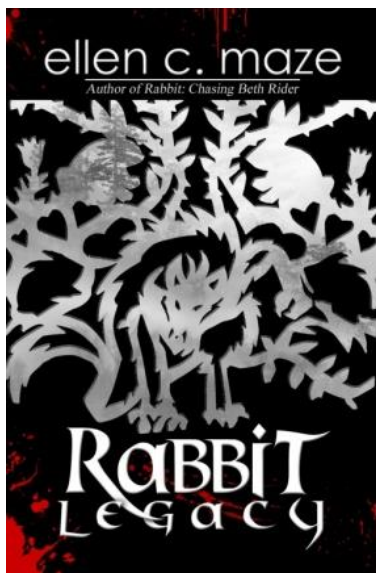
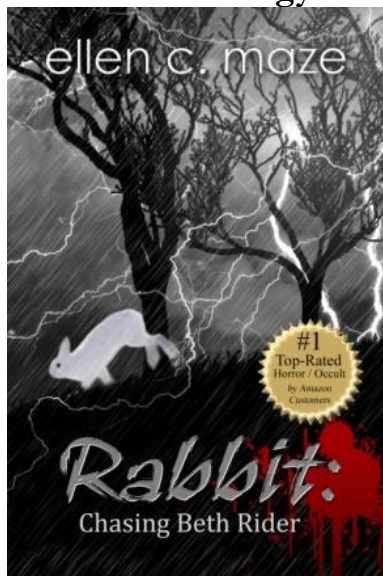
“Kazak, Abba,”^{viii} Markus said in Hebrew. Ionious repeated the phrase in Greek and Abroghia smiled. *Be strong*, indeed. Be strong.

And given a few months of conditioning and alchemy, the mortal born outside Athens would shed his humanity and claim his deity alongside his master. He’d be stronger than man was meant to be and he’d owe it all to a spirit manifest in the flesh named Ta’avah Rakha Abroghia; his god and king.

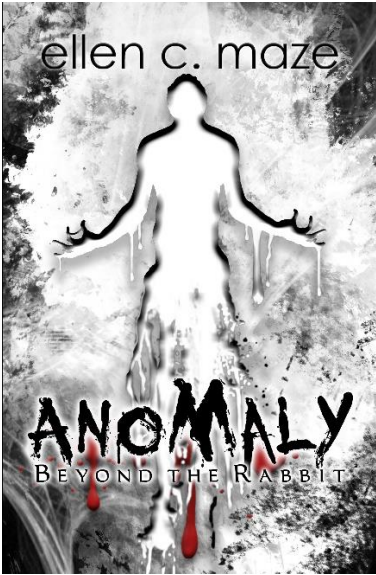
It was good.

END

The Rabbit Trilogy



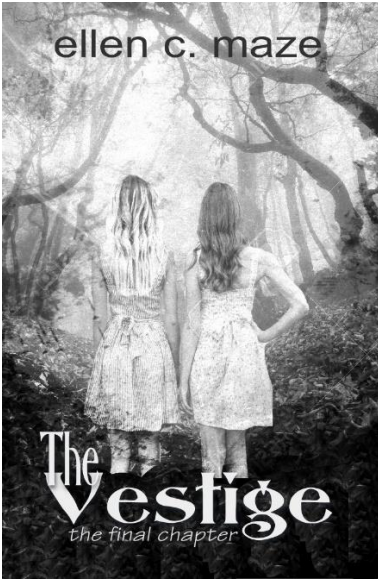
The Rabbit Saga includes 6 novels. The first 3 involve the Rakum becoming aware of a Creator, and the last 3 bring every last one to choose sides. Purchase all titles: www.ellencmaze.com



Fall 2018



Summer 2019



Winter 2019

(The Vestige cover not finalized)

Read the Book that Started it All...



The Judging The Corescu Chronicles Book One

Hungary, 1640. With the sharp stab of the demon’s fangs, village priest Markus Corescu finds his world turned upside-down, coming to the realization that he has been transformed into an abomination—a vampire. Immediately, the newly-undead clergyman assigns a divine calling to his bloodthirsty nature and satisfies his despicable hunger on the humans around him without remorse. Fast forward to the present, and the priest has suppressed and forgotten his past. With the aid of two mortals, and despite the violent protests of his immortal contemporaries, the old vampire is finally able to see the Truth. As he wrestles with his very soul, he discovers that the thousands of people he has judged were not killed were not killed within the will of God, but rather they were exsanguinated to satisfy his lust for blood. Now he must make amends with God, but even if his eyes are opened, his ways are not easily changed.

For more information on other works by
Ellen C. Maze
visit www.ellencmaze.com

MORE Praise for Rabbit: Chasing Beth Rider

“What a great book! It kept me on the edge of my seat, waiting for what was going to happen next. With all the strange powers at work in this world, this book reveals the greatest Power of all.” ~ Rabbi John Giddens, www.ChavurahShalom.org

“I’ve often wondered what makes vampires so intriguing to humans...The characters in this book are solid and each scene is more vivid than the next...The author opened my eyes to a unique and interesting new world leaving me thirsting for more as I read the last page.” ~ Stacey Pierce, www.diligentwriter.blogspot.com

“I absolutely love it when an author can take a myth or legend...and weave them neatly and efficiently into a brilliant and original tale...This book is definitely not simplistic in nature. Ms. Maze gives us a fast-paced plot with many twists and turns, not just in the action, but also for the mind...*Rabbit: Chasing Beth Rider* will grab your attention from the first page and will not let go until the end, and maybe not even then. Enjoy the chase!” ~ Stephanie Nordkap, Bestsellersworld.com

Maze takes us on a vampire journey with a one-of-a-kind twist! *Rabbit* is a fast-paced, action-packed, exciting vampire thriller...As an avid reader of vampire fiction, this gem unexpectedly has become one of my very favorites. ~ Marcia Freespirit, CEO, *JimSam Inc. Publishing*

“*Rabbit: Chasing Beth Rider* delivers a fresh new twist to vampire lore. The strength of the plot carries it from page to page as all the pieces fall into place, painting an exciting tapestry. This book is a must have for those seeking a real, refreshing vampire novel.” ~ SB Knight, *Premium Promotional Services*



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End Notes

ⁱ The Feast of Tabernacles

ⁱⁱ The Law of God

ⁱⁱⁱ Yeshua is Jesus' Hebrew name, it means literally, "Salvation"

^{iv} The Most High, Supreme One

^v The God of Israel

^{vi} Theophilus, son of Jacob

^{vii} Leviticus 17:11, 14; Deuteronomy 12:33

^{viii} "Be strong, father."