

Rabbit redemption

Book Three of the Rabbit Trilogy

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Rabbit Redemption

By Ellen C. Maze Sallas

First Edition

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Mild Language, Sexual Situations, Vampire Violence

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1

Present Day

Jackson, MS

November 7th, 6:30 a.m.

Something was not quite right and Canaan blinked his eyes several times to clear his vision. Below him, lying on the carpeted floor, undergoing a violent rejuvenation treatment administered by The Last, Isaac Akaron, was *his* body, pale, limp, and apparently deceased. Yet, Canaan wasn't dead. On the contrary, he watched the scene as if suspended from the ceiling. The last thing he recalled was Elder Rufus invisibly lasering his spine with skill Canaan never expected. If he'd only been more cautious. Yet who would have ever imagined an Elder insane with the Dying Buzz could remain potent enough to incapacitate an Elder as powerful as Canaan?

Standing in a semi-circle around his still form, he recognized his brethren watching the show with keen interest. Dimple, a sturdy Rakum grunt from New Orleans; Boris, six-foot-six and black as night, hailed from Rufus's pack before the Elder went bananas; and Hoss, a muscular grunt known for being slow-witted and obedient. From his insane ethereal position, Canaan counted one more, just outside their group, sitting against the wall and leaning over his knees. No matter how familiar, without his flesh, Canaan had no extrasensory abilities to discern this one's identity.

"YAH-HAH!" Isaac yelped with apparent joy below him, both palms against Canaan's head. "RETURN!" he bellowed and flashed his face toward the ceiling where Canaan hovered. Canaan blinked with surprise and when he reopened his eyes, he was looking into Isaac's face from the floor.

"I am amazing!" the boy said and removed his hands. He rolled onto his rear, crossed his legs Indian-style, and put one hand to Canaan's blond curls. "Hey, there, buddy," the kid said, a victorious smile in place.

“Hey,” Canaan said and nodded, trying to appear as unaffected as possible. He was the only Elder present and as such, must maintain superiority—at least among the grunts; Isaac’s top-level position remained a brand new revelation.

“How do you feel? Rufus cooked you a little,” Isaac said, still awaiting a report. He swirled his fingers a few more times in the wisps of hair on Canaan’s forehead and then smoothed his long sideburns with one forefinger.

Canaan did not reject The Last’s affections, the previous hours clear in his mind. This blond and perfect, seemingly thirteen-year-old boy was High Father Abroghia’s last laugh, the most powerful Rakum ever born. Now, the kid would be in charge of their race, what was left of them. Canaan kept his thoughts positive—the kid was more telepathic than them all.

“I don’t mind if you ponder my amazingness, Elder Canaan,” Isaac said then, his voice soft.

“Thank you for bringing me back.”

“Of course I’d bring you back, silly,” Isaac said and hopped to his feet with athletic agility. “I’m not sure it’s completely *fair*...” he stressed and turned toward the thick red-headed Rakum nearest him. “Dimple shot Rufus just when it was getting really interesting.”

“Shot him?” Canaan said, not really asking. He had heard several explosions before he lost consciousness and now had his explanation.

“Don’t get me wrong, Canaan. I want you with me. I *need* you, actually, but...” the kid shrugged, “a gun?” He looked at Dimple again and the guy winced as if he’d been struck. Isaac returned his attention to Canaan, still lying flat on the carpet. “Um, buddy...naptime’s over.”

“Of course,” Canaan agreed and commanded his body to stand. His limbs responded sluggishly, but all-in-all, he probably looked pretty sturdy to those watching on. He had no pain, and only a vague tickle remained along his spine from Elder Rufus’s attack to his nervous system. The Last truly was amazing.

An unexpected thought popped into Canaan’s mind and he knew Isaac would read it and respond: *Did Roman and the rest get away safely?*

“I let them go, they’re gone,” Isaac said, ending the discussion. “But that’s not all...” Isaac grasped Canaan’s hand. “I healed Beryl, too. He had burnt to a crisp running to the house at dawn.” Isaac laughed out loud and shook his head.

Canaan was familiar with the twins, Beryl and Meryl, in many ways. Most recently when they served Rufus. A mere week ago, Meryl

and Beryl were dispatched by the insane Elder to kidnap Canaan's lover, Marcy, to lure him to Jackson. Meryl had actually buzzed off her before Canaan could intervene. This breach cost the youngster dearly—Canaan broke his neck and left him to die. In addition, Canaan shot Beryl in the gut before the guy healed from the slug Marcy put in him minutes earlier. So... they had survived. Deep down in a place he wouldn't peek into, Canaan was glad they had.

Isaac caught Canaan's eye and winked. "You can be dangerous, can't you," he giggled, not truly asking a question. "Don't worry, Canaan, Beryl's all fixed up," Isaac said, still giggling at the man's misfortune. "It *was* hilarious, though. He was oozing puss. Completely black and red when *Officer Dimple* yanked him inside." Isaac tugged Canaan to where the Rakum sat with his head over his knees.

Canaan had seen Rakum burnt by the sun, and if they were allowed to crisp up even a few minutes, they would expire. Yet, Beryl had no apparent burns. Canaan looked at The Last in wonder; healing consumed tremendous energy and Isaac had healed two Rakum in one night. Isaac squeezed his hand.

"All of you..." He took a moment to catch the eye of every Rakum standing. "You guys are going to help me set things right."

"*Ta'Avah...*" Beryl whispered from their feet.

"*Pffft,*" Isaac responded, spitting. He caught Canaan's eye. "Just so you know, while you were passed out..."

His eyes actually shined with humor then, reminding Canaan of their new leader's ruthless nature. Sure, he was the youngest of them all, but there would be no limit to his power or his ambitions.

Reading his run-on thoughts, Isaac smiled as he completed his statement. "...our maker stole Father Theophilus from the basement."

Canaan had questions, but Isaac beat him to it.

"From now on, we will know him as Ta'avah, but he embodied High Father Abroghia in a previous incarnation. All of you," Isaac said to each, "must understand our maker is a spirit, and for the moment, he inhabits this Rakum's dead twin." The kid gestured to the kneeling man.

Canaan sighed; he had his answer regarding Meryl's condition. It was a damn shame. Before he attacked Marcy, Meryl had been his favorite between the two brothers, their personalities more alike. Beryl had always seemed *less than*, and Canaan hadn't been the only Elder that thought so. Without his twin to balance his periodic fragility, Beryl's un-Rakum-like tendencies would only increase.

"Yes, he's a moron, Elder Canaan, we all agree." Isaac interrupted his thoughts. "You're the only one not paying attention. Focus on me."

Got it?” Canaan nodded. “I will get Father Theophilus back and he will serve me,” Isaac continued easily, “and I will vanquish Ta’avah. It is my birthright to rule our people.”

“I’m with you, Boss, one hundred percent,” the lumbering black Rakum to Isaac’s left said in a low baritone.

“I know you are, Boris,” Isaac said touching his arm. “The rest of you—are you with me? Will you stand with me as your Father, against anyone—man or Rakum—who dares challenge me?”

“I will,” Hoss said without hesitation, and then Dimple agreed in a low voice. Canaan nodded, which Isaac acknowledged with a wink.

The Rakum on the floor still hadn’t moved or looked up. Canaan leaned forward to help him rise, but Isaac booted Beryl with his tennis shoe.

“Beryl, are you with me?” Isaac said and waited. A low “yes” was his response. Isaac paused another second and kicked Beryl in the shoulder harder than before. “We’re fresh out of pacifiers, Beryl,” Isaac said. “This is no house for babies. Is that what you are?” Isaac looked to Boris and stroked Beryl’s soft, brown hair. “You can eat this if it’s a baby, Boris. You’re my favorite.”

“No, Master, I am a Rakum,” Beryl said and rolled to his knees, then to his feet. “I will serve you.”

The Rakum’s gaze remained downcast, but Canaan’s eyes grew at the sight. In the history of their race, never had there been born more perfect and beautiful Rakum than the identical twins, Meryl and Beryl. Since their youths, both found it to be child’s play to manipulate anyone—man or Rakum—with their looks and charm. Canaan now understood Beryl’s depressed demeanor. Isaac had only healed half of the Rakum’s face. The other half puckered with red, yellow, and black oozing flesh, trying to heal and being prevented by a consistent and opposing force.

Isaac laughed then and turned away from the circle. “*I do what I want,*” he sent telepathically to Canaan alone. “*Now, come feed me,*” he said silently and crawled into what used to be Rufus’s throne. “Come now,” he said aloud, although all present understood whom the kid wanted. Canaan crossed the room and rolled up his sleeve.

2

Memphis, TN
November 7th, 7 p.m.

Javier dialed the number from long memory. Once a year, since he'd been mortal, he called Ruth Miller's house to check on her nephew Simon. The kid was picked by a Major League team before finishing college and had made quite a name through the years. Javier never spoke with him, never identified himself to the aunt, he only pretended to be a sports writer, collected the bare facts, and hung up. He had to know the boy was safe and doing well. Tonight, as he dialed Aunt Ruth's number, he would ask her how to contact her nephew. He needed help and since he was not ready to call Roman, his former Elder, his former Cow remained the only option.

The phone rang across three states as Javier waited, preparing the script in his mind. On the third ring, panic rose in his throat. What if the call forwarded to the answering machine? Then what? He had nowhere to go, no money, no shelter, and nothing to eat. He couldn't call anyone from his past life—they'd despise him for what he'd done in the darkness of the Stone's basement. Why did he do it? And the question that plagued him the most since he emerged from the hospital boiler room at sundown: what exactly had he done?

He was no longer human—he could feel it. His body was too strong and his senses too sharp. Unpleasant and alien sensations plagued his musculature and violent thoughts crept into his mind unbidden. But he also was not a Rakum. He had no interest in blood, and more importantly, the sun did not blind him or burn his skin. He had tested it before sunset by creeping up the boiler room stairs and slowly allowing the sunlight to fall across his body. Nothing happened. He had stepped into the waning light, the sun inches from falling below the Tennessee mountains, and he experienced only a touch of nausea. Javier's reaction

to the daylight was uncomfortable, but not dangerous. So he wasn't a Rakum and he wasn't a man. That left, what?

The landline rang a fourth time and was snatched up with a loud clack.

"Yeah?" a strong male voice barked. "What is it?"

Javier swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry.

"Who's there?"

"Simon?" Javier asked, cupping the handset in both palms. "Simon Miller?" There was a three-second pause that seemed much longer and then what sounded like a hand muffling the receiver for muted shouting. A few more seconds elapsed as Javier glanced around his phone booth. He spoke into the phone again. "Simon?"

"Javier? Is it really you?" a quiet voice asked, more like that of a child than the grown man Simon had certainly become.

Javier smiled and nodded to no one in the old-fashioned phone booth. "Hey, Simon. It's good to hear your voice."

"Ohmygod! I can't believe it!" Simon gushed, dispensing with the irritated adult voice he had used to answer the phone. He shouted at someone on his end and apologized to Javier. "Aunt Ruth was buried last night. It's a madhouse. Where are you? Are you in Athens?"

Javier's face fell, Simon would not be able to drive to Memphis and pick him up.

"Are you coming here?"

"I'm in Memphis, Simon, and I don't have transportation," Javier admitted, sorry that he sounded so helpless. "I was calling to see if you could help me out."

"Of course, I can, Javier! Hang on." Simon was gone a few seconds and hopped back on the line. "Can you fly? Take a plane? I mean, last I heard—well, uh, you were mortal."

Javier smiled despite his anxious state of mind. So much water had passed under the bridge since they parted ways. He hadn't seen the guy since Last Assembly and Simon had been a teenager then. Seven years ago and newly-human, Javier parted ways with Simon over the phone fearing it would be too weird to face a man to whom he had once been quite addicted. The kid had returned to his classes and Javier departed with Beth Rider to find a life among mankind in Alabama. Simon knew nothing about Rufus and his attempted coup in Jackson. He knew nothing about Javier's break from Roman. And of course, he knew nothing of Javier's biggest secret, the transgression that kept him separate from Rakum and friends alike.

"Javier, you okay? Can you get to the airport? Have any money?"

“Simon, a lot has happened. I don’t have anything. I don’t know why I even called.”

“Because we’re friends, Javier! Look,” Simon shouted away from the phone and was back, “I’m wiring you some money. Get to the closest Western Union and claim it. It’ll be under my name with the password *motorcycle* and no ID requirement. Can you do that?”

“Motorcycle,” Javier said with a sad smile. He had met Simon because the kid crashed his bike the same night Javier and Roman were out for a joyride. Before the memories washed back fully, Javier shut them out. His days of being a Rakum were over and he needed to work *with* God to keep it that way. “Okay, Simon, that’ll work.”

“Good. Get here as soon as you can. They’re sitting Shiva,¹ but you come on. Nobody’s keeping my best buddy out.”

“Okay,” Javier said and listened as Simon gave wiring instructions to the side.

“I’m sending plenty so pick up a disposable cell. I want you to call me when you have your schedule. I’ll have Pink pick you up at the airport. That work for you?”

“Yes, okay, thank you.” Javier was not embarrassed that he needed help, but now that it would soon come to pass, seeing Simon again might be awkward; Simon literally worshiped him as a Rakum. How would the guy see him now?

“Javier,” Simon said then, “Pink just sent the money. Hurry. We’ll work it out, whatever’s going on.”

“Thanks again, Simon,” Javier mumbled, pulled the phone from his ear, and stared into the receiver. What else could he say? How would Simon perceive him? Their initial attraction had been a supernatural one, brought on by his connection with High Father Abroghia. Now he was connected to the Boy-Father, Isaac, in the worst way. Javier gulped and hung up the phone.

He would find a Western Union. He’d get the money and a phone and call for an Uber to the airport. With any luck, he would be at Simon’s before sunup. Javier left the phone booth and jogged toward the lights of the drugstore ahead, now racing the sun for altogether different reasons.

¹ At-home Jewish tradition designed to honor the deceased.

3

Yazoo City, MS
November 7th, 8 p.m.

Father Theophilus shrank further into the shadows beneath the staircase as Ta'avah finished off the family whose home they invaded. The past forty-eight hours had been a nightmare, but hadn't the past seven years been nearly as bad? The immense and nearly limitless power a Rakum Father possessed had filtered away as his apathy expanded nightly. Theophilus inhaled deeply, held the air in his weary lungs, and then deliberately exhaled slow and careful. His body ached from lack of sustenance, his spirit ached from woe over his people, and his soul languished in a battle between God and Satan.

Yes, Satan; the Devil of Old—*ha-satan* in Hebrew, the Adversary in English, and Ta'avah today—fifteen feet away, sucking the blood out of the father of two boys who had already been beheaded by the monster. It was no accident that brought the old Father here; Theophilus made his choice eons ago.

He wasn't born a Rakum. Rather, two thousand years ago he was born to a normal Jewish couple in a small Grecian town. His dream was to be a tailor like his papa, making ordinary tents for the am *ha'aretz*² and extraordinary *tallit*³ for the *chasadim*⁴. But on a fated pilgrimage to Jerusalem, his plans detoured when he met not only the amazing new Rabbi from Nazareth, but also the miscreant who he today knew as Ta'avah.

Theophilus frowned at the sound of the demon finishing off his victim off with vicious gusto. Ta'avah dropped the man's corpse to the ground and headed upstairs. The wife had been gagged and tethered to the bedpost, and since his belly was full, Ta'avah would no doubt abuse

² Ordinary folk, literally, "people of the land."

³ A Jewish prayer shawl worn about the shoulders during prayer. Means "little tent."

⁴ Hebrew for "holy ones," or religious people.

the woman in other ways. Oh, how Theophilus longed to ask the God of the mortals for help. But how could he?

Yeshua⁵ of Nazareth had given him a choice and when put to the question, Theophilus chose the father of the Rakum, a race of monsters spawned by a demon cast from heaven when the world was new.

A scream sounded from the second floor and then hushed just as quickly. Ta'avah would not show mercy because there was none in him. Being privy and complicit for millennia, Theophilus knew the creature's entire history. Ta'avah was one-hundred-percent spirit. Six thousand years ago, when Ta'avah was first cast to earth by Elohim⁶, he took the form of a man and called himself Abroghia. Using his abilities to procreate, he spawned a new race combining his seed and the wombs of mortal women. Each male child born was imbued with his blood and evil nature. By the time Theophilus's path crossed his at that long ago Festival, Abroghia had raised over a hundred of these "sons" and was ready to enlist the aid of specially-chosen men to help him increase their numbers.

"Theophilus, come. I need you."

The words Abroghia had whispered to him came to his long memory, so vivid and substantial that it was hard to believe two thousand years had passed. Theophilus had just left Yeshua's side, convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Rabbi was more than a man, but the Son of God—the Messiah they'd all been awaiting. Yet, when Abroghia called him, Theophilus listened...

It was what became known as 32 AD, in a scrubby valley in Galilee, and Theophilus lay on the sand, flat on his back, overwhelmed by the simple touch of the Healer of Nazareth.

"Theophilus, come. I need you."

At the sound of the commanding whisper, Theophilus opened his eyes. In the clear moonlight, he recognized the man he'd met the night before as Abroghia, not a Jew, but a curious sort. A man who knew much about the ways of the Hebrew people as well as all of the local gossip concerning Yeshua of Nazareth.

"I need you to rule beside me," Abroghia continued with an excited urgency in his deep voice. "Teach these younglings what you know. Help me grow a great nation of men who live to serve their leaders."

"Why me, honorable Abroghia? I am 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." Still lying flat on his back, Theophilus met Abroghia's

⁵ (Hebrew) "Jesus"; *yod-shin-var-ayin*, ישוע - Pronounced *Yeshua*; literally, "Salvation"

⁶ (Hebrew) "God," specifically the God of Israel.

gaze and ignored two other men who stood nearby. They were younger, one Roman and the other possibly a native of Galilee. Theophilus touched his tingling cheeks still glowing as a result of meeting the Messiah face-to-face.

“You have been chosen, Theophilus. My sons will need a Father. You are the first I have called and there will be eight others. You will sire thousands of Rakum directly from your loins. Through your seed you will do a great service to the world.”

Abroghia had hit a nerve, for Theophilus harbored secret dreams of grandeur, fantasies of bringing the nation of Israel out of bondage by his own power.

“Come. Say not a word until I show you what I am capable of. Rise up, and come.”

One of the youngsters lifted Theophilus off the ground. When he found his feet, the Rakum youth steered him across the now-deserted field directly behind Abroghia. Within minutes, they reached the trees and Abroghia pulled a full-sized sword from a sheath at the other young man’s side.

“Markus,” Abroghia said gesturing to the teenager who supported Theophilus on his thickly-muscled shoulder. “Ionious,” Abroghia said, this time pointing to the dark blond man on his right. “My best sons. Theophilus, you and I will create a legion; you, and the other Fathers I will choose, will raise up a nation of a hundred thousand Rakum, all of which will worship you as their god and Father.”

Theophilus’s mind spun. How could this be? Abroghia answered his questions without him voicing them aloud.

“You will serve a master who can never die.” Abroghia held out the sword, hilt first. “Thrust this blade through and through, Theophilus.”

Shaking his head, Theophilus’s eyes grew wide. He voiced his doubts with vehemence until Abroghia grew weary of his complaints and handed the weapon to the thick-armed Markus. The teen thrust it through his master’s middle without hesitation and Theophilus rushed to his aid.

“Abroghia! What is the meaning of this?” Theophilus gasped, but the man was miraculously uninjured.

Smiling, Abroghia turned side-to-side twice, displaying how the blade entered just below his sternum and exited out the back. Blood oozed from both wounds and to Theophilus’s horror, Abroghia put his hand to the hilt and drew it slowly out. After tossing the bloodied item to Ionious, Abroghia ripped the already torn tunic wide. As Theophilus watched, the wound in the man’s torso closed before his eyes.

“Impossible!” Theophilus gasped, his heart hammering in his chest. Abroghia laughed.

“With man, perhaps, but not with me. I cannot die, Theophilus. I am a powerful god and I need you to help me with these young ones.” He gestured to the boys who stood obediently by awaiting command. “We will populate the earth with men who are stronger, smarter, and longer-lived than the earth has ever seen.”

“Who do you follow, Abroghia?” Theophilus had to know. Yeshua ben Elohim⁷, or another? How was he to follow anyone other than the God of Israel?

“I have walked 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. Power to make a change in the world, power to decrease the suffering of his people, power to please his Creator—these are things Theophilus wanted. Could the man before him do what he said? His immortality had been confirmed, had it not? Theophilus looked at the two young men on his either side, and then back to Abroghia.

“What of the Elohim of Israel?” he asked, his voice cracking.

“Who do you think gave me this power?” Abroghia asked. “Will you come? I will prove myself to you a million times over.” Abroghia stepped close and placed a heavy hand on Theophilus’s shoulder.

Energy transferred between them and Theophilus could not deny the desire that welled in him at the contact, a lust for supremacy accompanied by a possibility of fulfillment.

“But,” Abroghia said, lowering his chin and holding eye contact, “you must consent. You must submit to my authority. I will reward you for thousands of years and you will never be without fine food, luxury, all the pleasures of life. And you will *rule*.” Abroghia fell quiet and silence filled the night sky.

Theophilus’s heart yearned for all the man promised. Pushing all thoughts of Jesus from his mind, he placed his hand on Abroghia’s opposite shoulder. “If you can do all you say, then yes, I will follow you.”

“Good.” Abroghia smiled and in a quick movement grasped him by both shoulders. “You will never regret it, my son,” Abroghia whispered as Markus and Ionious stepped closer. “Answer me this: The life is in

⁷ (Hebrew) “Jesus, Son of God”

the blood, correct?”

Alarmed at how firmly he was being held, Theophilus squirmed, but Abroghia asked his question again, this time deep in his mind.

“The life is in the blood, correct?”

The man’s ability to speak without words further convinced Theophilus and he nodded his head. “Er, yes. So says Elohim.”

Aloud, Abroghia said, “Then it stands to reason if I pour my life into you, you will take on my attributes. Yes?”

Theophilus tilted his head with wonder, nodding slowly.

“Tonight we begin the process of making you over into a god.” Abroghia produced a small bone knife from his sash and sliced deep his wrist. He thrust the wound toward Theophilus’s face. “Take my life into you, Theophilus. Then you will know power like you’ve never imagined. Do it now.”

Perhaps in shock, perhaps frightened, but utterly enthralled, Theophilus did not pull back when the man’s blood rushed into his mouth, spilling over his lips and down his beard. Markus stabilized him with a palm to his neck and Ionious stood by with a hand on Theophilus’s chest. He wondered why they held him so tightly, but within moments, he knew. The stranger’s blood burned his gut, causing him to thrash in excruciating pain. Before long, his gagging turned to heaving, which then evened out into panting, the pain a distant memory. In his body, a sensation of immeasurable strength permeated from his core outward. He was different, he had become a new man—a Rakum, a spawn of the demigod, Abroghia.

“From this moment on,” Abroghia announced to the night, “you are Father Theophilus, a force to be reckoned with. And these men are your servants. Greet your Father, pups.”

Markus turned to face him and dropped to both knees, his face to the sand.

“Kazak, Abba,⁸” he said in Hebrew. Mimicking the prostrate gesture, Ionious repeated the phrase in Greek.

“Welcome, brother,” Abroghia smiled, his eyes far away. “In the months to come, I will further transform you into my image through ceremony and deed until you shed your humanity to the utmost. You will claim your deity alongside the Fathers of the Rakum race and we will rule our world, taking apart anything and anyone who does not serve our purposes.”

Theophilus took a deep breath, for the first time sensing a multitude

⁸ (Hebrew) “Be strong, Father.”

of new smells, sights, and sensations as the stars in the sky seemed to give him praise. He was a god and he owed it all to a spirit manifest in the flesh named Ta'avah Rakha⁹ Abroghia, his god and king.

A choice he now regretted. Back to the present, Theophilus rubbed his face wishing he could muster tears as the mortals so easily did. He couldn't weep, he couldn't mourn, and he couldn't pray. For an instant, he looked up in the dark vestibule and parted his lips, so close to speaking to Elohim. Then he stopped himself. An unclean monster, a killer, a filthy abomination for two thousand years—the God of Israel wouldn't, *shouldn't*, hear him. Theophilus slumped to the carpet and closed his eyes. If only he could die.

"Please, I want to die," his heart cried, thinking that he spoke only to himself. A lightness moved in his middle and he held his breath. Another spirit had entered the space and it wasn't Ta'avah's kind.

"Please, let me die," he begged, silently as before, but this time he willfully addressed the Creator of the universe.

"I love you," the Entity under the stairs said in his mind.

Theophilus exhaled, mouth ajar, eyes wide, and screamed.

Contact.

⁹ (Hebrew) "Vain Lust"

4

Larkspur, CA
November 7th, 8 p.m.

A low noise escaped his throat as Rafael leaned over his lap, waiting for the buzz to pass. Santiago's blood tickled his system as deeply as when the kid was thirteen. He peeked at his friend with one eye and smiled. Santiago caught him looking, groaned, and slumped to the carpet despite the expensive cashmere sweater vest he wore. He kicked off his Berluti's and rolled onto his back, covering his eyes with one hand. Since the kid came under his care, Rafael had been dressing him like a Macy's mannequin; if he minded, he never let on.

"You could leave off the creepy moans, Rafa," Santiago joked and covered his first hand with the other, enveloping his wrinkle-free forehead, his thick black hair only just beginning to salt. The signs of age were apparent only regarding the soft middle that replaced the rock-hard physique of his youth and crow's feet encircled eyes that laughed often.

"Shhh," Rafael whispered.

Santiago chuckled and then winced, increasing the pressure of his fingers over his eyes. "You're killing me, amigo."

“*Cállate*,”¹⁰ Rafael hissed without venom, his smile in place. “I’m buzzing here.”

“Whoop-dee-do,” the man replied, managing a grin despite his discomfort.

Rafael fell silent as did his partner. His pain would be tended to when the buzz passed; it was the way of things between them.

Santiago was his oldest mortal friend; he’d known him since the guy was knee high. Was *friend* the right word? Santiago’s father, Martin Rivera, and his father before him, Luis, were voluntary blood donors to Rafael, making the current Rivera what the Rakum referred to as a Legacy Cow. What was uncommon in their relationship was that through a series of complicated happenstances, Rafael became Santiago Rivera’s legal guardian when the child was five.

Rafael’s grin fell and he leaned back in the soft chair. It was extremely un-Rakum-like, but the man complaining histrionically on the carpet at his feet was his virtual son, his only friend, *and* his Cow. When the Fathers held the throne, they threatened to destroy the man more than once if Rafael didn’t adjust his attitude. Now, the Fathers were gone and Rafael stayed as far away from their new leader, Elder Rufus, as possible. Telepathic communication had all but disappeared between Rafael and his brethren, but he had gleaned along the grapevine that Elder Rufus was drinking strictly from the dying and had gone insane. Rafael forced down a vague warning in his subconscious that something big had happened to their deranged leader in the last few hours. Rafa didn’t care. The only thing that interested him these days was spending time with Santiago, and of course, enjoying the man’s blood on occasion.

“Rafa,” Santiago said and uncovered his face, rolling onto his stomach. “My head hurts worse than before.”

Rafael considered Santiago’s sincerity. The man had

¹⁰ (Spanish) “Be quiet!”

turned fifty a month earlier and his doctor warned him that he was in danger of becoming anemic. They'd both brushed off the diagnosis, neither willing to admit that the sculptor was getting old.

"*¿En serio?*" Rafael asked and his friend responded with a low noise. Rushing the lingering effects of his meal, Rafael slumped out of the chair and joined Santiago on the floor. Sitting cross-legged beside him, he laid his hand between the man's shoulder blades. "Really bad, eh?"

"*Sí*, I'm sorry," Santiago whispered and brought his fingers to his temples to rub in a circular motion.

Rafael remained still, his hand on Santiago's back, wishing he could heal with his touch. He had talents, but restoring health wasn't one of them. He must have sighed because his friend rolled onto his back and looked him in the eye, forcing a smile through a fog of pain.

"This is not your fault, Rafa. I'm fifty years old. Next year I'll be fifty-one, the next year, fifty-two, and on and on. We knew this was coming." Santiago stopped rubbing his temples and touched Rafael's knee. "Go and find another companion; it's foolish to hang with a used-up *paria*."¹¹

"*Cállate*, Iago." Rafael leaned forward to cover his friend's clammy forehead with his palm. "I'm going to take you to see the Elder. It's time we stopped this, this—"

"This slow death?" Santiago asked, eyebrows arched under the edge of Rafael's cool hand. "Diabetes and prostate cancer—that's what your man is going to heal? Why would he? Your people are divided and angry, dangerous and schizophrenic. You told me that monster in Jackson has the Rakum slaughtering each other like animals." Santiago sat up carefully. "No, if it were safe, you would've taken me there already. Don't go making plans to visit this spooky Elder when you don't know if he's *amigo* or *enemigo*."

Rafael rubbed his face until his eyes throbbed and then

¹¹ (Spanish) Unwanted person

got to his feet. He loved Santiago's blood and his friend loved donating it to him, but he was pretty sure their extended Rakum-Cow relationship was what made him so sick at a relatively young age. The Elder he referred to was a healer; Rafael had met him on several occasions before the Last Assembly. They enjoyed an amicable relationship in those days and if he was still alive and still a Rakum, he'd probably lay hands on Santiago to heal him. He might also be a lunatic; that was his reputation, anyway.

"No, we keep on like we are until I give out. I don't want to risk whatever time we have left on a *loco* Rakum Elder. It's not worth it." Santiago put out his hand and Rafael pulled him to his feet. His friend wavered and fell into him heavily.

Rafael held him up under his armpits and spoke into his ear. "Let me carry you to bed. It's the least I can do."

Santiago grunted his consent and Rafael picked him up as if he were a child and carried him to his room. Elder Kilmeade reportedly lived fifty miles south, in San Francisco. Out of options, Rafael determined his next course.

(END OF EXCERPT)

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