

# NO DOMINION

CHARLIE HUSTON



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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A NOVEL

CHARLIE HUSTON

 BALLANTINE BOOKS NEW YORK

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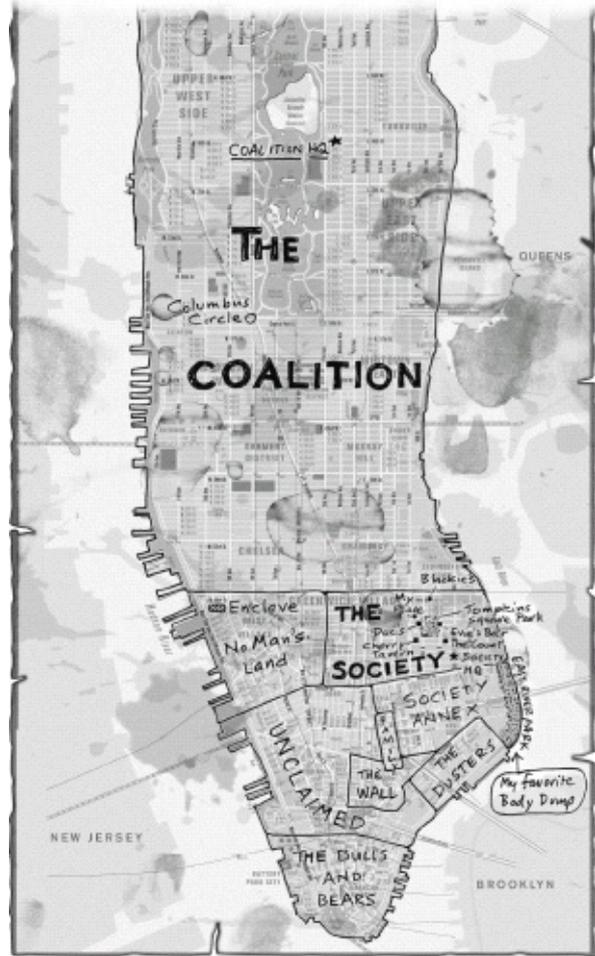
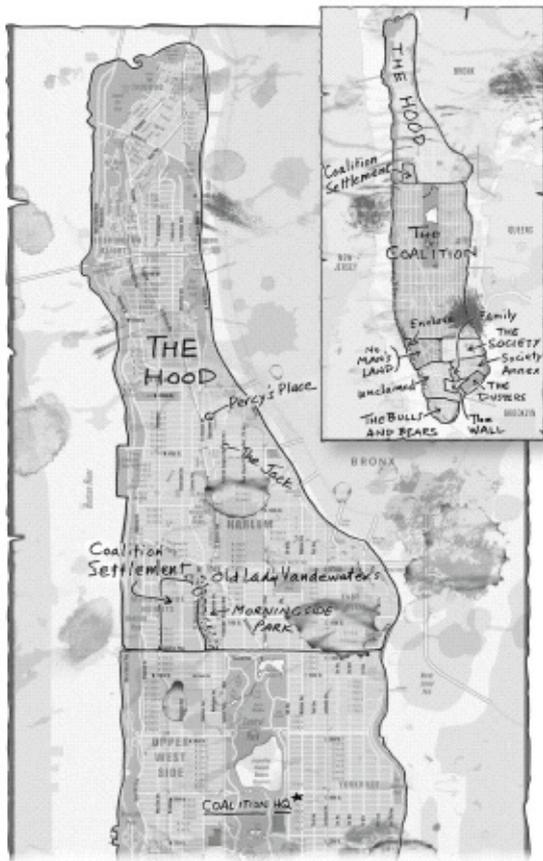
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*To Bob Wilkins  
and the Friday night  
Creature Features.*

*Thanks for keeping me up late  
and scaring the crap out of me.*



## THE GLASS IS BREAKING.

That's not the surprising thing; the surprising thing is that it didn't shatter when he threw me against it. Shouldn't come as a shock. This place, they went through a few front windows the first year they were open and decided it was more cost-effective to lay out the extra cash for the safety glass. Save them from having to replace it every time there's a brawl in here. Which is pretty regular I'd imagine. Any case, I'm not bitching. Wasn't for the guy who had the bright idea, I'd be on the sidewalk right now, my good leather jacket cut to ribbons and my face sliced up in all kinds of new and interesting ways. But now it's breaking, it is most definitely breaking. I'm sure about that because my face is jammed up against it. The big question for me is whether this is the kind of safety glass that bursts into thousands of tiny pebbles when it breaks or the kind that turns into shards. Pebbles would be fine. Shards, not so much. The window creaks. Tiny fissures appear in front of my eyes.

OK, time to stop worrying about the glass, time to start worrying about getting this guy off of me. I can't expect any help from the bartenders or the crowd, not after they watched him pound on the bouncer with that pool cue. And I don't see any helpful officers of the law rolling up outside at this point. Not that I have any intention of being here when the cops show up. So, I guess it's just me and him. That's OK, I can go this one alone. Not like it's new to me or anything. I just wish he really was on PCP; if it was just PCP he'd be pretty easy to deal with. But this? This is gonna take grace and style, maybe even a little tact.

He shoves my face harder into the big front window. People out on the sidewalk flinch as they see my features squashed yet flatter against the glass. The glass creaks again. The fissures grow another millimeter. He's still screaming, babbling insanity at the top of his lungs, howling so loud I can barely hear Boxcar Willie on the jukebox:

*You load sixteen tons and what do you get?  
Another day older, and deeper in debt.*

Ain't that the fuckin' truth.

He's enraged that my face won't just explode through the damn glass the way he wants it to. He rears back, and before he can slam my face forward, I've slipped to my right, spun, twisted my arm free of his grasp, winced as a clump of hair is torn from the back of my scalp, planted my right foot in the hollow behind his right knee,

hammered my elbow into the back of his neck and sent him face first through the window in my place. The sidewalk audience scatters as he hits the pavement. I step through the dagger-edged hole he left behind. Shards it is.

He was spazzing the second he came out of the bathroom.

Before that, I hadn't even noticed him. Why should I? Not like I'm working; not like there's any reason I should be doing anything but paying attention to the booze in my glass, the cigarette in my mouth, the pool game in front of me and the girl by my side. Especially the girl. Girl like this, most everyone in the place is paying attention to her. Want to be invisible? Hang out with a girl like Evie. All that red hair, the body that not only won't quit but works weekends and holidays, too. That smile. She's the kind of girl guys like to look at, but most aren't sure how to go about approaching her. Too bad for them. They miss out on the best part, they miss out on how cool she is, how funny, how sharp, how down-to-earth. Anyway, a girl like Evie on your arm and you turn into a shadow, just the lucky fuck taking up space next to the best view in the place.

So a night like this, when it's so cold out Evie is wearing her leather pants and that tight old thermal top with the Jack Daniel's label silk-screened across the front, a night like this where she's glued to my hip and every guy in the place wishes he was me, is it any surprise I didn't smell him the moment he came through the door?

Most nights I would have picked up his scent right off. Couldn't miss it. After all, he smells just like me, only different. But what with the Early Times I'm pouring down my throat and the Luckys I'm sucking on and Evie rubbing up against me, I just can't be bothered. Still, he couldn't have been in here all that long. Sooner or later I would have smelled him no matter how distracted I was. It wouldn't have meant trouble necessarily; we would have eyeballed each other a bit, sniffed each other's asses like a couple of big dogs, but there wouldn't have been any trouble, not in here, not where everyone can see us. That shit just doesn't happen. As it was, I was lining up a neat little combo that was gonna let me run out the rest of the table and he came out of the john and started spazzing out.

This wasn't your run-of-the-mill junkie-who-just-shot-up-in-the-can stumbling around. He came out of there like the Tasmanian Devil: spinning, arms flailing, kicking anything that came in range, sending tables and people flying; a full on spaz. A space quickly opened up around him while he whirled and gibbered and foamed at the mouth. The bouncer, a nice enough guy goes by Gears, came over and tried a little sweet talk.

—OK, man, settle down, settle down. Take it easy. Got yourself a dose of some bad shit, but we're gonna take care of you. Got some 911 on the way, gonna get you to an emergency room and get that shit out your system. Just take it easy.

Moved in slowly, arms spread wide, talking soft. Might as well been trying to soothe a rabid dog. The guy stopped spinning long enough to jump at Gears and swing his arm like a club. Guy was freaky fast. Gears got lucky when he fell on his ass out of the way. Guy's arm hit the backside of a bench made out of two-by-fours and a couple of them cracked. Then he went back to spinning. By this time folks are starting to clear out, and I'm starting to pay attention. Gears gets back on his feet, muttering something about *fucking PCP*, grabs himself one of the cracked and twisted house cues from the rack and goes after the guy. But I've taken a good whiff by this point and I know the guy ain't on PCP. Gears would be lucky if that's all it was. I mean, I don't know what he's on, but I know he doesn't need it; he's dangerous as hell to start with.

Gears waits 'til the guy has spun his back to him, and brings the cue down on top of his head. It makes a nice noise, but before Gears can get too proud of himself or maybe think about bringing the cue back up for another swing, the guy has turned around, snatched the cue away, kicked Gears's legs out from under him and gotten busy finding out how hard it is to break a pool cue by pounding it on someone's face. That's when I figured I should do something. Not that Gears is so big a friend. I barely know him except to call him by name when I come in the place, but The Spaz is out of control, causing the kind of scene that's bad for business. If I don't deal with him, the cops will. That will get very ugly very fast. Nothing causes a scene like when cops start putting bullets in a guy and the guy refuses to go down. Sure, Gears and the law and the press may just chalk it up to a PCP freakout, but there are other people who will hear about it. And some of those people will want to check it out. And I don't want those people around. Not down here. Not in my neighborhood. So I jump on the guy's back. Figure I'll get him to the floor, put a sleeper hold on him and drag him out of here. Make up some story for the crowd about how I know him and I'll take care of it. Get him out before the cops come; get him someplace private and get rid of him before he can make another scene like this one. That's the thing to do. Except he shrugs me right off his back, picks me up off the floor and throws me at the window. And when I bounce off the glass instead of going through it the way he wanted me to, he grabs me by the hair and tries to shove my face through the glass. Lucky for me, strong and fast as he is right now, he's a lousy fighter.

Once he's on the sidewalk I handle it pretty much like I wanted to inside. Knees in the middle of his back, pin him to the scummy pavement, arm around his windpipe and cut off the O<sub>2</sub> until he goes asleep. He does a fair amount of thrashing around, and I have to hold on good and tight to keep from getting bucked clear, but once I'm locked on to him I'm not going anywhere. When he's nice and sleepy I toss him over my shoulder and point at one of the bartenders who's come out to watch how the story ends.

—Get me a cab, will ya?

—Ambulance is on its way.

—Let 'em deal with Gears. This guy, I know him. I'm gonna take him back to his halfway house. See if I can keep him out of the shit.

—What about the cops? What about the window?

—Hey, come on. I got the guy out of the place. Give me a fucking break.

—Yeah, sure.

She flags a cab.

The cabbie's none too happy about me piling in with blood-drippy guy, but he sees I'm in no mood for debate and just gives me a dirty rag to put over The Spaz's face. Before we pull away, Evie runs up and passes my pack of smokes and my Zippo through the window.

—Want me to come?

—Nah, I got it covered.

—Meet you back at your place?

—Yeah. Maybe a half hour at the most. You gonna be OK?

—Don't start.

—Right. Sorry 'bout this.

—'S OK. Nobody can say you don't know how to show a girl a good time, Joe.

The Spaz tries to come to in the cab. I pinch his esophagus and he goes back under before he can cause me any more trouble. I have the cabbie take me down to the Baruch housing project just below Houston. It's a couple blocks outside what I'd usually call safe turf, but no one really has a claim on it, so it seems like a good place for an impromptu dump. I manhandle The Spaz up the steps to the pedestrian bridge that spans the FDR to the East River Park. It's nearly two in the morning on a Tuesday. Cars whiz by below, but the lights on the park playing fields were shut off hours ago. My eyes penetrate that darkness just fine. Too cold for any homeless people to be camping out. I do see what looks like a couple junkies sitting on a bench at the far end of the park, but they're facing the river. I pause at the top of the concrete stairs that lead down to the park.

The Spaz is still alive, alive and reeking of blood. I think about that blood; how I'd like to tap a couple pints of it and stick them in my fridge at home to replenish my rapidly shrinking supply. But his blood won't do me any good, won't do anything but

make me hellishly sick and kill me. I know that because of what I smelled back at Doc Holiday's; the smell of the Vyrus, the same smell I carry with me. Nonetheless, I'm just hard up enough to give him another good sniff. Hell, maybe I was wrong, maybe it was some other Vampyre's scent I picked up in there, maybe this guy really is just whacked on PCP. I inhale. No, no such luck. He's another sad fuck like me. But there is something about him, something about his scent that's a little off. Must be whatever he was taking in the bathroom. No surprise I guess. Whatever he's on would have to be some mean shit not to be neutralized by the Vyrus the moment it entered his bloodstream. Sure would like to know what it was. Be nice to try something like that sometime, something for a distraction. Christ, I drank over a fifth of bourbon tonight and it barely gave me a buzz. The Spaz stirs in my arms. Time to deal with the problem at hand.

I snap The Spaz's neck and shove him hard down the steps and watch him tumble to the bottom. The broken neck won't kill him outright, not like it would a normal person. A normal person, you break their neck, the medulla oblongata stops communicating with the body and all those autonomic functions like your lungs inflating and your heart pumping just stop. But the Vyrus reprograms your body, hyperoxygenates your blood and does a bunch of other stuff I can't really follow. The Spaz won't be getting up or anything, but there's enough O<sub>2</sub> in his brain to keep him lucid for the next several minutes. Probably a good thing for him that he's high.

I pop a smoke in my mouth, light it and head back across the bridge. I have to walk all the way to Avenue B before I can find a cab, but I still make it back to my place just a few minutes later than I wanted.

We don't get to sleep in.

Evie's a bartender. She's used to crawling into bed around dawn. Even on a night off she has a hard time falling asleep before the sun hits the horizon. Me, I got my own reasons for being a night owl. But we're up early the next day. Early for us, anyway, say just after noon. Evie's got an appointment.

I reach for a smoke as she crawls out from under the covers.

—What's the deal today?

—Viral load results.

—Right.

I sit on the edge of the bed, smoking and watching Evie through the open bathroom door. She rinses her mouth and spits toothpaste into the sink, then walks back into the bedroom.

—You been feeling any different?

—Nope. Nausea, vomiting. The usual.

—Yeah.

She squats next to her big black leather bag on the floor. Her back is to me. She's wearing panties and one of my old wifebeaters. I look at her ass while she digs in the bag.

—How much did you drink last night?

She keeps looking through the bag.

—A lot less than you.

—It's different.

—I know.

She finds a pill bottle in the bag and fishes out a capsule. Then she goes back in the bag until she finds another bottle and takes two capsules from that one. She tosses all three pills in her mouth and holds her hand out to me. I pick up the water glass from the bedside table, hand it to her, and she washes the pills down.

—Aren't you supposed to take the Kaletra with food?

She's squeezing herself back into last night's leather pants.

—I'm not hungry.

—Not hungry how?

She peels off the wifebeater. I stare at her pale, freckled tits until she covers them with the Jack Daniel's shirt.

—Just not hungry.

—Not hungry like you're not hungry, or not hungry like a side effect?

She stands in front of the mirror on the back of the closet door and starts raking a brush through her hair.

—Not hungry like I don't want to fucking eat anything, OK?

—Sure. OK.

I get up, go into the bathroom and close the door. I look at myself in the mirror. It's a bad view. I splash some water on my face. I flush the toilet needlessly. I open the

door, go back to the bed and get another smoke from the pack on the table. Evie has her hair pulled into a ponytail. She shrugs her way into her big, black biker jacket; all zippers and snaps. I light my smoke.

—You gonna be warm enough in that?

She holds up a hand.

—Enough.

—Just asking.

—And I'm just saying, enough. I know you're concerned. I know you care. That's great, I really appreciate it. I know it's not the normal thing for you. But you have to get out of my ass.

She steps closer to me, bends over and gives me a kiss. Then she picks up her bag and starts up the stairs that lead to the ground floor rooms.

—It's just I want you to take care of yourself, baby.

That does it. She stops on the steps, drops her head, exhales loudly and turns to face me.

—I am taking care of myself, Joe. I'm taking care of myself the way I want to. That means if I want to have a couple drinks and risk raising my blood sugar, I'm gonna do it. That means if I'm not hungry when I'm taking my meds, I'm not gonna force myself to eat. OK? That OK with you? Because if it's not, you know what you can do. No strings attached, Joe. That's your motto, right? You weren't there when I got the disease, and I don't expect you to be there when it kills me. In the middle, you want to be more involved in my life, you want to have a say? All you gotta do is involve me in yours, that's all it takes. Until then, stop with the fucking nagging. I get enough of that shit from my mom. I don't need it from my goddamn *boyfriend*.

And she pounds up the stairs, slamming the front door good and loud on her way out.

I flop back on the bed and take a big drag off my cigarette. I blow the smoke at the ceiling and smile. I can't help it, I just love it when she calls me her boyfriend. And she only does that when she's mad.

I know, pretty fucked up, provoking your HIV-positive girl until she's pissed enough to forget that you're not really supposed to be a couple and calls you her boyfriend. But then again, our whole relationship is pretty fucked up. Start with the fact we don't have sex. She beats herself up about that pretty good. Carries around this big ball of

guilt about me being stuck on her even though we don't fuck. I get it. It's not like it's rocket science or anything. She's terrified of giving me her disease. Condoms, dental dams, there's no amount of protection that'll make her feel safe enough to get more intimate than necking, dry-humping and hand-jobbing each other on occasion. It's too bad that I can't tell her that there is no way on God's green earth that she could ever get me sick. Nobody could. There isn't a bug on this rock that could put a dent in me. It's too late for that, I'm already as sick as a man can get. Pretty much. Once the Vyrus set up shop in my bloodstream, it made me uninhabitable for anything else. Any regular viruses or bacteria or germs come calling, they're gonna get their asses kicked but good.

So I don't mind the not-having-sex thing. That's not true. I mind the not-having-sex thing a hell of a lot. Just watching her get dressed this morning was enough to drive me half crazy. But I can deal. I can deal because I have to. Not because of what she's sick on, but because of what I'm sick on. I don't know if the Vyrus can be sexually transmitted, but I'm not taking any chances. I'm not taking any chances of infecting Evie with an organism that will colonize her blood and strip mine it for whatever components keep it happy. A bug that is always hungry for more. A bug that, when your blood is tapped out, will send you hunting. And you'll hunt, man, you will hunt. Because the alternative, the pain that will rack you and twist your body and eventually boil your insides? It'll make anything Evie may have to go through in the next couple years look like child's play. That's just a fact.

Nevermind that if she was infected with the Vyrus it would cure her of the HIV. Nevermind that she could go on living pretty much just as long as she wanted to, as long as she kept the Vyrus fed. Nevermind that we could be together that whole time and fuck to our hearts' content. It doesn't matter. It's still not the kind of thing you tell the woman you love. It's not the kind of choice you ask someone you love to make. If you're a man, you make it for them.

And now I guess we've settled what I am. Or at least what I'm not.

So yeah, the relationship is all fucked up. No reason why it shouldn't be, it matches the rest of my life that way. Besides, yours any better?

Not that Evie knows any of this. Not that Evie knows shit about me. Three years running and I'm still keeping secrets. It's what you'd call a sore point between us, her not knowing enough. Can't blame her for being curious, girl's got reasons to be. Like why I rent two apartments: the one-bedroom upstairs and this studio below it. Why I nailed the studio door to the door frame and installed a panel in the lower half that I can kick out in an emergency. Why the little spiral stair that leads from the upstairs living room to the studio is concealed by a secret trapdoor. And why, with all that space up there, I do most of my living down here in the basement where the only window has been drywalled over. She's willing to accept it when I tell her it's because

of my work, cuz of some of the enemies I've made. But she'd sure like to know more about that work. She knows I'm kind of a local tough guy, a guy who collects some debts, does some unlicensed PI work, that kind of thing. But it doesn't seem to warrant the security in this place, the secret room, the multiple locks, the alarm. What can a guy do? He can't tell her about the Van Helsings running around with a hard-on for people like me, those self-righteous busybodies looking to sprinkle me with holy water and drive a stake through my heart. Not that the holy water would do anything, but the stake sure as shit would. Hell, a stake through the heart will kill anyone. They don't really need it; a few bullets will do just as well. But a guy can't explain something like that. In the end she doesn't buy it, the whole *I got enemies, baby* thing. She maybe figures it's drugs.

Drugs would make sense. It would explain the security. It would explain my total and complete paranoia. It would explain why I don't have a regular job of any kind. And it would explain the little dorm fridge in my closet with the padlock on it. By now she's pretty certain that if she looked in there she'd find a whole selection of exotic pharmaceuticals that aren't carried by your garden variety, street corner dime-bagger. She *would* find my stash in there, but it's not anything anyone can get high off of, unless they're like me. Just three pints of healthy human blood mixed with the necessary anticlotting agents so it'll keep. Three pints. About seven pints less than the minimum I like to have on hand. Thinking about it makes me feel itchy.

Yeah, drugs would be fine as far as Evie is concerned. The blood? Figure it's a safe bet that would freak her out.

Funny, one of the things that should be toughest to explain is one of the easiest. How I never go out in the daytime? Solar urticaria. A sun allergy. I go out in the sun and rashes will break out all over my body and my skin won't be able to regulate my internal temperature and I'll black out and all kinds of bad shit. She buys it. And why not? She's looked it up online. Besides, it's not far from the truth. I do have an allergy to the sun. But if I go out and start sucking up UVAs, I won't just get all itchy and pass out. Me? The Vyrus will go haywire; tumors will erupt and riot throughout my body and over the surface of my skin. Bone cancer, stomach cancer, gum cancer, brain cancer, prostate cancer, skin cancer. Think of a cancer, I'll get it. Fucking eye cancer. And all of those cancers will have a race to see which can kill me first. Might take fifteen minutes all told. Less if it's a really sunny day. By the time everything runs its course, there'll be nothing left but a big blob of cancer cells. Biopsy that thing and it'll look like a giant, man-size tumor with maybe a couple teeth stuck in it.

I've never seen it happen. But the stories are more than enough to keep me from rolling the dice on a day at the beach. That's why I have to spend the rest of the day indoors.

I kill the time.

I shower and shave. I go through my DVDs and watch *Vanishing Point*. I go upstairs and find some old takeout from the Cuban place around the corner. I listen to some music and try to read a book. All I'm really doing the whole time is thinking about those last three pints and how I need to get some more.

It's been four days since my last pint. That's part of the reason The Spaz almost had his way with me last night. When things are good I like to hit a pint every two days. Keeps me sharp.

Four days? No wonder I've been crabby. I'll need to drink one today if I don't want to start jumping down everyone's throat. Figuratively speaking. Maybe I can get away with just a half.

I also spend a fair amount of time wondering how things went with Evie at the doctor's office. But she doesn't call to tell me. Which isn't a real surprise after the way she left. And that means I'll need to go by her work if I want to get the news. Which means I better just drink a whole pint so I'm not on edge when I see her. I don't need to be picking any more fights with the only person in the world who gives a shit about me.

Around four-thirty I open the closet. I flip the dial on the fridge padlock back and forth and snap it open. I used to have a key-lock. Then I lost the key. It was the middle of the day and I couldn't run out to the hardware store for a bolt-cutter. I just about chewed through the fucking thing before I got my shit together enough to find a hammer under the sink and use it to claw the hasp free. It can be like that when you're hungry. Simple shit just plain escapes you. Now I got the combination lock. God save me if I ever forget the combo. I open the fridge.

Times like these, opening the fridge is like the third or fourth time a gambler checks his betting slip to see if maybe he really had his money down on the winning horse instead of that nag that finished way out of the money. I know what's in there, but maybe, just maybe, I did something right without knowing about it. Like maybe I laid up a dozen extra pints that are just somehow hidden in the back. Something like that. So I open the fridge. No dice. Wrong horse.

I take out one of the three pints. I take out the scalpel I keep in the fridge. I poke a little hole in the bottom of the pouch and place my lips around it. I squeeze the pouch and a thin stream of cold blood squirts into my mouth. When it's warm it's better. When it's hot, say 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit, it's best. But well chilled is just fine. I try to sip, but who am I fooling? I tilt my head back, hold the pouch upright and poke another hole at the top. It drains in a single rush, flooding my throat. Then I carefully cut the bag open and lick the inside clean. It makes me feel good. It makes me feel alive.

It is keeping me alive after all. Giving the Vyrus something else to gnaw on, something fresh. Keeping it from ranging further and further into the blood-making parts of me. Keeping it from digging into the little blood factories inside my bones and scraping them clean. Keeping the Vyrus healthy and happy so that it doesn't rampage through my brain, randomly hitting switches as it looks for more of whatever it is it wants. It's keeping me alive. But only if you call this life.

When I'm done I tuck the pouch into one of the red biohazard bags I keep in the fridge. There's only a couple empties in there, so I leave it be for now.

The nice thing about winter? The sun goes down early. I love that. Add in all the overcast days and those three months are my favorite. I pull on a sweater, lace up my boots, grab my jacket and scoop keys and change from the top of my desk. I also flip through a thin fold of bills: just over a hundred bucks. I got another grand stashed in the toe of a shoe, but that's for emergencies. And it won't cover half the rent on this place, which I'm two months overdue on. Blood ain't the only thing running short around here.

Depending on who I'm doing a job for, I might get paid in either one: blood or money. But I haven't had a job for awhile now. I can hustle for the blood, dig up a pint here or a pint there on my own. But, in a way, money is riskier. I knock out some guy, drag him in an alley and tap his veins, I know I'm gonna come away with a pint or two. But as to what's in his wallet? The kind of guys who look like they might be sporting a good roll are the ones you least want to hit. Those are the ones that might make noise after the fact. Don't want a guy like that finding holes poked in his arms after he's been rolled, asking his doctor what the hell that's about. And there's just no point in robbing a man if you're not gonna tap him as well. Just no percentage in the risk if there's no blood. I mean, money is money, but blood is blood.

And don't even think about a real robbery. Walk into some liquor store and point a gun at someone? Try to do a little housebreaking? Anything like that leaves behind a profile and physical evidence. Start getting a file at the precinct, an MO in some computer database. Show up on the cop radar and you can just cash in. No blocked up windows in the holding cells. No blood in the chow line. Just a matter of maybe a week before you starve or get hit with some rays.

What I need is a real gig. A deal that will pay off big in both categories. I need something besides all the nickel-and-dime crap I've been hitting for the last year or so. The year since I pissed off the Coalition and they stopped dropping their loose ends on me. I never realized just how much I relied on the scraps from their table 'til they were gone. But I sure as shit miss them now.

For the thousandth time I think about giving them a call. Ringing up Dexter Predo and telling him I made a mistake. Telling him I can make it right; I'm ready to toe their

line. I think about it. But the phone stays right where it is.

Fuck those assholes.

I walk out of my place and down the block to Avenue A. I hit the deli around the corner for a pack of Luckys and a beer. I cross the avenue, find a bench in Tompkins Square and drink and smoke and think about my problem. My problem is jobs.

My work comes to me by word of mouth. Problem is, word hasn't been getting around much lately. No straight citizens showing up with a deadbeat dad to track down, none of the smaller Clans calling to have a Rogue swept off their turf. Just me picking up bouncer shifts at Niagara and some arm-twisting for a couple shylocks. Shit work. Fucking Coalition. When I finally bit back at those guys, I maybe bit a little too hard; bit clean through the hand that fed me.

The Coalition is the only game when it comes to booking a heavy gig, but they always got to rub your face in the fact when you come calling. Kind of makes you resent them for being the only Clan that has the juice and the resources to drop a couple grand and a dozen pints on a guy on anything like a regular basis. And Predo? He just plain hates me. That's what happens when you land in the middle of the Coalition spymaster's plans and end up screwing them up all to hell. He hates you. He wants your head. He has papers on his desk he thinks it will maybe look good holding down.

I suck down the last of my beer, toss the empty in a trash can and start walking. The Coalition is the only outfit that could hook me up regularly, but there are other Clans, and you never know when they might have some dirty work lying around. And I may have been avoiding this play for a good long while now, but the two pints left in the fridge are a pretty compelling argument to bite the bullet. So I head east, toward Avenue C and Society headquarters, biting that motherfucker all the way.

—Hey, Hurley.

—Joe.

—Read any good books lately?

—Fuck yas.

—Yeah, I like that one, too.

It looks like your average Alphabet City tenement, but it's not; it's a fortress. I don't

know exactly what kind of security or how many partisans they got holed up here, but Hurley is all they need. He stays in front of me, slouched against the door frame, threatening to bring the whole building down if he leans a little harder.

—Sumtin' on yer mind, Joe?

—Terry around?

—Yeah.

We stand there, me on the threshold, him blocking my way. I want in, but I don't think I could ever want anything badly enough to try and force the issue with Hurley. Guy's been around at least since Prohibition. I can't begin to calculate how tough a Vampire thug has to be to last as long as he has. As for him, he's in no hurry to move himself. He could stand there all night waiting for me to get down to business and never move an inch. It's not that he's possessed of Zenlike patience, it's just that he's too stupid to ever get bored.

—Think I might talk to him?

—Gotta appointment?

—An appointment?

—Yeah.

—Since when does Terry make appointments?

Someone steps out of the shadows behind Hurley.

—Since I took over security.

I look him up and down.

—Evening, Tom. See you finally got that promotion you been bucking for.

—It wasn't a promotion, asshole. The Society isn't a fucking corporation, it's a collective. I was elected to the post by my peers.

—Yeah, sure. Anything you say. I'm sure Terry backing you had nothing to do with it.

He starts to come outside, but stops himself.

—OK. OK. You know, you can say whatever you want, Pitt. Doesn't matter to me. Know why?

—No. Tell me, please.

—'Cuz you're just a slob on the outside who's trying to get inside, and all I have to do to get rid of you is this.

And he slams the door in my face.

Well, shit, I'm a bigger pain in the ass than that.

I cover all the buttons on the intercom panel, push them down and hold them there. It takes about a minute for him to open back up.

—Knock that shit off, Pitt!

I take my hands off the buttons.

—Hey, Tom. Terry around?

—You don't have a fucking appointment. No appointment, no Terry.

He slams the door. I hit the buttons. He opens the door.

—Hey, Tom. Terry around?

—Hurley, get rid of this guy.

Hurley comes out onto the porch.

—Time fer ya ta go, Joe.

—Hey, Hurl, that rhymes.

He points at the steps.

—Ya want ta walk down 'em, or ya want ta fall down 'em?

I stand on my tiptoes and look over his shoulder at Tom.

—So if a guy wanted to make an appointment, how would he go about it?

Tom smiles.

—A guy like you? An old friend of Terry's?

—Yeah, a guy like me.

—Well, I'd say all a guy like you has to do is pencil something in for a week past fucking never.

—That's a long time.

—Hurley.

Hurley turns around and looks past Tom.

—Yeah, Terry?

—What’s the hassle about?

—Joe here wanted ta come in.

—Well, why’s the man standing out there?

—Didn’t have no appointment.

—That’s cool. Let him in.

Tom spins, dreadlocks flying.

—What the fuck? He’s got no appointment.

—No problem, Tom. I’m not really busy right now. Just taking it easy.

—That doesn’t matter. I’m supposed to be clearing people in advance.

—Sure, but we got to stay flexible, too.

—But security.

—Sure, sure, we want to be safe. But that’s Joe. We all know Joe.

I hold my hand up.

—Hey, Terry, I don’t want to cause trouble. I can make an appointment. No problem.

—No, man, no. Come on in.

—You sure?

I take a step toward the door. Hurley moves to the side, but Tom steps in front of me.

—Security is supposed to be my job. And this asshole hasn’t been cleared by security.

Terry takes off his Lennon glasses and wipes them on his Monterey Pop Festival T-shirt.

—Yeah, man, you’re security and all, but we got to remember this is a community organization. You know, it’s all well and good for us to be safe, but we have to be able to respond to the needs of the community. Otherwise, man, what’s the point? And Joe