

# BLOOD HOUND. BOOK #1

JAMES OSIRIS BALDWIN

One of the first things every new mage learns about magic is that—despite your newly discovered powers over the universe—you are forever a struggling speck of krill in a very large, very cold, very dangerous ocean.

I was just one of many sharks swimming beneath the towering skyscrapers of Manhattan, a single quiet voice drowned by the incessant, pounding roar of the city. Tonight, the sensation of surrounding pressure was intense. We were on our way to kill a man. The target was my boss's oldest friend, Semyon Vochin, currently hiding out at his safe house on East 49th Street. It was a solemn affair: he was one of us. We thought we had known him well.

Our driver, Nicolai, was as grim as a pallbearer at the wheel. He was Old Crew, one of the first *muzhiki* to come from Ukraine via Afghanistan and make a name for himself in New York, just like Semyon. There was none of the usual shit-talk and banter that usually went on before a job. Semyon was a friend to nearly all the old guys in the Yaroshenko *Organizatsiya*... as much as anyone in the Russian Mafiya could be counted as a friend.

My partner for the evening was nervous. He wasn't new to contract work, but I was the first mage he'd ever met and he was clearly uncomfortable. Every anxious shift of his ass on the seat prickled my ears with the sound of wool on leather, squeaking like little insect legs. His name was Mari, Manny, something like that... a Bulgarian, fresh off the boat, older than I by around five years. His face was pug-like and flat, like maybe someone had once smashed it in with a skillet. I'd been sure to look him in the eye when we were introduced: a mage can tell a lot from a man's stare. What I'd seen inside this man was a flat, dull nothingness, a void of old anger and self-entitled spite. The whites of his eyes were yellowed from too much cheap vodka and *krokodil*; he walked with a cock-swinging swagger and had tried to crush my hand when we shook. Unfortunately for him, he reminded me strongly of my father.

"You cool, spook?" As if feeling the weight of my thoughts on him, Manny-Mari grunted the question aloud for perhaps the fifth time that night.

I ignored him and continued gazing out the window. My stomach swooped giddily as I watched the orange streetlights caress the pavement past my dim reflection in the glass. I realized, with a nervous little lurch behind my ribs, that we were nearly at 49th.

Naturally, he took my silence as a challenge. "Hey, Sokolsky. Shortass. I was talking to you."

“And I was very carefully not listening.” I didn’t give him the benefit of a glance. All proper mages must know how to perfect an aura of impenetrable sourness, the better to discourage people from bothering us. Otherwise, they start on with the inane questions, like “Where does magic come from?” “Why do they call wizards ‘spooks’?” “Can you set this cat on fire?”

“*Iaz mi huia.*” My partner cursed me in Bulgarian. “Fuckin’ freak.”

I blinked, once, and resumed my meditation. I’d been called worse things by better men.

With these kinds of jobs, repulsiveness was the most important quality you needed in a good partner - the other requirements being religious fervor and an IQ less than a hundred. To my great relief, Manny-Mari ceased trying to get me to turn my head and settled for grumbling and cuddling into his new jacket. His suit was a better cut than anything he could have gotten in Sofia, but he was already ungrateful. America did that to people. I’ve tried to imagine getting off the plane or a ship from the old country the way my parents did, taking your first yellow cab through the mythic brownstone buildings and Art Deco monoliths of New York. As far as Slavs are concerned, America’s a soft carcass with all the organs you can eat, a place of unadulterated lust for thugs still stuck behind the Iron Curtain. But Nic had told me once that as hard as life in the USSR could be, the USA had its own kind of poison. The country corroded something inside you, and I’d bet anything that when the cabbie took off on you, spraying snow from the curb all up your nice new coat, and you realized he stiffed you because you didn’t know how much twenty bucks is really worth here... well, suddenly New York wasn’t so romantic anymore.

We turned the corner onto the silent road and came to a gentle stop in front of the apartments sheltering our target. Nic cut the engine and sat back, fingering the cigarette he’d stowed behind his ear. Manny-Mari dropped the seatbelt clip he hadn’t fastened and fussed with his hair, his belt, and his gun.

“Hold your whiskers, tiger.” Nic’s terse, staccato Russian punctured the air of the cabin. “Briefing.”

“Oh.” The other man dropped back into his seat.

I hadn’t moved, save to look sidelong so I could watch Nic’s face in the rearview mirror. Nic was my *Kommandant*, the captain who oversaw all the street teams working in Brighton Beach, Red Hook, and the Bronx. He was a dry, thin man with sun-weathered skin, heavily tattooed, and missing the tip of his left ring finger. His blue eyes were slightly cloudy with premature age, but even in his fifties, he was still as lean and sharp as a razor.

“Vochin hired his own spook to do him up with some heavy magic. If you know what’s good for you, Moni, you’ll shut the fuck up and do what Alexi says. Anything he says. Whatever Sem’s got up there ashed the last two guys who tried to pay him a call. Hit Vochin and anything else alive you find. Make a scene, but not too much of a scene. Got it?”

Moni—that was his name—looked sidelong at me and furtively licked his teeth. By the shift in his manner and the look in his eye, I knew what he was thinking before he said it: “And if the wife’s up there?”

“Don’t leave a mess.” Nic’s flat voice turned a little stiff with distaste.

*Pig.* I finally stirred from my seat and left the car, masking my own opinions behind a pleasant nothing-face. I put the wave of disgust aside with my first breath of fresh air. Fresh, at least, by New York standards. I could taste pennies on my tongue. The wind was metal-tinged, heavy and humid after the last summer rain, and ripe with magic.

After you pierce the Veil for the first time and make the switch from 'dabbler in the Occult' to 'mage', something in you changes forever. You develop a sense of presence, of something else always behind your own thoughts. Many of the greatest mages describe it almost like another person, and it has many names: The Holy Guardian Angel, the Genius, Anima, Neshamah. I had never had the compelling relationship with this presence that other mages had described to me, but I could tell that it was less like an angel and more like a large, patient snake gazing upon a world of mice. As I tuned into the street, I could sense the Art in this part of town. Magic crept and crawled and waited in a thousand places. Some of it was old and ghostly, arcane architecture coded straight into the design of the city itself. Some of it was newer, still shining like spiderwebs. Burglar alarms, house-blessings, benedictions, curses, wards of all kinds. Wards are the most common form of magic found in cities: static enchantments written onto the energetic matrix of a structure, place, or object. Of those wards, most are really just simple alarms: they alert someone when the ward is breached. Evocation wards—complex, dynamic spells that can do all manner of wonderful things—are in the minority. They are used, for instance, to blow people up.

Only about two hours ago, my *Avtoritet*, Lev, sent two men to kill Semyon Vochin in his car. Surzi and Boris pulled up alongside him at a red light, where Surzi stuck his pistol through the driver’s-side window and promptly exploded. Boris hadn’t been any luckier. Semyon’s evocation wards turned them both into cat food and caused a six-car pileup on Water Street. Then, like a frightened rodent, he’d scampered back to his burrow. Unfortunately for him, Lev knew exactly where he’d run.

The apartment lights were on, shielded by heavy drapes. Were they even still in the building? If it had been me, I would have split town while I was still in the car. Clothes, money, they could all be replaced. But life? No. Heavy magic and big guns had a way of making men overconfident, though, and Semyon was surely a greedy man.

Moni trailed behind as we headed for the foyer, hats pulled down. Even with the heat, this was an occasion for Manhattan goon formal, after all—hats to hide our faces, overcoats to conceal our weapons, and gloves to hide our fingerprints. We had ski hats on under the brims so we didn’t lose any hair for the cops to find later on. With forelocks, we could have passed for a couple of rabbis.

“So, uh, what’cha gonna do up there?” Moni spoke as we passed the desk. “Sacrifice a goat or somethin’?”

“If there just so happens to be a goat handy in this New York penthouse suite, we could make a party of it.” My voice stayed deep and dry, a little flat.

He scowled. “Are all Americans assholes, or is it just you?”

“I have it on good authority that I occupy the extreme end of the bell curve.” God, Moni was nervous. I could smell it, the sour tang of spent adrenaline. The Bulgarian was half a foot taller than me, big and brawny, but he was sweating like a new side of lamb. “But in all seriousness, I will look over the wards, examine them for flaws, and either use those flaws to destroy them or find another workaround.”

“The hell does that mean?”

And here was why I discouraged questions about magic. Very few people really want to know what they think they want to know, and even if they do, the information rarely sticks. I sighed.

“Heap big magic,” I said in English. “Wizard do things good.”

Moni’s brow furrowed. He didn’t understand a word. “What?”

I half-opened the door and turned back to glare at him. “Blood magic. Now, please. I must concentrate.”

The foyer was stripped clean of spells, but like so many of these old buildings, it had been made to handle them. The Freemasons and Rosicrucians once had and still do have a significant hand in the building of America, and sure enough, we passed across a checkered floor and between two columns, one black, one white. Beneath the dome overhead lay the compass within a circle, a very powerful magical construct in its own right. A chandelier hung down from the center of the dome over the compass rose, like a knife poised over a beating heart. The core of these old buildings channeled magical energy like a lightning rod. If I concentrated, I could sense its unimpeded flow.

“We take the stairs,” I said, already heading for them. The security desk was unmanned. Lev had called and arranged the bribe in advance. “The elevator will be trapped.”

Moni made a stupid, thick sound in his throat, but he followed. Thank goodness I had to work with him for only one night. I clamped my teeth together and locked them just to feel them click.

The stair climb was a good way to relieve some tension, and by the time we hit the fifth floor, I felt better. Sweating, laboring, thighs trembling a little—but not too much—my heart thumping with every step, I felt properly alive. My intuition was playing my body like a violin, and my fingers vibrated the higher we went. I don’t know how I knew Vochin and his wife were still in their rooms and were meant to die tonight when common sense told me they should have already fled. I am not very powerful as mages go—with the right tools and a lot of my own blood, I can break

wards and move paper clips around on a table without resorting to magnets—but this sense of fatedness has been my guide ever since I was a child, and it has yet to fail me.

The first ward was on the sixth-floor landing. I pulled up hard as the hum washed over me, holding up a hand to wave Moni back. The hissing ozone smell of magic filled the echoing stairwell, but we hadn't pushed past the threshold. "Wait. It's here."

"What?" Moni drew his pistol from his coat, as if it would do him any good. "Where?"

"Put your pistol away. And don't move." I breathed in deeply, scanning the greasy walls, and focused my will into a sharp point of intent. The faint dizziness from the climb helped my vision split between the two closely knit layers of reality on Earth: *Malkuth*, the material plane, and *Yesod*, the subtle aetheric layer. On one level, I saw nothing but stained concrete and peeling metal railings. On the other, my vision swam with fine blue lines that danced and glimmered like strands of hair in sunlight. The threads led back to the landing door in a fine web and were bound to a square foot of wall beside the exit. A freshly enchanted sigil, crawling with energy. The mage had drawn it in lemon juice and salt water, that old invisible ink recipe we all learn as kids.

"Go back down, and watch the stairwell. Try and head anyone off," I said. "Magic draws attention. People might come out to gawk."

Moni holstered his pistol and glared at me reproachfully, but to his credit, he obeyed. He excelled at following orders. That was good.

I reached into my coat for one of those tools I rely on: a knapped onyx knife, a small, leaf-shaped blade with a fine razor edge. Calmly, I rolled back my sleeve with two precise turns of the cuff, exposing my forearm. The humming of the magic rose an octave and spilled out, reacting to the stirring energy that built in my blood and hands. Wards fed off ambient energy, and this one sent out little tentacles towards any focused source of power, like a plasma globe. Moni couldn't see it, but he could feel the creeping weirdness. He looked back. That was not good—he was too jumpy, and it made the energy wobble and shift slippery around us.

"*Bi-en bol baltoh.*" The words bubbled up as I faced the sigil, eyes closed. I brought the knife up and around, drawing it through the soapy film of energy to find its flow and pattern. The words themselves were fragments of Enochian, a language which had to be spoken slowly, each letter intoned at a specific pitch. "*Comselha cilna nor-molor.*"

Enochian was invented by John Dee, the court wizard of Queen Elizabeth I. He believed he had discovered the language of the angels. I suspected he had actually taken a lot of drugs and made it up, but it was the ideal magical language for someone who saw sounds in color. Every sound had a unique color and texture, and I could taste both with every well-shaped word. They tripped sweet and syrupy from my tongue, rolling, weaving into the ward, and my senses began to expand. I could feel Moni twitching and flinching from ten feet away through my fingertips. This was not even the high weirdness, but magical disturbance was unnerving for Blanks with no

ability to understand what was happening. They feel dread, I am told: a twisting in the belly that screams “wrong!” like a siren going off in the animal part of the brain.

I carefully pricked the skin of my wrist and watched the red well up, only to be sucked away. The first drop twisted upwards and vanished, then the next. A giddy rush of energy flooded me then, pushing and clamoring. I tipped my head back and let it connect, feeling out along the ward as it fed from my body. It did not take long to find what I was looking for: the chink. The delicate error where the mage’s drying finger had not quite connected the circle. I felt it out with the prying fingers of my mind, braced myself, and shoved.

My arm bled, the ward swelled, and then it snapped. My grasp on it turned from caress to violation as I shunted hot power through the fine filaments of magic. The air of the stairwell blackened and buzzed like television snow around us; the lights flickered, one of them bursting with the pop and fizzle of spent Freon.

“Jesus have mercy!” Moni’s voice echoed up and down the stairs.

The magical net snapped one last time, flickering with pearly light, and then burnt itself out and fell dormant. The ripples slowed. The lights shone normally. The ward was inert, while the big Bulgarian, a veteran of hundreds of smuggling runs and God-knew-how-many murders, was white and bunched with fear. He watched me warily in the swelling silence.

“That was what we colloquially refer to as a ‘snatcher.’” Scanning the wall for anything I might have missed, I tugged my gloves up and adjusted the cuffs of my jacket. “A spell designed to extract intention and memory. If we’d passed the door, we’d have forgotten what we were here for. If Nicolai asked about the job, we’d have said it was finished, and as far as we’d know, it would be.”

Moni’s eyes bugged. Slowly, he clambered up towards me from the bottom of the stairs. “So you’re saying that maybe some of the things I remember, I don’t really remember? Like, maybe I didn’t even do ’em?”

“Perhaps, but spells this powerful are not especially common these days. They’re very expensive to hire for. Now, we move on. Come.”

I led the way into the hallway, and for a time, we heard nothing but the rhythm of our shoes tapping against marble. I counted the doors out of habit, but I knew which one we needed. The penthouse floor was like a wind tunnel, the pressure of arcana drawing me towards its core.

The ward scribed into Vochin’s door was a delight, thrumming the Yesodic substrate with a deep bass hum. The hairs on my neck thrilled as we approached, and I paused for a moment of appreciation for such a beautifully wrought piece of work. The one in the landing had been quick and dirty, a first-stop defense. This ward throbbed with power and malevolent, bated heat. It was written to connect with the energy of Mars, which meant it would respond—and act—with some kind of physical force. Explosion, implosion, kinetic burst. No wonder Semyon had fled here.

Moni couldn't see the lines, but I could see him sense the force in them as the ward rippled warily in my presence. Gooseflesh crept up the big man's neck and arms, and his fingers tightened on the trigger. "Fuck this place. Feels like them air pockets, huh? You know, like when you're on a plane."

"I've never flown." I held a hand up towards the door, and the ward thrummed sensuously in response. Who on earth had this kind of ability? I could only dream of creating something like this. It was impossible to suppress a twinge of envy, but given what had happened to Surzi and Boris, I'd expected Semyon's inner layers of defense to be greater than what I myself could cast or dispel. "This is the same kind of ward that killed the men earlier today. Masterful, and the product of a great talent. Very dangerous."

"What did it do to them?"

"It turned them into two buckets of red paint and ground beef," I replied. It was hard to keep the right tone of voice at this point in the game. "This is a very powerful piece of magic—and I need your help."

"Me?" Moni turned to face me, a gleam of avarice finally lighting the spark in his wolfish eyes. No doubt he enjoyed my loss of *blat'*, respect, and the boost to his own authority. His mind was already stoked on whatever he planned to do to Vochin's wife, and the money he expected to get after the job: twenty thousand, minus Nic's cut. Even after he greased the Kommandant's palm for his excellent driving, Moni would have more money than he'd held in his entire life. "What the hell do you think I can do about this shit, shortass?"

"You believe in God, don't you?"

"Yeah." His eyes narrowed warily.

"I need you to stand right in front of the door and pray while I speak the incantation. Belief in the divine is more powerful than normal magic. I need your help and your faith." I pitched my voice low, gentle and authoritative. "Make sure you don't touch it, but get as close as you can."

Moni nodded, licked his chapped lips, and moved slowly towards the door. The ward geared itself expectantly, poised like a weaving cobra, but Moni did what he was told. He lifted his hands and prayed earnestly. He was scum, but he could definitely follow orders. None of us joined the Organizatsiya because we were nice, pleasant people, but I made sure Nic gave me the worst of the worst for these jobs. Rapists, bullies, pedophiles... My last partner had a thing for teenage girls, fourteen or fifteen years old. My stomach curled at the memory of his banter in the car.

While he mumbled earnestly at the sigil, I drew my most powerful tool from my coat, a tool I have worked on enchanting for most of my professional life: The Wardbreaker, a silver Colt Commander engraved with symbols down the length of its barrel. I checked the silencer was properly aligned, and then leveled it at the back of Moni's head.

"*IAL!*" The word of power burst from my lips like the bullet from the gun.

Moni's face exploded in a wet spray against the ward, body jerking in surprise, and the air buckled and warped with a sub-audible screech. The sacrifice flooded the ward with energy, so fiercely and so suddenly that the magic spent itself before the man's soul snapped its link and closed the Gate. I helped it along with another bullet, shoving as much of my own return force into the spell's weave as I could. Moni didn't even hit the floor: the ward sucked the remaining life out of him and compressed his flesh into something the size of a baseball, which landed with the full weight of a two-hundred-pound man and shattered into chunks of super-dense charcoal. A frightened cry came from inside. The job could begin.

I kicked the door in and stepped in over the mess, into a white-walled hallway decorated with gilt mirrors, marble tables, and bad art. A cat ran from me, silent as it scuttled under the furniture of the sitting room. A door slammed from back in the house. A woman cried out in alarm from behind a door at the end of the hallway. I flung it open to find Semyon gone and his wife, her nose white and bloody with coke, staring at me in a drugged stupor as I leveled the pistol and fired one straight shot. The silenced round took her in the forehead. I advanced far enough to put the second bullet in her chest, just to make sure. Clean and quick.

I followed the banging and clattering and swearing through the house, hugging a wall and circling in. Semyon's clatter turned deadly quiet, and the air of the apartment trembled with his silent terror as I drew closer. I heard suppressed, panicked cursing from inside the master bedroom. Carefully, I reached for the door and tried to focus, to sense for wards. Before I pushed down on the handle and threw the door open, a cloud of bullets sprayed through the flimsy wood and blew white paint chips across my coat and into the hallway with the 'spat-spat-spat' rattle of a machine pistol.

I returned a single shot through the gaping splintered hole, whirled around from my cover, and put a booted foot through the remains of the door. It took most of the next hit. I rolled across and had a brief vision of Semyon cowering by his bedside table, a gun wobbling in his damp, shaking hand.

"Stop! Stop! I'll k-kill you, you crazy white-eyed fuck!" he called out. He sounded high.

"You know why I'm here, Semyon," I called back and measured the familiar weight of the Wardbreaker in my hand. *Five bullets gone, four left.* "Your protection is gone. You can't kill me."

I dove around the corner of the open door. His reply was an auto burst that tore the bedsheets off his bed and sprayed me with shreds of fabric and foam, but Semyon couldn't aim the barrel straight. The strength was draining out of him. He had never been a strongman. He wasn't a Bull or a soldier. He was a gemcutter and appraiser, a fussy white-collar who relied on men like Moni and me to do his dirty work and protect him, and I only had to wait until the final bullet and the guilty click of an empty cartridge to roll out from around the bed and aim my gun at his beaky, milk-white face.

“A-Alexi. God, Molotchik, look look look... you know me, you know me,” he stuttered, still holding the useless gun. “There’s coke, lots of coke. And money. Money under t-the bed. Take it and I’ll g-go. Away. Moscow, Israel. I’ll go and you can t-tell Lev—”

“That I let a snitch escape to Tel Aviv?” And coke? I frowned. I knew him, but he apparently didn’t know me very well at all. “You betrayed the Organization to the Manelli Family, and they went straight to the FBI. Or did they? What do you know about this, Semyon Milosivich Vochin?”

“B-business. It was just b-business,” he whispered, shaking his head. “Look, you have to talk to Nic about this, he—”

“No, Semyon. No, this isn’t about business. Men like us have no business selling out.” I got to my feet, keeping him centered down the sight. “Lev paid for you to come to America and help our people. Not the Manellis, and certainly not the police.”

Semyon said nothing, staring at me with cringing, red-rimmed eyes.

“He shared his home with you. He found you a job. You prospered, and you owed him your life here. You turned on him for drugs. Not for justice. Not because you thought you were doing the right thing. You turned for drugs.”

Tears leaked down Semyon’s face. “Alexi, I swear they made me take the deal, I didn’t have a choice! Nic—”

“We always have a choice.” Five years ago, New York had no ‘Russian Mafia.’ No one knew about us, our *Organizatsiya*. We were a nebulous, seemingly unconnected collection of businessmen, racketeers, gambling bosses, spooks, bookies, bouncers, and attorneys. We kept an easy peace among ourselves and our community, and the police never connected the dots—until Semyon Vochin. The Manelli family had passed on his information because, like all the old crime families of New York, they had a strict code of honor they broke when it suited them and a policy of never working with the law unless it achieved their own ends. “You chose to steal. You chose to stick product straight up your nose. The Manellis can’t order you to turn in your friends, Semyon.”

“You don’t understand! They—”

“I understand that five men are dead because of your choices.” A tic rippled across my face. I advanced a little more, carefully. Whatever magic he’d had, it must have been on the car, not on his person, but it paid to be cautious. “So now I am here, the logical conclusion of the bad decisions you have made. You only have one last choice to make. Die well, or die poorly.”

“Fuck you,” he hissed.

“Come now. It’s a yes or no question, Semyon.” My aim did not waver.

Semyon’s fingers twitched on the trigger, and before he could throw the pistol at me, I fired. Fully charged with blood, the gun was truly silenced.

*Blip blip.* One took him in the chest, the other in the thigh, and with a hoarse shout, he pitched to the carpet.

*Blip.* His wordless scream cut into nothingness.

I found the cases of money under the bed: fifty thousand in cash, mixed hundred- and fifty-dollar bills. It smelled like new Government money. I left the case arranged neatly on the end of the ruined mattress, the rows of bills facing Semyon's open bedroom door. Let the Feds find it, and wonder.

As I nosed back through the house, I heard a sound from the den. The woman? Neck prickling, I slid along the wall and around the corner, gun leveled.

The cat who'd run from me nosed around the dead woman's hand, sniffing her fingers with tail held high. She was a Siamese with pale gray points, lithe and bold. When she got no response from her mistress, the cat turned and trotted across to me with a friendly chirp. Before I could think to move away, she pressed herself against my pants leg, purring and meowing.

"Huh." I looked down at her, chagrined, and holstered the Wardbreaker. I shouldn't have let her touch me. The fibers of my trousers would be on her fur now.

I tried to step back, but she rushed under my feet, making for one of the doorways, where she turned and yowled. Against my better judgment, I stepped around the blood and followed. She led me into a large, clean kitchen and paced around an empty dish of kibble crumbs. I felt a pang of something that might have been guilt.

"I see." I found the box and poured until the bowl was full. "I suppose you'll be going to the pound when the Feds come by, won't you?"

The cat looked up at me, and for a moment, I was transfixed. Her eyes were a grey so pale they were white. Just like mine.

"Mrrrr-raow. Mrrr," she replied.

A lot of wetworkers like me, they start out by killing animals. I never even considered it. The way I saw it, animals were just animals. They don't have free will. Our choices make us human, and it is a very human thing to make choices which shape when and how we should die. Moni's choices had led him to die here; Semyon acted similarly, making decision after decision that led him to the moment of his death. His decisions shaped the fates of his wife—complicit, but not responsible—and this particular cat, a creature with the misfortune to have been under the guardianship of a snitch. She was as stuck with him as I was with the Organizatsiya. This wasn't her fault.

I turned to leave but then paused, looking back. The cat had an expression of fatuous contentment, crunching on her kibble. It would take the police days to find the corpses. Would she have enough food and water? What if she ate one of the coke-addled bodies and got sick?

*No, no, don't start on this. Damn it, brain.* Her welfare was not my responsibility—but I am the son of an alcoholic and a Jew besides that, and the impulse to take responsibility runs hard and deep and true.

I jerked my shoulders and forced myself to walk away. This time, I made it as far as the doorway before turning. The cat was not eating: she was looking up at me, her

white eyes wise and wide, imbued with subtle intelligence. If she was afraid or regretful at the loss of her human companions, she showed no sign.

"Is that so?" I folded my arms, wavering in place.

"Maarow."

She had the upper hand, and she knew it. On seeing my expression, the cat squinted victoriously, purring, and began to groom her long toes. Her slender neck could produce a surprisingly deep sound, and even from across the room, it felt nice: a pleasant rumbling mouthfeel, a sound my brain translated to a delicate sky blue.

Five minutes later, I was back outside. Nic grunted with satisfaction when I threw open the car door and climbed into the backseat, and then again in surprise when he noticed the struggling bundle in my arms.

"The fuck is that?" he said, turning the engine.

"Mraaaow," the cat replied.

"Her name is Binah." I rested a gloved hand on her head, flattening her ears. She relaxed under my palm. "Don't ask."

"Uhn." Nic pulled away with his headlights dark, only turning them on at the end of the street. "You did the job?"

"Of course."

"And Moni?"

"A non-issue."

"Good," Nic replied. "Piece of shit."

We settled into a comfortable silence, broken only by the sound of Binah's purr and the rustle of fabric as I shucked my outerwear. Nicolai was not known for being chatty. He was an old soldier, an Afghan veteran and a hardened killer. I couldn't say I liked or trusted him, but I respected him. He was my teacher, my superior... and less fortunately, my creditor.

"So, about my fee," I said after a time. "I'm waiving it towards Vassily's prison bribe."

"Okay. But it's not gonna cover it," Nic replied. "Ten grand to go."

The pleasant afterglow faded, and fast. "Ridiculous. I already paid five. How much did it really take to get him out early?"

"Thirty, plus interest. Five years of interest. That was the deal, kid."

The Vochin job was worth twenty. I'd already paid off five. The rest of my money had gone to my father's old debts, Chernobog take him. My jaw worked, muscles tightening and bunching. "You get one more round of work from me. That's it."

"I got one lined up already. You two can come talk to me about it when he's back," Nic said. He didn't look over at me, steering laconically with one hand. It was the closest he got to sympathy. "Vassily's out of the can tomorrow, isn't he?"

"Today." My voice sounded tight in my own ears. I petted Binah, who restlessly explored the seat beside me. "Nine thirty."

Nic grunted. “Come to Sirens tomorrow. I’ll tell you more there and—fuck.”

I perked up as the tinny sound of Nic’s pager cut through the cabin and tensed as the car listed to one side of the road when he pulled it off his belt and read it.

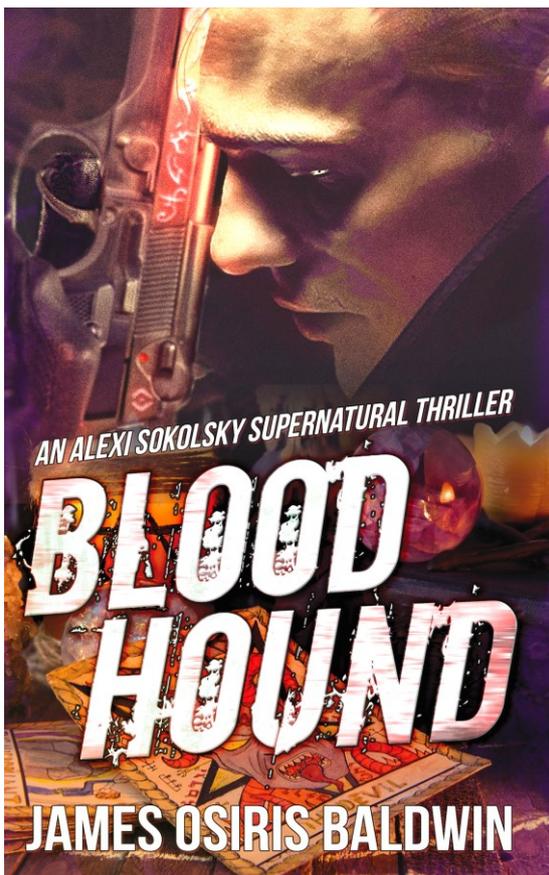
“Fuck,” he said again. “Motherfucking piece of shit.”

“Pardon?”

Nic threw the pager back to me and stomped the accelerator, pitching me and the cat against the door as he strove to make the exit. I somehow caught it as the car righted and held it to the light. The code was a string of symbols: *T1RH#4C*.

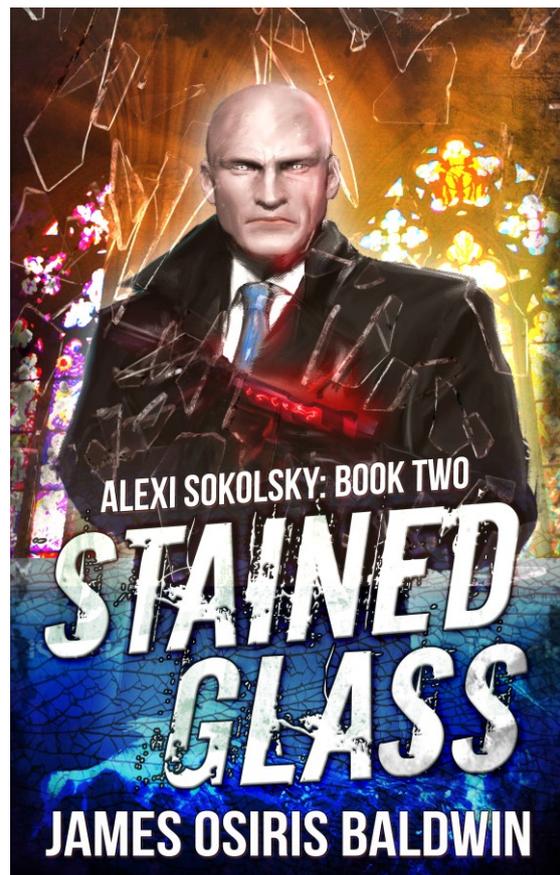
T was for *trup*, the Russian word for corpse, and the number showed how many bodies. The location, *RH#4*, stood for Site #4 in Red Hook: the AEROMOR shipping yard. The last letter in the paging code showed the nature of the problem. ‘C’ stood for *cherny*, ‘black’—but to me, raised bilingual in Brooklyn, the C was for Crisis.

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