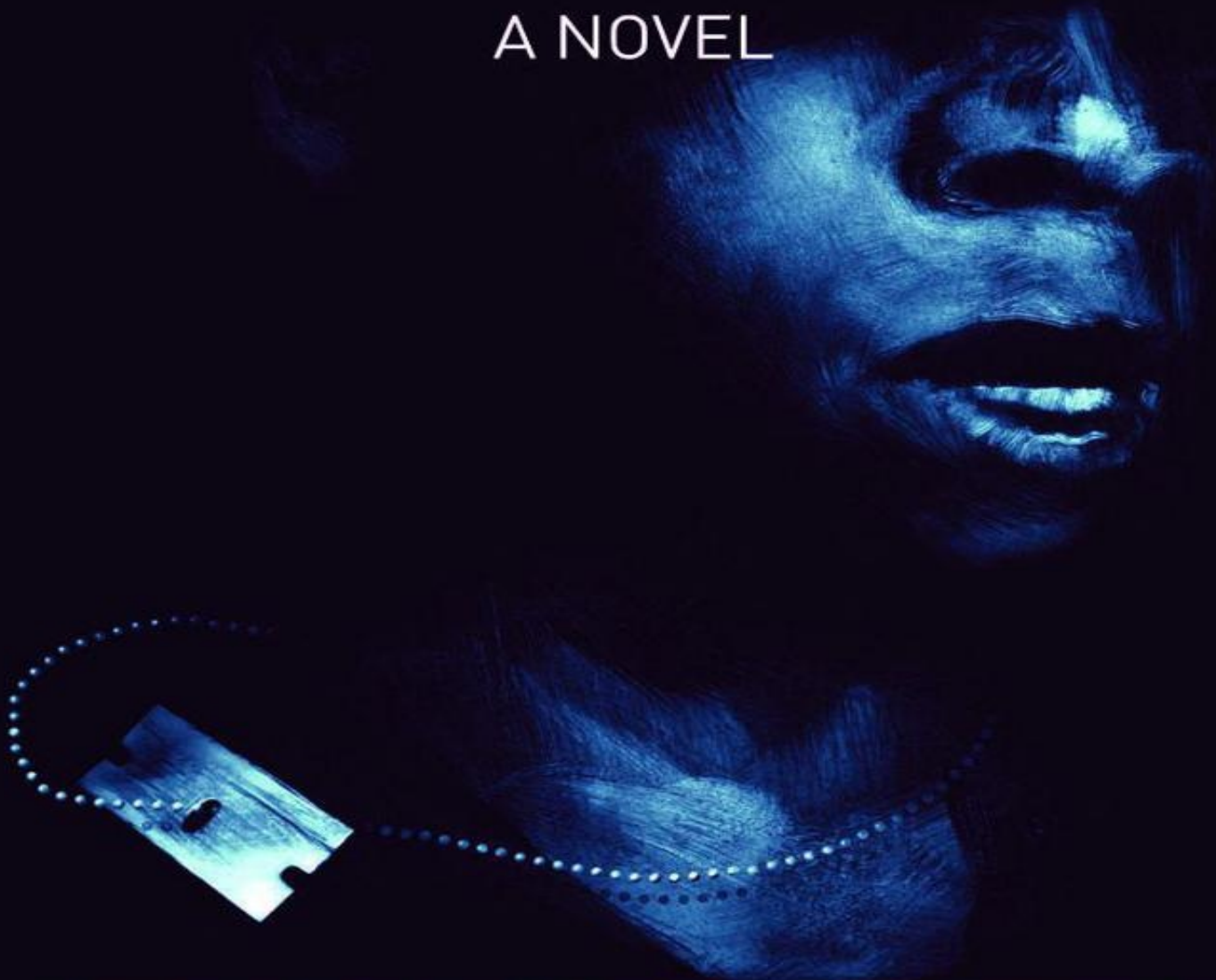


THE
LIMINAL
PEOPLE
AYIZE JAMA-EVERETT

A NOVEL



"A voodoo cauldron of Sci-Fi, Romance, Crime, and Superhero Comic."
—Andrew Vachss (author of *That's How I Roll*)

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Praise for *The Liminal People*

“The action sequences are smartly orchestrated, but it is Taggert’s quest to retrieve his own soul that gives *The Liminal People* its oomph. Jama-Everett has done a stellar job of creating a setup that promises even greater rewards in future volumes.” [San Francisco Chronicle]

“For all the grit, character and poetry on display here, Everett’s own super power appears to be plotting and set-pieces. Readers will find a quick immersion in the opening scene, and then some secret world-building. Once the plot kicks in, readers had best be prepared to finish the book in one sitting, while experiencing better special effects than you will find in any movie. Indeed, Everett’s prose is cinematic in the best sense; when he puts us in a scene of action, his descriptions take on a hyper-clarity that is better than telepathy. The plot arc is cunning and enjoyably surprising, and the revelations have the shock of the new but the old-school satisfaction of well-woven espionage plots. *The Liminal People* is seriously well-written, but also seriously fun to read. It’s a secret world that deserves the elegant exposition of this engaging novel—and a sequel, sooner rather than later.” [Rick Kleffel, *The Agony Column*]

“The story’s setup . . . takes next to no time to relate in Jama-Everett’s brisk prose. With flat-voiced, sharp-edged humor reminiscent of the razors his fellow thugs wear around their necks, Taggert claims to read bodies ‘the way pretentious East Coast Americans read *The New Yorker* . . . I’ve got skills,’ he adds. ‘What I don’t have is patience.’” [Nisi Shawl, *The Seattle Times*]

“Every once in awhile, a first novel catches you by surprise. Sometimes it’s the style and sometimes it’s the pure originality or unique mixing of influences. In the case of Ayize Jama-Everett’s *The Liminal People*, the pleasure comes from all of the above.” [Jeff VanderMeer, *Omnivoracious*]

“Ayize Jama-Everett has brewed a voodoo cauldron of Sci-Fi, Romance, Crime, and Superhero Comics to provide us with a true gestalt of understanding, offering us both a new definition of “family” and a world view on the universality of human conduct. *The Liminal People*—as obviously intended—will draw different reactions from different readers. But none of them will stop reading until its cataclysmic ending.” [Andrew Vachss]

“Ayize’s imagination will mess with yours, and the world won’t ever look quite the same again.” [Nalo Hopkinson]

“*The Liminal People* has the pleasures of classic sf while being astonishingly contemporary and savvy.” [Maureen F. McHugh]

“Fast and sleek and powerful—a skillful and unique mix of supernatural adventure and lived-in, persuasive, often moving noir.” [Felix Gilman]

“An astounding first novel. . . . *The Liminal People* is a noir juggernaut with startlingly genuine themes of salvation, emancipation, and family. As of now, this book is my favorite of the year and I desperately hope that Jama-Everett chooses to pen a sequel.” [Elitist Book Reviews]

~~“Fast-paced and frequently violent, Jama-Everett’s engaging and fulfilling debut offers a compelling take on the classic science-fiction convention of the powerful misfit; incorporates an interesting, multiethnic cast of characters; and proves successful as both an action-packed thriller and a careful look at the moral dilemmas of those whose powers transcend humanity.” [Publishers Weekly]~~

“Razor. Plush. Fast.” [Tan, City Lights Books, San Francisco, CA]

“Compact but creative, and filled with good ideas and elements of classic sci-fi, noir, and superhero stories.” [Peter, Brookline Booksmith, Brookline, MA]

“From within ‘The Golden Ghetto’ Jama-Everett has created a book that resists classification, joining the Afrosurreal Pantheon of writers exploring this new-found freedom. He calls the gifted ones Liminal People, people ‘Always on the borderland, the threshold, the in-between.’ He has Taggart explain. ‘I learned what I know by walking the liminal lands.’ I trust that many people will relate, or will want to.” [D. Scot Miller, City Lights Blog]

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Small Beer Press
Easthampton, MA

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this book are either fictitious or used fictitiously.

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ولله الحمد ويرجع الى الله. فقط الأخطاء هي الألغام

Chapter One

Nordeen was right to send me. I feel three heartbeats at the ridges of the ancient crater we're resting in. Snipers. I don't know for sure, but their hearts are tense and their trigger fingers twitchy. As soon as I got out of the car their right eyes all zoomed in on something. If they're not snipers then they're one-eyed caffeine freaks with muscular dystrophy in their fingers. At least they're smart enough to know not to shoot me right away. Their boy, my date, Omar, wants what we have. If it's not in the car and they shoot us, they're shit out of luck.

"Stay in the car, no matter what," I say, leaning into the passenger side of the twelve-year-old Mercedes-Benz that has dragged me to this ancient and massive hole in the ground. The meteor that crashed here centuries ago is as cold as Fou-Fou's response to my command. His steady sub-Saharan heartbeat is the only answer I get from the 240-pound menace. He'll play it smart. Always does. The kid in the back is who I'm really speaking to. Nineteen, can't pee straight, and ready to scrap, the native Moroccan looks more spooked than ready. "Understand?" I bark at him in his native Berber instead of the usual French patois we play with.

"I got your back." He says. His blood pressure is pumping a steady drum and bass beat. His raw breath is stinking up the car. I guess his family had the Third World dental plan: eat for a month or get one of your children's teeth fixed. I know which one his parents chose. Maybe when we're done with all of this, I'll help him.

"Get my back by staying in the fucking car, man. Keep with the package until I call for you. Yes?"

"Yes. Yes. But if that fucker Omar starts anything . . ."

"I'll finish it." I barely get the words out before two heartbeats enter the gully from the opposite side. Before I get up I close my eyes. I envision the three ridge heartbeats. They've been waiting for this a long time. Too long. They're tired. It doesn't take much to nudge them into sleep. It takes a little more effort to put them into the REM state needed so that they'll stay down, so I release the brain's native marijuana, anandamide, into their minds in P-Funk-size quantities. With one person it would have been easy. Three folks, far away, hurt a little. Knew it would. That's why I didn't bother to use my abilities to warm myself up. I've got limits just like everyone else.

I read bodies the way pretentious, East Coast Americans read the *New Yorker*. With a little focus, I can manipulate my body and others' on a molecular level. With a lot of focus, I can push organs and whole biological systems around. But if I do it too much, I get tired and hungry. I've got skills. What I don't have is patience.

"Taggert." Hate the way Omar says my name. Hate the way he slams his fucking door all the time. Hate the way his heart is always skipping like it's lying. Hate the way he smells. Hate his Third World breath as I give him the mandatory three kisses business partners expect in this part of the world. Hate this fucking man.

“You’re late.”

“Don’t be mad, Taggert. These things take time.”

“What things?” His heartbeat is as erratic as I expected. He thinks he’s got us in a trap. It’s not the first time someone has thought that.

“Finances, my friend. We have many investors. Some are not so much forthcoming with the funds as you asked. . . .” His bad English irks me almost as much as this crap-ass play.

“I didn’t ask for anything. You know who I represent, and he doesn’t ask for anything. You don’t want the funds, we don’t have any drama. We’ll take our product back to Maximus and—”

“You are so harsh, Taggert. This is not Marseilles, this is Morocco. You must . . .” I open my jacket quickly and brace myself against the cold mountain air. Omar’s new trigger boy is as twitchy as my foul-mouthed nineteen-year-old. Either that or he really has no idea who I represent; he actually palms his .45. Omar—who has sense enough to know what a bad play that would be—tells him to calm down with a wave of his hand. For my part I just hold up the razor-blade necklace my boss gave me.

“Razor-neck crew,” I say in the hill language of the Berbers. “That’s who you’re dealing with. This ain’t the medina. This should be a simple exchange. It’s not. I’m not in a position to negotiate, and neither are you. So we back out of this. Let our betters talk to each other and make another meeting time. That’s the smartest play for you.”

“Hey, French boy! How about you don’t tell me what the smart play is?” Omar shouts like he owns something. I don’t know who told him I was from Marseilles, but I’ve never tried to change his mind. I do know why he’s so mad. At five-three he’s got the Napoleon complex bad. Anytime anyone tells him what he can’t do, it’s like setting off a firecracker. I didn’t do it on purpose, but I’ll be damned if I let some midget with an attitude and nothing but new booty for backup bark at me.

“How about you fuck the dumb shit, you son of a maggot-ridden whore, and make your move. Come on, you want to pull something. Want to try and jack the shipment? Make your play!” I open my arms wide and make a grand circle, inviting the unconscious snipers to take their shots. Halfway through it occurs to me that there might be more than three snipers, or that the new booty might be dumb enough to shoot one of the razor-neck crew in the back even with God knows who still hiding in the car. Luckily, I make my round with no shots fired. Omar’s face finally reflects what his pulse has been telling me all along. He’s scared shitless. I march up close, a nose hair away, before I start speaking again. At the same time I’ve increased the pressure on the new booty’s bladder three times over. He’s afraid to move for peeing himself.

“This is your play, ain’t it, Omar? Your bosses don’t know anything about this, do they?”

“Can you forgive your brother for—” I crack him on the jaw hard with my fist. Before he reaches the ground my elbow gets a piece in, too. Now that he’s peed himself, the new booty feels totally ineffective, even with the .45 in his hand. Who am I to tell him he’s wrong?

“You are not my brother.” It’s a chore to keep it French. That’s how I know I’m mad. I only want to speak English when I’m pissed off. “Don’t ever let those words pass your lips again.” I look up quickly at the new booty. He almost jumps. “Go get what cash you brought. Now.” Less than a minute later, a briefcase with six hundred thousand euros is at my feet and the smell of piss has invaded my nostrils. This guy needs to drink more water.

“So we can do the deal?” Omar asks, still trying to salvage something.

“You’re short. For every day we have to wait for full payment, it’s ten percent marked on. We hold on to the product until then. If it’s over a week, we start selling it off, ten percent at a time, to your competitors, and you still owe for the full amount.”

“Taggart.” He tries to think of some way to convince me to do something else but then realizes I’m holding all the cards. To reward the comprehension I throw him a handkerchief.

“Your betters won’t be mad at you for trying to trick us. That’s the name of the game. But it was that you didn’t have a Plan B. You might lose a finger or thumb or something because you didn’t have a way to cut your losses and just do the damn thing the way it’s supposed to be done. Don’t take it personal. Just the cost of doing business.”

My back’s to them and I’m heading to the car. Neither one of them will move on me. Omar is dialing right now, trying to ring in on his snipers. I can “feel” a phone vibrating in one of their pockets now. Doesn’t matter. We got the money and held the hashish. Plus we didn’t leave any bodies behind. Nordeen will be as happy as he gets.

Chapter Two

I wake to the smell of fish, and I know I'm home. Biya, or Al Hoceima, isn't too far from us, but the underground regiment I live with likes to stay away from there. Most of our business goes through that port, which makes it better to not be seen anywhere near by. I leave Fou-Fou in charge of the money and the kid in charge of the hash. Kif, or hash, in the Rif mountains is like water in the ocean. There's no value in it. Six hundred thousand euros, however, is something most people in Morocco can't even imagine. I don't know if Fou-Fou has ever imagined it, but his heartbeat doesn't change. I trust him to get it to the boss. For the past six years I've been living here. My passport works for me. I'm in Morocco. I'm in Morocco. In exchange I get a nice, three-bedroom, sky-blue house with a rooftop that overlooks the ocean, and peace. By peace I mean I get enough cash to buy anything I want, a beautiful young girl who cleans my apartment twice a week, cooked meals, good friends, and even vacation when I want it. As I ascend my ocean-colored stone steps into my spot I can't help but smile a little bit. This home has been a long time coming. I'm glad that it feels like a place to come home to. I don't have a dog. Everyone here knows who I work for. They know who I am. At least they think they do—and even *that* reputation is enough to keep people out. Still, it's a comfort to come home and find a box filled with "supplies" from Spain. It's mostly American comics, chocolate, and books I'd ordered online. I'm already on the roof reading and drinking some tea when I see something that doesn't belong. A voice recorder. The type that records onto chips, with no tape. It's Suleiman's. He's recorded something for me, despite the fact that he lives a two-minute walk away. Suddenly my chocolate doesn't taste so sweet. There's an ugly pit in my stomach. It hurts as it expands. There's only one way to get it to shrink. I have to listen. I don't want to. I can tell already. Fuck.

"I'm calling." I'm gasping for air as I hear the voice. "You said to call if I ever needed you. You said you'd come. You said if I used this number then to not use my name and that you'd find me. Find me. I need you. I need you now."

Yasmine. Damn.

The second person like me I ever met was in college. Her name was Yasmine Petalas. A year older than me, and she was gorgeous. If she ever weighed more than 110 pounds I never saw it or felt it. She stood a good four inches shorter than me but could bring down the house with her lungs. Her British-born, Ugandan mother gave her excellent bronzed skin while some recessive gene from her Greek father gave her deep, red, long, straight hair. I knew her for a year before she even knew my name. When I say I fell in love with her, don't understand it as some fantasy made flesh, or some adolescent reciprocal fascination. I would have died for her. She says she needs help, and if I'm the man I want to be then I'm dropping everything and getting on the first thing steaming out of Biya. But I am not the

man. Before I leave, think of leaving, I have to get Nordeen's permission.

Suleiman is Nordeen's right-hand man. He knows Nordeen and I have a special relationship but he doesn't know what it's based on. Nordeen likes it that way. Still, I show the man respect by never meeting with the big boss until I clear with Sully first. Otherwise he may think I'm making a play for his spot, which I am most definitely not.

Nordeen is like me. I read bodies but I'm not exactly sure what he can do. I know for sure that I can always tell when someone is lying to him. It's a great talent for an international drug dealer, and a fucking annoying trait in a boss. But even that's not Mr. Maximus's real power.

In comics there's this bit character called the Question. He's got no face, and no powers. He's kind of like a brokeass Batman without the Robin. I like him because of the concept of a man with no face being called the Question. It's good in comics. It's bad in your boss. No one knows where he's from. Not me, not Suleiman or any of the other fifteen people he's got working for him. Maybe Fou-Fou knows, but he's not talking. One night we all got drunk in Segovia and tried to piece together the bits of our mystery leader. All we got was a colossal-sized riddle. He won't leave Morocco anymore, but he has bank accounts, which have to be set up in person, in his name in the U.A.E, the Cayman Islands, Scotland, and South Africa. All the royalty of Malaysia sends him birthday cards, all at different times of the year. At least five women claim to be his first daughter, he has no sons, and his grandchildren range in age from six months to thirty-five years old. We've never seen any of his wives. His English, French, and Berber tongues are incredible, but he massacres Arabic as though it were a heathen in the noose of the Lord. Yet he's a devout Muslim. By the end of the night of speculation, I was more fearful of the man than I had ever been before.

"Suleiman." I find him with his family, his wife, and his two children ages three and seven. His tastes lean toward the moderate: not a lot of foreign products in the house aside from the expansive television. Minus the drug running, and Suleiman would be the perfect model for the moderate Morocco. I take my shoes off before entering his house and wave my hand at his wife, letting her know it's OK to keep the veil down.

"Taggart, say hello to my children," Suleiman commands. He thinks I'm from London so he speaks with a fake Cockney accent. He wants his children to speak English, so I'm put through the cross-generational farce every time I come by. I hate children. Luckily, I don't have to tolerate them for much longer than it takes Suleiman's wife to make the customary tea. We are left in the kitchen alone.

"Was Omar so bad?" he says, examining the scowl on my face.

"He tried to swindle. The boss will have to talk to his people; don't be surprised if the guy comes up missing," I say in rapid-fire Arabic only to be interrupted by Suleiman's brief but fervent prayer for the idiot's soul. The rumor goes that Suleiman used to be in training a mullah before the boss got hold of him. "This isn't about that."

I pull out the recorder and slide it back to him. Already erased. Sully looks at it suspiciously, then brings his long-scanning, desert eyes up to meet mine. "You asked me to check it once a month when you first came to us. But we haven't used that safe house for a few months now."

"I'm not mad," I lie. "I just want to know if you played it for anyone else." Has he told Nordeen?

"I've only been home twenty minutes. I haven't even had time to see the Old Man yet," he says slowly.

"If it's OK with you, I'd like to tell him about it myself."

“Can I help?” I forgot that Suleiman likes me. His wife has a hard time bringing babies to term. She’s lost more than she has. I lied and told her of a tea that would help. In truth I just worked with her body. That’s the only reason they have the three-year-old. Suleiman thinks he owes me for the tea. But I don’t delude myself about his loyalties. He *will* check to see if I’ve told Nordeen.

“If it comes to it, yes. But for now let me see what the boss says.”

Chapter Three

Nordeen Maximus lives in the biggest house in the city, the closest to the beach. We can almost see Italy from his roof. Everyone here hangs out on their rooftops looking someplace else: Europe, a ship leaving for the States, or places they can't see. Everyone wants to get away from here. Everyone but Nordeen. He hates the cold air on his naked skin with the vitriol of a mongoose in a cobra's nest. Most people think he's frail because on those rare occasions he leaves the house he's always bundled up in layers of Berber sweaters and jackets. That's the way he likes it, people underestimating him.

I never announce myself in his presence. He hates it. I just walk in to his huge living room and sit in the corner. If he's not talking to someone else he's either watching TV or reading. Interruptions cause the blind irritation to rise in him; even to me they come out of the blue. His heart rate doesn't increase, his breathing remains steady, his eyes don't even twitch. He just yells with a fury my brother could only muster when he was truly afraid. Sometimes I love Nordeen and sometimes I wish he'd just die. I've yet to find a subject that he doesn't know nearly everything about, including myself. But he takes the whole "knowledge is power" thing to phenomenal heights. It doesn't make sense to ask the man for anything without giving something in return. Not if you've grown accustomed to a fully functioning reproductive system, that is. He is brilliant and deadly, a combination often hard to like. But I always respect him.

An Al Hoceima whore plays housewife and offers me tea before scampering into the back room. He always got a parade of them. As he reclines on his floor pillows with shirt proudly open I can almost see why. I don't know how old he is, but he looks to be able to give the nineteen-year-old a challenge. The tea I use like a prop, downing it quickly and healing my scalded throat before the shock has time to set in. It's the type of subtle move only he'll notice.

"You almost broke Omar's jaw for mentioning your brother," he says in the Rif tongue, and I'm mad. Of course he wants to talk business first. I'm gonna sidestep it, then remember he knows when I'm lying.

"He had three men on a ridge for an ambush." True. I've never told him about my brother.

"You handled them?" A question. Luckily I can answer without lying.

"Put them to sleep right before he came. I needed to give him something to know me by. If I use my . . . thing, in that scenario I'd have to . . ."

"The youngster." He smiles, finally putting down the French fashion magazine he was reading.

“How’d he fare?”

“Stupid and young. But followed directions well enough. We’d both appreciate any dental care he could get. Pretty sure the Geneva Conventions outlawed that breath.” My boss laughs, and I know I’m not in the doghouse for the arrangement I’d reached with Omar.

“I doubt we’ll see Omar again. The deal’s gone sour with his people. But the parting gift of the cash was appreciated. Now, what’s this recording all about?”

“I’m asking for permission to take the razor off temporarily.” I don’t dare meet his eyes when I ask. Membership in the razor-neck crew is for life. We all have small nicks and scratches on our breastbones from where the razor scrapes our chest. They’re never to be taken off. Even when we’re having sex. I’m scared shitless that somehow he knows whenever we even think about trying to take them off.

“Ya’llah.” If that’s all the mangled Arabic I get in this consultation I might make it out of Morocco. But I know enough of my boss to know that if he ever decides I need to go, it won’t be him that’ll do it. He owes me too much.

“Tell me about it.” He says. Good. Not a question.

“I don’t know what it is. Maybe something minor, but I doubt it. In any case, it predates my association with you and the crew. I don’t want to track mud through your house.” I use French because it sounds prettier. He knows I’m not French and appreciates the sentiment.

“What will you do?”

“Find the sender. Do what I can. Get back to my life here as soon as possible.” All truth. I’m not gone yet and already I’m missing my house—my fried-fish dinners every night, tea on Suleiman’s porch, fantasies about Fou-Fou’s past. All of it. I don’t want my world to change. I’m hating Yasmin right now. But she dialed a number I swore she’d never use.

“The one who called. She is like us?” The question I was hoping he wouldn’t ask. There’s no way out of it.

“Yes.” This time I’m looking him in his eyes. Any more questions about Yasmine and I’m out the door and dodging bullets. Nordeen has an unusual obsession with people like us. I’ve never met anyone else who knows more about people with our type of abilities. I don’t want to know how he came to his knowledge. But he’s not getting any more from me about Yasmine than the sound of her voice and that she’s got power.

“Keep the razor on,” he says with no change in his face. “Fou-Fou will give you sixty thousand euros from the take. Call back if you need more.” He beckons me close, and I’m scared. I’ve healed him three times from lethal gunshot wounds. Those were the only times I was allowed to touch him. I keep low, making sure my head is never higher than his. I’m expecting a hand to kiss; his deceptive, powerful arms embrace my body. Even so, I still can’t see him or feel him like I do everyone else. It’s like hugging a ghost.

“Remember, what we have is rare.” I realize he’s speaking English in that no-accent way he does when he’s trying to show me compassion. “People like us tend to stay away from each other.” I nod. I’m like a cat being held by a kid known to abuse animals. I can’t give him any reason to be pissed at me or he’ll kill me. I don’t know how he’ll do it, but it’ll be bloody and sadistic. I know because I’ve been his instrument for such tortures in the past, waiting in shadows and silence for him to finish and embrace just like this before I struck.

“But before you go”—Nordeen breaks his lips apart in an attempt to smile and reclines back to his pillows—“tell me about your brother.”

Fifteen muscles in my back spasm, arguing the pros and cons of flight and fight until I consciously

remind my body that neither is truly an option. This is Nordeen at his worst, picking at my scabs. And I've just asked for a favor and been given finance and permission for it. All he requires is a story. Even the ancient rules of friendship and service, Nordeen is in his rights to hear the whole story. I'm too tired, physically and emotionally, to think of any way out of this. So I speak the truth.

"My brother was like us," I say and wait for a response. Nordeen takes a drag from a nearby hookah. "Only, he could push things with his mind. Make things move. He was strong with his power but weak in morality. I . . . he was four years older than me. I idolized him. Despite what he did to my family. . . ."

"What did he do?" Nordeen asks with the voice of a sadistic psychotherapist.

"He was a bully. My father couldn't stand against him and wouldn't report to anyone what my brother could do. My mother was sick. Depressed. She spent her days washing down Thorazine and Seconal with gin and tonics. But it wasn't just my parents that suffered. The whole town quietly cowered in front of my brother."

"But you didn't?"

"I did!" I say, realizing I'm way too excited by what I'm saying. "I cowered until he ignored me. Then I tried reintroducing myself into his vision, making myself useful. But I had nothing to offer until the day he 'pushed' me out of the second-story window of our house. I broke my arm, the wound instinctively healed it. He felt it, felt me use my power, and became interested in me." I pause, hoping it's enough. Another damn drag off his hookah, and he's still waiting for more.

"He let me follow him around for a few years. The understanding was simple: I healed him and not only him from whatever hurts his bullying got him, and I would get his discards—money, girls, drugs, whatever. None of that mattered. I . . . he let me hang out with him. His company was the biggest prize. At fifteen, I thought I was on top of the world—"

"Until you healed your mother?" Nordeen interrupts me with a truth I've never told him. I know what it feels like when someone picks up a stray thought from my brain: this is not that. I can't get bogged down wondering how Nordeen knows. He does.

"Yes. It was a tumor resting in her brain, causing pain and confusion. I didn't mean to go against my brother. It was just an instinctual healing once I had cultivated my eyes to see illness. The tumor was the size of a quarter and took five minutes to dissipate. My mother's tongue-lashing afterward took longer."

"She chastised you for being morally weak," Nordeen says looking into the corner of nowhere, eyes now milky white, voice now the sound of a whale's cry. "She was disgusted that her womb could produce such bastards, such powerful creatures incapable of compassion." His voice changes, as does the air in the room. My mother's voice comes from his mouth. "Shut up. You bully. You . . . my mind is finally clear. I don't understand any of this. But I know bad, wrong, when I see it. I could barely survive for the pain I was in every half an hour for . . . years. But even in that state I knew evil when I saw it. Your brother is definitely evil. But you are not exempt, Taggart. Do you hear me?"

He waits until I wipe the tears from my face before silently demanding I go on. "She went out on her own for the first time in about ten years that day. My dad, a military man, was at the base. I waited in the dark until my brother got home, the whole time breaking and healing my bones, compacting them to be as dense as they could get. I grew extra layers of skin around my knees, knuckles, neck, anywhere my body thought calluses could grow. I hardened my body. And when my brother came home I set about beating him. I punched and kicked and battered him while he threw every part of the house at me. But as quick as he wounded me, I healed and was back on him. In his final fit of rage he brought the house down on both of us."

“He survived.” Nordeen speaks. Knowing, not asking.

“Yes, but it takes a team of specialists to teach him how to tie his shoes each day. I caused permanent brain damage.” Nordeen nods, giving me tacit permission to leave. I hear his closing sentiment as I walk through his door.

“People like us tend to stay away from each other for good reason, Taggert.”

I’m out the house and I’m still alive. What does it mean? Nothing. Only that he doesn’t care. Suleiman knows that he wants me dead. Most likely he’ll have Suleiman do the deed. If not him then the stink mouthed kid. Doesn’t matter. If they come, I’ll feel them. And if they come I’ll kill them. I’ll have to.

My house feels less secure now. The walls are just as sturdy. There’s food in the fridge. I could watch satellite TV if I wanted. The crew got it as a gift for me last year. I try to read comics. I try and smoke the product that keeps us all fed. Nothing. I even think about drinking. I could ride into A Hoceima and hit one of the hotels. Or one of the local whores, even. It wouldn’t be the first time, just something I haven’t done in a few years. But alcohol just makes it harder for me to use my power. And whores, now they just make me sad. It’s too late to get on the road now, even if I wanted to. And with sixty thousand euros in my pocket, I don’t even need to pack. I need to just relax in my home, say good-bye to it. I’ll need lots of sleep for whatever comes next, and this is the only place I know I can rest well. So I’ll sleep because I won’t be back here for a while.

The sun came before I realized the moon had left. All hopes of sleep were dashed by memories. And thanks to Nordeen, my memories of Yasmine were clashing with my memories of my brother. Both people like me, but both rejected me. Maybe both for valid reasons. Maybe my brother rejected me because somewhere he knew our relationship had to come down to some serious sibling rivalry. And maybe Yasmine knew I was a freak all along.

Suleiman calls ten minutes after my girl comes through with some apricots, juice, and nuts for breakfast. He lets me know Fou-Fou just dropped off a cash card for me, along with a set of keys. He’s asking where he’s supposed to take me. If Nordeen is setting me up, he’s doing a lot to make sure I don’t suspect it. I tell the right-hand man to grub with his family and then pick me up when he’s ready.

We’re about twenty minutes away from Europe. But it’s a different type of Europe. It’s filled with hash and illegal immigrants. I could get to Yasmine that way, but then I’m under the radar and still identifiable as Nordeen’s. So I take my breakfast slow and then go to the drawer I never use. The drawer from my past, in the closet. It holds the last Italian suit I ever bought and my American passport, the real one. I put both of them on, and it feels like I’m regressing a good ten years. Yasmine better be in real trouble.

Suleiman enters my house with a pulse that’s pounding so hard I’m thinking I’m hearing it with my ears. I can imagine his thought process. Maybe Omar made some deal that required Suleiman’s help and maybe I was the one who had to do it. It’s that kind of thinking that makes him Nordeen’s Number 1.

“How do I look?” I ask, showing him open hands as soon as he comes in. It relaxes him somewhat.

“Like a bullshit Frenchie.” He’s never seen me in civilian gear. “What’s the plan?”

“I’ve got to catch a flight from Fez.”

“And then?” Like I know.

I don’t even pretend to sleep until I’m installed on the plane. It’s less than an hour flight to Marseille but it feels like another planet. Planet Old Life.

Chapter Four

I met this kid once. He was maybe twelve years old. His dad owned the biggest telecommunication network in Mogadishu. Don't laugh; those Africans will kill for wireless, literally. The kid was like me, only he talked to the land. Once his hands were in the dirt he could make things grow: enrich soil, deplete it, whatever he wanted. After I showed him what I could do, we became friends. I asked him one time if he wanted to get out of the Mog. He told me even if his father would let him, he wouldn't leave.

"I will die without this land." He said "this" land like he was talking about the plot directly below him. I was still kind of fucked up at the time over Yasmine, so I just chalked it up to his youth—some kid not wanting to have a new experience of the world. But now, as I'm sitting on this plane, leaving Africa for the first time in five years under my real name, I'm realizing how much I had in common with that kid. I'm afraid I'm going to die on this little journey and never come back. It's the never coming back part that's hitting me more than the dying.

After Yasmine wrote me off I went on this ironic death journey around the world, trying to save as many lives as I could. I didn't put myself in danger's way; I pulled up a chair in front of the death T and started in on a bowl of cocoa crisps like it was Saturday morning and I was a kid again. At first I went through official channels. Somewhere, I think I still even have my Red Cross jacket. Wherever the medics were being fired upon, that's where I went. And once there I broke the rules and went into the no-fly zones. Shit, if suicide by terrorist bullet didn't get me, this trip shouldn't be so hard.

Strange that it feels the same. When Yasmine left, I was alone again. My parents and I had worked out a nonverbal agreement: they would pay for college and never mention my brother or the house they had to sell, so long as I never came home or asked them for anything. Even after she left, I always filled out Yasmine's name and address in the place marked for next of kin. Working my trick on a young village boy or girl torn up by automatic fire as bullets whiz by me and all I can think about is what Yasmine going to do when she finds herself the proud owner of my headless corpse? Never happened.

I can't say a few bullets didn't catch me, or that my ambulance never hit a stray landmine, but my body has an automatic healing effect. It's autonomic—hell, it happens even faster when I black out. It only took four fatal gunshot wounds to realize that. And I couldn't even get drunk enough to mourn my inability to commit suicide—my body wouldn't let me. So instead I got immoral.

Turns out an EMT is like a street doctor for those who can't afford a hospital visit. As I was about to go back to London from Sri Lanka, an African with a British accent approached me about doing some fieldwork in the Continent. He was looking for field-trained medics unafraid of bullets. And he definitely paid more than the Red Cross. So to Somalia I went, working for a warlord. I ordered

enough supplies I didn't need and made sure to not heal anyone too quickly. Still, I got a reputation for being able to handle almost anything after the warlord got cancer in his foot and I "saved" him without chemo. You'd think he'd be appreciative. Instead the bastard started renting me out. First to a Liberian friend of his and then to some Colombians he knew. But the cash was good and I was treated like a king. I liked the life and would've stayed in it if not for the mother who brought her daughter to me one night begging that I heal her. The girl was nine years old and had more herpes sores covering her hairless vagina than zits covering her face. The mother pleaded with me to heal her as she was my warlord's favorite and he didn't know the mother had been renting the girl out to other people. I healed the girl in silence. No tricks, no fake medications, no examination. I just laid my hands on the sides of her head and spent my rage on every cell of that virus in her body. The sores literally fell off of her. And I fell off the planet.

I'm not going to say I was innocent back then. But I knew less of what people were willing to live with, to put up with, to invite, in order to survive than I do now. Had I seen babies turned out as prostitutes before? Of course. Had I seen them ravaged by S.T.I.'s? Most definitely. Had I seen creatures disguised as mothers pimping their kids out previous to that? Yes. But to see it all together at once, staring at me with hopeful eyes filled with understanding, inviting me to join their compromised way of life, it was too much for a younger me to bear. How was I to know I was just delaying the inevitable?

I figured someone would come for me. I couldn't just walk out of the Mog. But that's what I did. Out of Mogadishu into Kenya up to Ethiopia and then across the Sudan, Chad, and the Niger. My dark skin helped me blend in. Anyone who came at me with guns, I healed. When I needed shelter I healed people for it. The same with food. There are a lot of sick people in Africa. I became a bit of a legend. I never spoke to anyone and never rested more than one day in any place. It took me a year and a half but I walked from Mogadishu to Bandiagara, Mali. Why there? No idea. The place pulled me to it. The people there, the Dogon, were the only ones that reacted to my healings with absolutely no surprise. I stayed amongst them for a month, learning their language, helping them find a way to eke out survival in the poorest country in the world, crying about all I had seen . . . before they kicked me out.

"Healers are poison to the warrior soul," the village chiefs told me. "They make us forget the gift of death. This is a hard land, and we must be as hard as it to survive. You are a good man, but you make us soft." Where do you go when dirt farmers don't want you?

It's only after the plane touches down that I realize I actually did fall asleep. Haven't been in Marseilles in a while. Didn't realize the Parisians were buying up vacation spots. I wonder how long it'll be before they own the minarets? Doesn't matter. I'm through customs with my carry-on and my American passport with only a little bit of trouble. I have to explain why the last country I was supposed to be in was Sri Lanka and why I'm coming in from Morocco. Too bad the customs agent was taken by fever, cold sweats, blurred vision, and swollen glands, which all got worse the longer he spoke with me.

A cab is easy enough to find, and my French is still passable as native. "The best hotel you can find" is all I say to the driver. He sees the suit and knows I'm not bullshitting. I walk in with my cash and a card that looks like a credit card and get a suite without a reservation or an explanation. Forty minutes after getting off the plane I'm in a hotel, alone. No Yasmine, no razor-necks, no one. Yup. Another

planet.

Chapter Five

I thought I was hard until that Somali girl. I thought I was used to solitude until the dirt farmers told me I had to go. I thought I knew what power was until I met Nordeen.

All through my silent trek, I dreamed about what it would be like to have the kid who talked to dirt with me. We could've cut a green healthy veldt through some of the roughest patches of Africa. A few times, after healings mostly, people would try to follow me, even worship me. But I'd keep walking. I'd walk without fear near wild animals or wild people. My followers would suffer the Peter syndrome and betray me three times before my death. Some people shot at me, some people hit. No one ever stopped me. The animals were smarter. They'd try and stalk me but soon they'd realize something was different and, like most of my life, I'd be left alone. Still, the power to walk, to be quiet, and to bare my teeth to eat or drink for over a year had me focusing on my abilities in a whole new way. In the darkness of African nights, when no one was around, I had to ask myself the uncomfortable question. Was I God? I still slept and I still ate, but a strange inkling in me questioned the need. If I were stronger, more in tune with my power, like my brother, would I even need those last vestiges of my humanity? It was a question Nordeen had been contemplating since well before my birth.

I first met Suleiman and Fou-Fou in Mauritania. I was wandering north, for the same reason I had spent a year and change wandering west—just 'cause. They came upon me in the middle of nowhere and called me out in the most bizarre way possible.

“My employer says he knows about you. He says for you to know about yourself, you should come with us and meet him.” I went to their Jeep and reached for a hand to get in. Both men recoiled.

“With respect,” Suleiman said, “my employer also instructed us not to touch you in any way.” In its own way my life as a healer prepared me for being treated as a threat, so there were few words between me and the razor-necks until long after I made my first peace with Nordeen.

They drove me out to a clear piece of desert and flagged down a low-flying aircraft. Within a few hours I found myself in a small villa just outside of Marrakech. Creature comforts such as food, water, a bed, and a roof over my head were distant memories. I greeted them like war buddies long thought dead. One luxury I was better without was a mirror. It was as though I had absorbed my patients' illnesses, not cured them. I was pockmarked and blemished from the sun on all the spots of my face that weren't covered by a kinky mat of hair. Whatever pigment, other than rust, that had once colored my eyes seemed to have retired years ago. I examined my body visually for the first time since the Mog and found that I looked like someone who had crossed African cities, savannah, mountaintops, and desert on foot with no supplies. I had feet, and then I had calloused rhino-hide skin between where my feet ended and ground began. If I weighed more than ninety-two pounds it was not due to food. My clothes, before Nordeen's donation of silk pants and a loose-fitting djellabah, were gifted to me by some of the poorest people in one of the poorest nations. Any thoughts of godliness felt like a joke.

that moment.

Razor-necks don't operate in Marseilles. Angelwise Crew, the Question Marks, even the Brunfe Collective, none of them set foot in Marseilles. It's a no-fly zone for scams, deals, anything illegal. Nordeen always had special prohibitions against me coming here. All he'd say about it is that it used to be cursed and now it's protected. That's exactly why I'm here.

I pay my tab with the card then put it in an envelope and mail it to one of our drop houses. It takes a month before it gets back to him. No way in hell he's not tracking every purchase, every cash withdrawal on it. Wouldn't expect any less of him. But I've got to handle this on my own. And the boss has a way of making things more . . . difficult than they need to be.

So I ditch the hotel, burning the credit card for sure, and take a cab ride from an Algerian up to Avignon. He gets paid in cash. I utilize one of my old drop houses and pick up a much smaller bundle of cash and three different IDs. Next to the Palais des Papes, I find a hotel at the end of an alley with no internet service and no links to any crew I know of. It's the perfect spot to wait and see. It took Nordeen I didn't want to track mess in his house with this. In truth, I don't want to bring him anywhere near Yasmine.

"You're a king playing the role of vizier to sycophants and insignificants" were the first words the boss said to me. They were coughed out between battles against rising sputum, sometimes settling in my chest. Behind me Fou-Fou, Suleiman, and a host of other loyal murderers sat outside the door. I felt most of their pulses rise, their throats close, and their jaws clench as we set about entering the room and approached the small sand igloo that the man rested in. As usual he was covered in blankets and shadows. I made out two eyes perched immediately over a pit of darkness, all a child's height above the ground. But nothing else.

I'd never met anyone I couldn't feel before. Still haven't, though I'm sure there are others out there. At the time, it was the first confirmed surprise regarding my power I'd experienced. Nordeen had no heartbeat, pulse, respiratory functions, or even digestive system that I could feel. Every time those deep yellow orbs that he calls eyes blinked, I was surprised. That was probably why it took me a few minutes to respond to his critique of my life.

"Why king?" I finally attempted in English, realizing I couldn't recall what language he had spoken to me in. "Why not God?"

"At best you might become a proper tuner of a god machine, little healer." He responded in English, after a laugh that frightened me more than I thought possible. "But your providence is what? Bodies? Flesh? Perhaps time even? The gods are beyond such things."

"I'm barely understanding what you're saying. Are you like me?"

"You are barely visible as one of my kin, little healer. Don't presume too much." There was spittle in his voice that brightened the room as he spoke. It came to me that the others stayed out of the room not out of deference to me but to him. "That the fates make your talent so capricious is your own value."

"You know what I can do?"

"Do you know? I asked you earlier. Do you work all flesh, animal, fish, and fowl? Is your trick limited to the body, or do you see the mind and spirit as well? How do you heal? Do you reverse the ravages of time? Or do you connect to the eternal ideal of the flesh and return it to that monstrous

stagnant vision? Speak quickly and know I cannot be lied to.” It was the only hint he ever gave me his own abilities. I told him everything that I knew about my powers, though I left out my brother and my time in London with Yasmine. As soon as he said it, I believed he could tell if I was lying. I banked on omissions not being considered lies. But there was enough in my initial diatribe to make my soon-to-be master/boss content.

“From the sounds of it, you are a true healer. Unedited in the corporal connections among humans. You will serve my purpose well, if you so desire.” He coughed hard, and in those spasms I saw severely taxed organs illuminate from under his blankets. Whether it was with my power or with the naked eye, I can’t tell to this day. He seemed to be a man unimpressed with shocking others, so I did my best to conceal my surprise.

“You mean I have a choice?”

“Life worker.” He attempted a smile. “You above all others should know that when there is life there is always choice. I will not hold you here. Tomorrow my men and I will be gone. If you decide to come with us, I will teach you as much as I can about the thing that has decided to rest inside of you. My payment will be your undying loyalty for as long as I deem fit. You will be taken care of. You will have to work, but it won’t be hard for you. In time, you will come to appreciate it.”

“I’ve worked for warlords before . . .”

“Yes, in Mogadishu. That was where you first came to my attention. And as you walked across the original lands to the first tribes who speak to the stars, you carved an arc of healing . . . heralding your presence to all who would look for those such as us.”

“So why not kings then?” I asked trying to have a conversation instead of an interview. “Why not let whoever wants to find me, find me. If they are gods, I’ll bow. But if they’re men, let them come for me. I’ll just heal myself.”

“I remember when I was your age and just as ignorant, little healer. Yet I pride myself on learning lessons from the past. So I shall not, as my teacher did, bury you in a well with a one-ton rock resting on it to test how long it takes you to build up your strength to climb and lift the rock. Suffice to say there are fates worse than death that those such as we can inflict on one as limited as yourself.” I shook at the idea.

“You didn’t want the others in here.” My head was beginning to hurt from the massive amounts of information Nordeen gave with every sentence.

“They are not like us. Tell any of them what I am, and I promise you a slow death.” I started in shock, truly afraid for the first time in ages that I would be murdered. “The prologue to your necessary knowledge, little healer is this: the more people who know what you are, the more people are likely to use it against you.” I backed out of the room at that point, making a point to keep my gaze below the two yellow globes.

If you can understand why I stayed with Nordeen, then you can understand me a little better. I’m not a sycophant. I don’t crave power, nor do I have a desire to be under anyone who does. Nordeen’s description of the power inside of me was perfect: “the thing that decided to take up residence inside of me.” On rough days, it made me feel like an alien beast or, as Yasmine would say, like a freak. But on good days, when I exercised my power in right relation to the world, I felt nearly unstoppable. I grew with power.

Living a bipolar life, rocketing between freak and human, made me long for some stability. And despite the bowel-spilling terror Nordeen invoked, he offered that. I knew that under his protection and guidance I would learn more about myself.

If you don’t have powers, then you probably can’t understand why I stayed. Best analogy I can

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