

DREAM
OF
INNOCENCE

By Christian David

To DKM, for the courage to love and get hurt and somehow love again.

To CDM, for always being down to walk and talk.

Every seven years
When the Trapezoid of Time is perfectly aligned
And the sky turns white for seven nights
No man can die
This is when the Blade Masters fight
At the Tournament of Time
Nothing can kill you
But a blade through the heart

1 - The Premiere

Julian woke from his dream standing up. It was the best way to wake up, already walking down Seven Sun Boulevard. His mind had been somewhere else, another city, at the center of a sand filled stadium, the clashing of swords echoing through time. A memory of a scream brought him back.

The purple sun was setting and he knew he was late for the premiere. But, talent arrived when talent arrived.

The director, Moranovich, would already be high on the essence, surrounded by models. Julian had been high on the essence since before he left the house, however long ago that was. How many blue sunsets had it been since he met the girl with blue hair and seven serpent tattoos?

As he approached the glass doors of the *Grotesque Theater* he paused to take in his reflection, tucking in his dark navy shirt, the one with the dancing flamingos. He took off his sunglasses, realizing that they were on. For a split second, he thought he saw the thin slits of a lizard's eyes staring back at him, but they were just his baby blues. He shook it off, putting his shades back on and taming his long blonde hair.

"You!" The unmistakably hoarse voice of the director, Moranovich, bellowed out. The barrel chested man stormed through the crowded lobby, one hand holding a drink over his head, the other pointing right at Julian, who had just been hoping to blend in at the bar.

"You missed the whole flick," Moranovich picked up Julian with a big meaty fist. The man was half gargoyle, with greasy hair and red cheeks like candy apples. His breath smelt like gasoline.

"It is what it is," Julian sighed.

“It is what it is... It is what it is...” Moranovich repeated. His eyes burned, intoxicated with the essence. Julian had seen him throw a man right off stage before, crashing into a row of chairs, simply for flubbing a line.

“I should turn you into a statue and then pulverize you into statue-dust right here!” Moranovich threatened, ripping Julian’s shades off and growling. “You’re lucky I don’t want to embarrass you in front of all your fans,” he relaxed for a moment, silence filling the lobby. Out of nowhere he exploded with laughter. “You’re lucky you’ve got the shine, Rook! You’ve got the shine, baby!” He squeezed Julian so hard they both wheezed.

“Fans?” Julian gasped, as Moranovich spun him around.

“Look who showed up,” Moranovich said, showcasing Julian to everyone in the lobby like a souvenir. “The busiest man in the city, so busy he couldn’t even make his own premiere! Rook Shine!”

Rook Shine? Rook was a name Julian had gone by, out here in the Golden City on the Coast, but where did Shine come from? Rook was a name he’d gone by lately, at least. He’d had a dozen. Ace, Jack, Bishop. He threw out his identities like playing cards or pieces on a chess board. To him, that was just part of being an actor in the city of Never Ending Sunsets.

Everyone in the lobby laughed too eagerly. It was an eclectic, chatty crowd with more people than Julian had expected. There were actors and models and agents and ghouls, even an elf or two. Julian spotted a few dwarves with black briefcases in the back, smoking cigars like they meant business. That’s when he noticed the poster on the wall. It had his face on it. Only his. *Rook Shine*, it said. That made him more uneasy than all the eyes on him combined.

“I would hardly call it *my* premiere,” Julian said, wondering where else that poster might be going up around town. He didn’t let it worry him, he’d been out here for seven years and no one had ever recognized him. Besides, you can’t be high on the essence and worried at the same time, Julian reminded himself.

“Of course it was your premier,” a man in an electric white suit seemed to teleport out of thin air. “It was more than that. It was your explosion onto the scene,” he said, sliding up to Julian. “Roq Delliere, producer extraordinaire.” His eyes flashed as he held out his hand.

“Rook,” Julian said. He thought he felt a slight shock as he took the man’s hand, like static. “Rook Shine,” Julian added. The problem with having so many identities was, it was too fun to take a new one and run.

“Nice to meet you Mr. Shine,” Roq replied. Had lightning flashed through his eyes? “Meet Fawn and Sveta,” he said, motioning to a girl with red hair and a scar that led way too far, standing next to another paralyzingly beautiful girl with black hair and cat eyes. The combination made Julian’s legs weak.

“Sorry I missed the party,” Julian offered up the quickest words he could find.

“Far from it,” Roq laughed. “If you’re with Roq you’re still at the party.” His eyes sizzled.

“And when you’re with Sveta, you’re in the right place,” Sveta said silkily as her long black tail stretched out and poured Fawn a drink. Julian didn’t know where to look and not stare. Red dress, black dress, red dress, black dress, his eyes went back and forth trying not to look anywhere too long. He didn’t care to stare at that poster of himself either. *Rook Shine* stared back at him.

No one knew who he was out here, he reassured himself. His right hand tingled, squeezing into an anxious fist as he tapped his foot.

“Relax,” Roq snapped his fingers and a man in a silver blazer and black bowtie handed him a genie’s lamp full of glowing liquid. “Pure essence,” Roq prompted him. “Celebrate, it’s not every day we find someone with the shine,” he said.

When Roq said *shine*, Julian’s right hand twitched again, jolting like it had squeezed a beam of lightning. He grabbed the lamp and took a deep breath,

exhaling golden bubbles. The next thing he knew, he was on the couch with Sveta, her tail wrapped around his shoulder. His body felt like it was glowing from the inside out.

Moranovich was on the other couch, wearing Julian's sunglasses now, telling a blond haired elf a story about how his mother ran off with a gargoyle when he was a baby and left him backstage.

"I was born backstage," Moranovich said, like he was winking behind his shades.

Julian let out a silly laugh. He could hear Roq's voice too, far away, like it was muted, but still high pitched in his mind, like helium. The room vibrated with shapes and colors.

"Rook's going to be a star," Roq said. "It's sensational, the way he stole the picture. I mean, the moment he was on screen I knew he had the shine. And he's got even more charm in person. What was the main character's name? Talon? Shmalon. Rook said, move over Tal-no-one, there's a new face of action."

Julian was holding on to Sveta's leg for dear life, feeling like he was going to float right out of his body. His hand squeezed her thigh ever so lightly, every time Roq said *shine*. As he looked in her eyes, his head felt like it was floating toward the sky, off to one of the million multicolored moons.

"He's going to be everywhere!" Roq boasted. "The biggest action star who ever lived! They're going to know Rook Shine's face all the way from here to the *Capital!*" Roq emphasized the last word. *The Capital*.

It echoed, too far off for Julian to hear now. He was lost in Sveta's outerspace eyes. They were as black as the black hole at the center of the universe, the one that every sun revolved around. He was about to float away in those eyes and never come back when, all the way deep in the distance, he heard a different voice in his head.

Look at me always, the voice said, softly. A girl with green eyes and brown hair flickered through the darkness of his mind. They walked downtown, beside sunscrapers that stretched vertically into the sky. He held her beneath an old knocked out streetlamp, where no one could see. Eyes blinking with tears, he tried to find his way back... He tried to find his way back...

Look at me always, she had said, seven years ago when the Trapezoid of Time had been perfectly aligned and the sky had been pure white. Her voice was nothing but a faint whisper, after seven years. But the whisper roared like a crowd filled stadium, now.

“All the way back to the Capital,” Roq toasted. “They’ll chant his name in the City of Fate, the City of Fortune itself!”

For a split second, Julian was back in the middle of a sweltering stadium again, sand beneath his feet. The sound of swords clashed and clamored, echoing over shouts and cheers. Then came the scream.

“No!” Julian jumped up from the couch. “I’m sorry, I’ve gotta go!” He stammered, looping Sveta’s tail over his head, turning to run from the leather couched lounge.

“Where ya going?” Roq asked.

“I’ve gotta find my friend!” Julian said, squeezing his way past two robotic looking bouncers in black suits. He raced through the chandeliered lobby toward the door.

“Come back here, or I’ll lock you in the crypt beneath the theater, with the sadistic ghosts!” Moranovich shouted beneath skewed sunglasses, messy hair no longer slicked back, shaking his fist in the wrong direction, before laughing his head back into the couch .

“After party at my penthouse!” Roq called after him. “777 Seven Sun Boulevard! All your friends will be there!” Julian was already out the door.

“I’ve got to find Jib,” Julian said to himself as he panted, sidewalk spinning, the red sunset stinging his eyes. He’d been in the theater for hours, apparently. It was time to find Jib, the only man in the city who would know how to deal with this level of buzz.

Julian ran diagonally down Seven Sun Boulevard, just to keep a straight line, heading toward the ocean. The brilliant suns spun high in the sky, with reds, whites, purples and blues reflecting in wave after melting wave, like one big kaleidoscope. Lately, he couldn’t avoid the feeling of each of the suns creeping closer to the black hole in the sky, slowly heading toward their blinding eclipse. It followed him like the feeling of someone following him now, all the time, like reptile eyes hiding in the shadows of the back alleys.

Julian told himself the panic he was feeling had nothing to do with the fact that the Trapezoid of Time would be perfectly aligned again soon. Why would it? He would not be at the Tournament when the sky turned white, this time. He was a no-name actor now in the Golden City on the Coast, not a swordsman.

He had to find Jib, the only man in the city who knew his real name. Jib would remind him he had nothing to fear, out here. Julian would be someone new by tonight, before the next blue sunset. He could kill off Rook just like he’d killed off all his other characters, all his other lives.

If he could kill Julian, he could kill Rook, no problem.

He told himself the panic had nothing to do with the fact that he’d been auditioning for bigger and bigger parts lately. It had nothing to do with the movie, the premiere, the Tournament, or the lizard-like voice chanting in his head. *Shine. Shine.* His hand tingled as he breathed in the ocean air and felt the seven suns shine on his face. It had nothing to do with the fact that he was starting to feel the sword in his hand again.

2 - The Thread

It was pointless to guess where Jib might be with any certainty. On a night like tonight he could be at the *Rose Cafe*, *Electric Club*, passed out in a back alley, or at a magic parlor or a zoo, for all Julian knew. Julian found Jib all the time, but could almost never remember how.

The only thing Julian knew for sure was that at this point in the never ending sunsets, Jib was feeling good, wherever he was. The scary question was, how good?

Maybe he was just loopy from the effects of the essence, but Julian felt like he'd been walking forever. He should have reached Rose Avenue a long way back. Julian pulled out his old pocket watch, with seven hands on the dial. He thumbed the faded gold engraving. *To the man of the hour*.

One hand on the pocket watch was always pointed at the Dark Star, like an anchor. It was the Black Sun, the pupil in the eye of the universe. The other six hands moved around the dial, each with the orbit of a different star. The pink sun spun the quickest, whizzing like a fairy in the sky. But the time didn't seem right tonight. The hand of the red sun was long past setting and there was no way he had been walking all night. Feeling eyes watching him from the shadows again, he turned around quickly, but no one was there.

Suddenly, Julian felt very lost. Only one shop on the street had a light on. *The Thread*. It sounded familiar, like an old thrift shop he might have picked up some flowered shirts from once before a party. He might as well make a quick stop. After all, if he was going to change his identity, he should change his outfit.

A little old lady with white hair was working behind the desk, fixing a necklace. The only other person in the shop, she smiled expectantly at Julian as he combed the clearance rack.

Julian looked for something that could serve as his new disguise: a brown leather jacket, a black shirt with silk lightning bolts, and a hat to hide his eyes. He tried on a pair of mirror sunglasses.

Looking in the mirrors within the mirror, he fell down a rabbit hole of reflections. He saw himself within himself, over and over again in his own eyes. He felt like he was going to lose his balance for a second.

There's something you desire, Julian.

Did Julian hear that? Had he said that to himself in the mirror, or was there a voice in his head? He kept going in the cascading reflections, looking deeper and deeper as the mirrors turned red, blood red.

There's something you desire more than anything.

The voice was louder, hissing through his head as it pulled Julian closer to the mirror.

The Lizard King will give anything you can imagine, Julian.

Julian shook his head, trying to look away from the mirror. He saw a vicious reptile staring back at him now, with red scales and a forked tongue. The voice in his head was a cold blooded roar.

FIND THE FAME AND HE WILL FIND YOU.

He ripped off his glasses, but they were regular black shades in his hand now. Panting, heart pounding in his chest, he looked at the old lady.

She had the same expectant smile, like she hadn't heard a thing, still just waiting for him to buy something.

"Have you seen my lost bead?" She asked innocently, like a sweet old granny. How had she not heard that horrendous reptilian shout?

Julian just shook his head, stunned.

"Are you sure you don't have my lost bead?" She asked again just as sweetly. Julian reached in his tight turquoise pants and right in the pocket was a tiny, shiny black bead.

It was a regular bead that could have come from anywhere. It could have fallen off anybody on any random dance floor in the city. It could have been in his pocket from weeks ago, or perhaps a forgotten memento of an overnight guest. It wasn't his, that much he knew.

The old lady smiled gleefully as he went to hand it to her, but it was as heavy as a handful of steel. He slammed the tiny black bead on the glass counter.

"Thank you," she said. "For bringing it from so far away... All the way from the Capital. Thank you, Julian with the faraway look in his eyes..."

He wanted to scream, but his heart was in his throat. Who was this witch? How did she know his name? For the second time tonight he turned and bolted. She cackled after him. "FIND THE FAME AND HE WILL FIND YOU!" *She hissed.*

A black cat ran across the floor of the thrift shop. Julian tripped and fell into the mirror, shattering glass everywhere. Seven shards scratched his skin as blood stained the broken glass. Had she really said *Julian*? No, it wasn't possible.

In fact, everything was normal. Julian was staring at himself in a mirror wearing mirror sunglasses, while quiet elevator music played in the thrift shop. There was no broken glass anywhere. There were strange reptilian voices. He simply paid for his new outfit and turned to leave. Until he reached in his right pocket and found a black bead of darkness. He stared into it until it consumed him like a black hole. Then came the bad *deja vus* of seven red reflections, seven screaming vipers, seven screaming men falling on their swords.

Julian snapped out of it. The old lady smiled at him and waved goodbye, with a look of grandmotherly concern in her eye. A black cat crossed the aisle in front of Julian but he paused just in time, this time. *This time?* Julian scratched his head. It had been a very long night. He tried not to think about Rook Shine or fame or the Capital. It had been a very long night and the mind could play tricks on you when you were sleep deprived and deep into the essence. He was in the Golden City on the Coast now, and he had sunsets to catch.

When he stepped outside *The Thread* with a whole new wardrobe, the blue sun was still in the sky. The blue hand on his pocket watch pointed away from the Dark Star. He had thought it was much later than that.

After a short walk, Rose Avenue came around the street corner. Julian recognized a few bars and a streetcar selling food so he grabbed a bite. The Rose Cafe was only a few blocks away. Luckily, he didn't notice the seven black cats crossing back alleys as he walked by, or the seven black birds flying through the sky, as quick as the mind could count.

He had to find Jib. They'd grab a drink and laugh away this bad dream. They'd ditch the city for a while, maybe even take a long cruise down the coastal highway and feel the never ending summer breeze in their hair. They'd find somewhere new, if they had to. Jib was the most popular guy in the city that nobody knew and they were never more popular than when they were together in a bar full of strangers.

3 - The Pocket Watch

Julian bopped his head in the middle of the crowded *Rose Cafe*. The ambient lights were violet and ricochet red. An electric beat moving through the mass of bodies like a pulse as a pink spotlight bounced around the room, illuminating one face at a time. Darkly lidded eyes swayed side to side. Julian just tapped his foot and scanned the crowd, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

When you've been hit with a curse, you'd be surprised how easy it is not to realize. Curses become repressed like a traumatic memory. They get buried deep down, deeper than anything. You don't notice the discoloration in the lights. You don't look in the windows of abandoned buildings, to see what's watching you. You might not notice your curse at all, even if it was as obvious as a woman that was way too beautiful for you, pulling you down a dark hallway by the tie.

Julian finally wasn't thinking about *The Thread* anymore, or any of his exes or hexes at all. He forgot it like you can forget the nightmare you had last night by the time you made breakfast. He pushed all his nightmares aside, until he saw a girl with brown hair and green eyes in the crowd. Or thought he did. It was just a flash of a face between faces. She'd been staring right through him, but she was gone now, no matter how deeply he searched the dance floor. That face was coming back to him more and more lately, this haunting face from seven years ago, and not only when he was asleep. He could not count on himself to separate dreams from daydreams and memories now.

After what he'd done to his mind the last seven years, how could he trust that he really knew the face, or the memory of the face, at all? The only way he could know for sure would be to check a photo he had hidden away, deep in the hills outside the Golden City on the Coast. There was a photo of a girl tucked away in a journal full of faded ink, buried in a secret spot. But, he wasn't going to do that. He had buried it there to be forgotten. He should've burned it then. Whether her

face was true or not, he could still feel her, even if he'd burned his brain cells away with the essence, night after night for the last seven years.

Julian took a sip from his glass, back to searching the dance floor and floating deeply again. That was what was beautiful about the essence. It did not choose favorites between dreams or memories. If you got high enough, there were only dreams. The essence let you imagine a future without the past. Julian was all about the future. The future was here, now. We stepped into it second by second, Julian thought.

Walking around the Rose Cafe, looking for Jib, Julian felt amazing for a moment. It's amazing how long you can ignore your recurring nightmares. You could wake up clawing at your face, searching for scales you'd seen in the mirror, then fall right back asleep, if you wanted. If you were buzzed enough.

Julian stood in the middle of the dance floor, tapping his foot to the music. He soaked in the sight of people dancing under the canopy. Glowing orbs floated around the attractive people hanging out beneath hanging vines. They sipped the essence and felt fine. They never stopped moving and talking. Julian swayed with it, forgetting himself.

Eventually, Julian took out his pocket watch again, out of habit. It was the only thing from his past he hadn't hidden away somewhere. He was never really sure why he held on to it so tight. It was the heaviest thing he had. But it was too important to lose, even if it felt like it was burning a hole in his pocket every second the seven suns sailed through the sky. He rubbed the tarnished old gold, reading the inscription,

To the man of the hour. Instantly, a roller coaster of memories hijacked his mind once more. He slammed his next two glasses of essence and took a breath off a glowing silver pen, somewhere between dancing with faceless strangers. He was so high he danced with flamingos, the world spinning on seven different axes.

The first time Julian had heard the phrase, “*To the man of the hour,*” his father had spoken them to his oldest brother, Abrian, the day that Abrian had become a Blade Master. Abrian the Promise, they had called him then, almost fourteen years ago. The Trapezoid of Time had been aligned, the sky pure white above the stadium, as Abrian fought in his first Tournament of Time, the fabled Tournament of Masters. Abrian was young to be fighting in the Tournament. Too young, their father had said. But apparently he had promised a reporter he would win his fight against Master Fecine, who was the favorite to win the Tournament, and the word had spread around the stadium like wildfire. The people of the Capital had raved at the young man’s bold confidence.

Julian had been ten years old, but he remembered that fight clearly. The thing about repressed memories is you don’t know when they are going to un-repress themselves. He couldn’t take his hand off his pocket watch now, even in the middle of the crowded *Rose Cafe* dance floor.

He remembered how the beautiful swords sparkled as they danced beneath the white sky. He remembered his father forcing him to watch through tears as blood poured into the sand.

“This is what fighting costs,” his father had said, grabbing Julian by the chin, turning his boyish face forward.

Abrian had been maimed by Master Fecine’s sword, then. Yet he fought with his left hand. Abrian the Bold, they called him after. Most fighters would have yielded long before, especially against someone as deadly as Master Fecine. You could see the man was cruel just by the look of his face. Fecine the Feral, as cruel as he was talented. He was wealthy, and he killed men for sport while he trained at his estates, when the sky was not pure white and they could not be healed by the magic of the Trapezoid.

“He can’t get hurt, right?” Julian had cried. “The Trapezoid will heal him, right?” His father had been too tense to respond.

When the Trapezoid of Time was perfectly aligned and the black hole in the sky disappeared for seven nights, it was almost impossible to die. Like many miracles, the source of the power is unknown. But to see a man with a slash across his face heal before your young eyes, leaving no scar, nothing but a dried tear of blood, was to know it was true.

Some said it was because Time itself stood still. Some said it was because it moved in fast forward, the Universe traveling at hyperspeed as it warped beneath the gravity of a black hole. No one could define the science. But, even a man on his last breath could survive seven more nights, underneath the Trapezoid. Those who studied the sword used it as an opportunity to test themselves against the Blade Masters, without fear. This is when the Tournament of Time was held.

It was the perfect time to duel. Nothing could kill you but a blade through the heart.

Julian still remembered the gashes on Abrian's body, opened wide but healing. His arms bled profusely, sopping onto his sword. Julian squeezed his middle brother's hand in the bleachers, weeping, trying to look away. *Dartagnán*. Dartagnán, his inseparable brother, only a few years older, with red hair and the bluest, most hopeful eyes.

The crowd waited with baited breath, like they could feel death creeping into the stadium. Even their father could barely watch and he was harder than steel. A Blade Master who Julian had never seen fight. He uttered few words and mostly spoke of discipline.

There was only one way to become a Blade Master. Defeat another Master. To become one of the few men that could walk into any room in the Capital to the reception of silence and bows, you had to win a fight at the Tournament of Time, a task most swordsmen never come close to achieving. For every thousand men in the City of Fate, maybe one could challenge a Master. Some trained their whole

youth and never were given the chance to enter the Tournament. Most were too afraid to try by the time they were past being boisterous boys. But not all.

In an incredible left handed feat, Abrian spun and disarmed Fecine, holding him defenseless at swordpoint. The man raged and fumed as he was forced to yield, a terrible rage crossing his face. Abrian joined the ranks of the Masters in his very first match. Abrian the Promise, the retired Masters called him. He had not lied.

He passed out a few seconds after the fight was over, ripped to shreds, death banging on his door. His family waited by Abrian's bed all night, unsure if he would wake. Even his sister Lillianne, sweet but ill-tempered little Lily, had stopped talking about birds and dresses for a moment to hold his hand and pray.

So grievous were Abrian's wounds that day, that even the Trapezoid of Time could barely heal him. To leave the Trapezoid of Time with scars was to know you fought past mortal limits. Even after seven days, scars still marked his face, his left eye left permanently drooping.

"To the man of the hour," his father had whispered, placing the pocket watch in Abrian's hand when he finally woke in the hospital bed. "You are a Master now, son," he said, kissing Abrian's forehead and telling him to rest. Abrian had been unable to fight in the rest of the tournament.

That had been the first time their father had bestowed the cherished family heirloom to any of his three sons. His father's father and brothers had passed it between themselves, to the Master of the moment. A tradition Julian's brothers carried on joyously for the next seven years. *To the man of the hour*. The phrase marked the greatest moments of all their lives, as one brother would relinquish it to the next with a rueful grin.

The manner in which the pocket watch had come into Julian's possession still burned in his gut. It chewed at his heart with reptile teeth. He did not deserve to have the pocket watch in his possession, out here in the Golden City on the

Coast. For seven years after Julian had lamented the fact that it belonged to Dartagnán, truly. Julian had not seen his brother since the day he had proved he was not a Master at all, but a disgrace.

He could feel the little gears of time grinding away at him now from inside the pocket watch, as he danced senselessly on the floor, spinning, doing splits, taking love from whatever direction it came. Julian had no idea what it meant to be a Master anymore. He shook his head. He didn't even know what it meant to be Julian anymore.

He was an pseudonymous actor now in a faraway land, nothing more. It was the only way forward. He could disappear into any role, be someone new every night. He took another deep sip of the essence and felt so light he might float away completely, above the crowd, watching himself below, dancing and laughing, trapped in the faces and the lights.

Find the fame and he will find you. He will give you anything you desire.

The lizard-like voice hissed in Julian's head, popping his high like a balloon. Another sip would get it back. He would get lost in the crowd for one more night, he told himself. Just one more night. He wasn't running away, he was just being who he was. He was just being no one. There was a difference between running away and being lost. When you were lost you could be free.

He met a girl with forest green eyes and told her his name was Solitaire. He touched her face to see if it was real and not another face from the past. They danced in the blur as more and more glasses passed around, breathing out of glass devices that could lift you into the kaleidoscope sky when you exhaled. Julian never looked down.

He would be sure to find Jib Luceddi soon, the man who knew all Julian's secrets. The man who could jinx you with the hijinx in his laughter. Then the night would really get started. Julian's last night as this version of no one. He was on his way to the place you didn't find, but a place you ended up..... Oasis.

4 - The Search

A man with red hair stared out the glass window of his office, but did not see his gaunt reflection staring back. The thousand sunscrapers of the Capital laid out before him, but he did not see them either. He was lost in a memory of his brothers trading swords in their backyard, laughing, smiling like silly children. He snapped out of it, before the smile reached his face. His jaw was too hard for laughter now. He'd been standing in the window so long the lights had long since turned out, so still the motion detectors never turned them back on.

His eyes dove into the city below. He scanned the myriad of lights bouncing off buildings and windows, searching intently, aimlessly. How do you find something that cannot be found? Dartagnán asked himself the question over and over, face in the shadowy glass. His eyes were as blue as ice.

Renting the office wasn't cheap, but at least he could hear himself think up here. Besides, he had to keep up appearances. He didn't need anyone knowing how far he'd taken things, how invested in his search he'd truly become. He was overinvested a long time ago, according to Abrian. But what did Abrian know? There were more important things than making millions to Dartagnán now. Making millions was so much easier than his new pursuit.

Finding something that could not be found was a whole different problem, especially in a city as big and corrupt as Fortune. It was the City of the Last Breath, The City of Fate, the Last City in the Universe. It went by so many names.

Who was to say what anything should be called now? Who was ever to say what something's true purpose was, but the thing itself?

If you asked Dartagnán, it was the City of the Damned. No one out there would feel safe if they knew what Dartagnán knew. Psychosis would be their only reprieve if they'd seen what he'd seen. There was a war for Heaven and Hell going on and Dartagnán had seen his share of Hell.

Dartagnán had never been very religious. Once he'd seen the Demon, looked into the Demon's eyes, he could not question that Hell existed. That was his only proof of Heaven.

He looked away from the glass for a moment, pierced by his own eyes. He was not sure what scared him more, his fear or his excitement.

If there were Demons, he would have to find Angels for help. He had to believe in Angels to still have hope because he could not run away now. He was not Julian.

Julian. It had been almost seven years and sometimes he still talked to Julian out loud like he was there. But there was no Julian, anymore. Julian was just another thing that couldn't be found. But there was still hope. The Demon had told Dartagnán of a sword that could change everything. The Demon who had come in the form of a lizard who could change faces. It was madness to trust him, of course. But what other choice did he have? It didn't matter what the source of the idea was if the idea was correct. There was a sword that could right all wrongs, the chameleon had told him. *Mordecai*, had been his name.

Dartagnán did not like to think of the name, or picture the reptile eyes. It was still hard to believe what he had seen. But reality was not for him to determine. He'd realized that a long time ago. He couldn't change what was. The surreal had become real.

He had not believed Evelyn when she had first told him of the chameleons, or the lizard's blood that allowed you to change faces. They had other powers too, that Evelyn didn't quite understand. They could influence your thoughts, she said.

Evelyn was the only person who had ever scared Dartagnán more than he scared himself. She drank the lizard's blood, she said, and it gave her wild visions. She said it let her see other dimensions, past, present, things never to be but in dreams, things you couldn't imagine until you tried it and felt the terrifying elation.

She said coming down was like acid in your veins, tracing your outline as you remembered your own face.

She had looked strung out last time he'd seen her, bruised and beaten. He knew she was not who she pretended to be, lizard blood or no lizard blood. He knew who she really was, even if it was too painful to admit. Dartagnán let her hang around, almost as if the real her would return someday.

It wasn't long after his sister Lily had passed away that Evelyn showed up. She had become a caretaker for Dartagnán's parents, in their grief. It had been hard enough when Julian disappeared, but after Lily's death... They were inconsolable.

Yet, when Dartagnán stopped by his childhood home, his parents always seemed to be taking care of Evelyn. He once saw them washing her feet, while she wept on the couch and Evelyn seemed to have a lot of new dresses lately. He wanted desperately to reach out to Abrian and discuss the madness that was taking place, but for some reason, he couldn't. It had been many red sunsets since he had reached out to Abrian. He told himself it was because he was too lost in his search.

It wouldn't matter that much to Abrian at this point, anyway. Abrian had his own child now to look after, and his companies. That Abrian had so much going on was probably for the best. He didn't need to know who Evelyn really was, either. Just like he didn't need to know what Dartagnán was really up to, or who he was associating with. If Dartagnán had troubling sleeping before, there were only waking nightmares now that he had met Mordecai. He would not wish the sight of the reptile eyes on anyone.

At first, he'd thought he was just hallucinating, a combination of sleep deprivation and liquid essence, packaged into high potency purple pills. Dartagnán had been working slavish hours for his investment firm. The top firm in the city. If

he wasn't at his desk he was wining and dining clients, or staring at his ceiling in the dark of his bachelor pad.

His firm had an in-house bar where the bartender poured drinks that could make you forget anything or remember anything, depending on whether it was the start or end of your shift. Did Abrian's company have that?

His *old* firm, Dartagnán should say now. Although he wasn't advertising that. Everything changed when he met Mordecai on one of the firm's sunscraper rooftop cabanas.

"Are you familiar with the sword, Mr. Dartagnán?" The smooth faced client with an expensive suit asked. He had a high pitched, curious voice. Dartagnán paid no mind, most of the wealthy clients at the firm were eccentric.

He was more surprised at the fact that the man didn't know who Dartagnán was. Dartagnán had bested most of the top swordsmen in the city, at one time or another. But he let it go. He had trained his ego better than that.

"I could probably defend myself if I had to," Dartagnán laughed. A harsh, reptilian face took the place of his clients, scales shimmering, but only for a split second. Dartagnán barely even blinked. The pressure he'd been under lately must be getting to him, he had thought then, dismissing it. He hadn't slept in days.

As the conversation went on, it became impossible to ignore the flashes, the lizard bearing its poisonous teeth, glaring at him with burning slits for eyes.

"Who are you?" Dartagnán asked, frozen in his seat, wishing he had his sword.

"*Mordecai*," the chameleon breathed and it chilled Dartagnán to the bone. "Stay, please, I have secrets to tell." His voice was a smooth hiss, hanging on the s's. But it was strange, like the words were partly in Dartagnán's own mind. Had it all been his mind?

It was Mordecai that day who told Dartagnán about the war going on between Dark and Light. He said the chameleons were in between both sides,

always, for all time, trying to keep the balance. He was a broker of peace, there to recruit Dartagnán to the balance.

“The balance has never been this off before, this tilted towards Darkness. The Darkness spreads as the Trapezoid of Time approaches,” Mordecai said gravely. “We must act soon,” he implored. But Dartagnán didn’t buy it, he knew a Demon when he saw one. There was nothing but hate in Mordecai’s eyes.

“There is hope, though,” Mordecai continued. “For those who wield the blade. For the one who could call himself *Master of Masters*.”

“What kind of hope?” Dartagnán asked, unable to break from Mordecai’s powerful stare.

“Why, a sword, of course,” Mordecai hissed with excitement. “A sword that heaven forged. Forged by the hands of Angels, as it was. Do you believe in Heaven, Dartagnán?”

“My father always believed in guardian Angels,” Dartagnán said, trying to feel his feet on the ground.

“That is why I have come to you, Dartagnán,” Mordecai slithered his forked tongue. “I know who you are... Dartagnán the Determined. Dartagnán the Destined. Only you can find the sword we’re looking for. The sword that can save our souls. The sword that can save *anyone’s* soul.”

Dartagnán thought of Julian for a painful flicker in the mind. He thought of his boyish smile and his untamed laugh, echoing as they danced together in the backyard, wooden swords in hand. He had been so innocent, then. But with the memory came the blood soaked sword, the blood soaked hands, the horror in Julian’s eyes, the horror that filled the eyes of everyone in the arena. Dartagnán had watched from the bleachers, with Abrian and their father but he pushed the thought away. He could not go back to that memory again. It was too painful to think of the last time he had seen Julian. It should have been Dartagnán in the

stadium that day; it should have been him in the fight. To drown the memory he chilled it with other cold ones. He thought of Lillianne and her lifeless eyes... ..

The past was too painful. It gnawed at him, clawed at his insides. If there was a way they could still be saved... Even a small chance to save his sister's soul, his brother's soul...he had to take it. He could not bear the thoughts of their eternal damnation any longer and here was one thing that Mordecai had said that Dartagnán couldn't force out of his head. It was the reason all his searching had been fruitless so far, pointless if he was being honest with himself.

"Where do I find this Blade?" Dartagnán had asked.

"The City of Ice," Mordecai hissed.

The City of Ice. Mordecai had told Dartagnán exactly how to get there, to the City Below the Suns and Sand. Dartagnán tried to remember exactly how, now, as his eyes and imagination wandered out far past the city laid before him, bathed in seven suns. His eyes searched far into the distance, into the black hole that lay all the way out there, deep in the center of the universe. *If he left the city and headed toward that Dark Star, in the distance he would find the desert. In the desert, the purple moons would guide him.* If he went far enough, he would find it, Mordecai had said.

Dartagnán had heard of the City of Ice before, the City of Frozen Time. It was an old elves tale. The only problem was, Dartagnán had never heard of someone returning from the search for the Blade with their mind in tact. But his mind wandered already to the faraway tundra, perhaps already lost to it,, past purple moons and towers that pierced the suns of blue and white, red and gold, like glistening swords in the sky. If there was any chance that redemption for his family lie there, he had to go.