

Turns

A Samuel Branch Novel

By Eric Dontigny

Preview Chapters

Chapter 1

“You see,” I said, in friendly explanation, “the trick to a good martini is less about the vodka than the extras. You start with two parts vodka and a touch of vermouth over three ice cubes. Shake. Then pour. You add a splash of lemon juice, three olives on a toothpick and sip til finished.”

I held out a full martini glass to the Glynn. If a cop had seen us, I would have been arrested on sight for providing alcohol to a minor. Luck of luck, there were no cops in my kitchen. I mean, how would I explain that the Glynn is thousands of years old, despite his adolescent face? There had been a time when I wondered why he chose to appear that way. That time had passed. The Glynn, all around messenger, errand boy and hatchet man for the Lords and Ladies, looked from the glass to me and back again. I relished his obvious discomfort.

“Must we go through this every time, Samuel Branch?”

“Drink it,” I said, no longer friendly.

“You know that I won't.”

“Drink it or leave.”

“There is no time for this. They wish to see you.”

“Too bad. I don't wish to see them.”

“There are matters at hand about which you need to know.”

I pushed the martini glass closer to him.

“You know the condition,” I said.

“As you wish. I will leave. Have a care, Samuel Branch. There are forces moving.”

“I'm sure the Bound will get around to me in good time.”

“It is not the Bound.”

The Glynn vanished out of existence between heartbeats. Damn him, I thought. He knew how to play the game too. I downed the martini in two, burning swallows. Poured the rest out of the shaker and downed that too. It had taken months of trial and error to find a way to drive the Glynn away at will. Now that I had it figured out and had sent him back to his masters and mistresses, he used my own knowledge against me. I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was a little. He couldn't understand why I refused to deal with the Lord and Ladies again. Too many years in their service had blinded him to the truth. The Lords and Ladies, primordial beings that held the laws of reality in place, had played me. That alone I could have lived with, but the price had been far too high and I

hadn't been the one to pay it.

Jean, a woman I have loved for most of my adult life, had paid in my place. Victim of a brutal physical and spiritual assault meant to hurt me, she had been just this side of a coma ever since. She never spoke, never acknowledged the presence of anything or anyone, including me. In its way, the attack had worked. I was still bleeding every day; you just couldn't see it. The worst part was that the whole errand had been pointless, a ploy intended to make the Lords and Ladies stronger. They claimed they didn't possess foreknowledge and couldn't have known, but I eventually realized that you don't need foreknowledge if you have an unlimited capacity to calculate the odds. I refused to forgive them for allowing Jean to become collateral damage and coercing me into helping.

I'd found myself wishing more and more often that I could talk to Father Bradley. The grizzled old priest had saved my life facing down a creature of pure malevolence. It was one of the bravest things I've ever witnessed. I fight my battles with no small amount of power at my disposal. He fought that battle armed with nothing more than his faith and a right hook of smiting that would have made the God of the Old Testament proud. The thing I was needed most, however, was his counsel. He'd been tending to poor parishes for decades and his advice was as often practical as spiritual. His experience battling personified evil had shaken the man, though, and he'd gone on a spiritual retreat. I didn't blame him, but I sorely missed him.

I'd been drinking too much since all of that went down and didn't care. For the record, I'm in the drink-to-forget category. It didn't work very well, but it occasionally took the sharpest edges off the guilt. On that day, though, I would have been drinking no matter what. It was the end of the semester and I had final papers to grade. That is a task that drives normal people to drink. I went into my office, a converted pantry, and fired up my computer. Teaching online classes had upsides and downsides. I considered getting final papers in a digital format a downside, but you take the bad with the good.

Two hours later, I once again realized that the format didn't matter. I still wanted to start banging my head against my desk. I couldn't believe that after an entire semester with me, some of my students were still unclear on the different uses of affect and effect. Given that I'd taken the time to cover it, quiz on it, worked up a reference sheet and gently corrected the error over-and-over on papers, I started knocking five points off the top of the grade every time I saw a misuse. I knew I'd change the grades later, but it was cathartic in the moment.

I was glad that it was the end of the spring semester. I didn't have any classes scheduled over the summer and I needed the break from teaching. I wasn't sure that I'd be doing it again when the

fall semester rolled around. My head wasn't in the right place for teaching and hadn't been for some time. If not for my contract, I might have quit sooner. I manned up and chipped away at the grading until it was getting dark outside. A few more hours the next day and I'd be finished. I stood up from the desk, stretching my aching back, and wandered into the kitchen. I hadn't even opened the fridge when I heard the knock at the door.

“Oh, for the love of God, not again,” I said.

For months, random strangers had been showing up at my door: people that had no business knowing who I was or where to find my home. Yet, still they came, shamans, nuns, monks, holy people from across the globe and every denomination. I'd learned to say hello in a lot of languages. Their purpose was, as near as I could tell, to pay their respects. The spooky part was that a few of the visitors were not human and, if circumstances were different, things that I would normally expect to have to fight. Good or evil, though, no one started any trouble or called me out, so I never pushed the issue. It had, however, stopped being amusing after the first dozen or so visits.

I thought hard about not answering the door, but there was always the possibility that it was someone I knew. I walked to the door and opened it. I raised a hand to shield my eyes, convinced that someone had turned a floodlight onto my front door. I squinted through the blaze and saw someone I knew, but had never expected to see on my doorstep.

“Hello, Cheryl. Would you like to come in?”

“Yes. Thank you, Mr. Branch.”

I knew where the light was coming from now. Cheryl had been a different kind of collateral damage from the same miserable situation that had injured Jean. I felt more than a little pity for Cheryl. As horrifying as what happened to Jean was, it had happened very fast. Cheryl hadn't been so lucky. She'd been kidnapped to compel the obedience of her brother, Carmichael, in some plot I had never fully understood. Imprisonment and torture by a servant of the Bound, the chaos-driven counterparts of the Lords and Ladies, had left her in a fragile state. Not as fragile as Jean, but the healing process was far from over. The thing that concerned me, though, was the enormous amount of power Cheryl had at her disposal. It was power that she barely had in check, judging by the blinding glow that I was trying to block out of my consciousness.

I stepped aside and made an effort to shut down the part of my psyche that was always monitoring the state of energy around me. It was hard. That was a change that had snuck up on me and I wondered if there would come a time when I wouldn't be able to shut it down. It can be

dangerous to have your consciousness exposed that way. I yearned for the days when I was wary about being that open to the world around me. I had been a smaller fish then. Cheryl stepped into my home and gave it a cursory glance before settling her gaze on me. I closed the door and waited in awkward silence for her to say something. I didn't have the vaguest clue where to begin. Me asking, how have you been since I cut you out of a cocoon of absolute darkness, didn't seem like a good idea.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hi.”

“That is how one begins a conversation, correct?”

“Yes,” I said, “that's one way of doing it.”

“I have trouble with conversations. It wasn't always that way, but everything seems less relevant.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.”

“I'm sure that, given time, you'll see things differently.”

“They say the same thing,” said Cheryl.

“They who?”

I felt a flutter in my stomach. If she was hearing voices, there was no telling what she was going to do.

“The healers,” said Cheryl. “They tell me that I'll see things differently, in time. They also say that I should begin to explore the world again. Talk to people that I knew.”

“I see. The healers feel you're ready for that?”

“They do.”

I disagreed. Cheryl had never been vague or disjointed. I couldn't believe Carmichael had approved of this little jaunt into the world. Her energetic form was like a quilt assembled by distracted children. I had seen enough to know that much. Let the wrong thing happen and she might come unglued, which could mean a dead body. She wouldn't even have to try that hard. I needed a drink.

“Was there something you wanted to ask me?”

“No. Yes. You were in my home, when it was destroyed?”

“I was,” I said, feeling guilty. “I never had the chance to tell you that I'm sorry about that.”

“Trifles. Buildings are replaced easily enough.”

Still a touch of the blue blood in there, after all, I thought. I know I'd be furious at the person who caused all my worldly possessions to be destroyed in an enormous explosion. I'm petty that way.

“Then, was there something else you wanted to know?”

“Did you see all of my home?”

It took me a second to get what she was on about. I'd done my best not to think about that place since I was last there. She wanted to know if I'd seen her secret life, the life that included bondage gear and video cameras.

“Yes, I saw all of it.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” she said, visibly relaxing.

“Okay,” I said. “Not the reaction I anticipated.”

“I'm supposed to talk to people who knew me, but no one knew about that. Except you.”

“And Jean.”

I felt my heart skip a beat. I'd said it without a moment of forethought. I had to turn away from Cheryl to collect myself. I thought I might cry or self-implode from the sheer concentration of grief. I could barely say her name consciously. An unconscious slip like that hit me like a hammer to the head. I took several deep breaths and forced the emotions down. There was enough emotional wreckage in the room without me adding my own to the mix. Cheryl stared through me with a hollow expression. I opened myself back up a little to observe what was happening to her energy. The patchwork quilt was straining at the seams. I hoped it would hold. I wondered what kind of healers had done this. How bad had it been when they started? Cheryl regained some measure of control and the straining in her energy receded.

“I'm sorry,” I said.

“Is there nothing to be done for her,” Cheryl asked, sounding like her old self.

“Not that I know of, but I'm not a healer.”

Cheryl nodded and the brief moment of clarity passed from her. I began to understand that Cheryl didn't understand why she was here any better than I did. We were both groping for an explanation that remained obscured by pain. She wandered into the living room and I followed. It had been redecorated, courtesy of Carmichael, and I was sure I caught a whiff of paint every now and then. Cheryl wandered back and forth before settling on a spot and looking at me.

“It happened here?”

“Yes,” I said. “That's where she was attacked.”

“Such fury.”

“It was a creature of pure malice. I'm sure fury was second nature to it.”

“I meant your fury.”

I said nothing. I was shaking, inside and out.

“It's the fury of a god,” she said. “How do you bear it?”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“I want to be as I was.”

“I don't understand.”

“You could help me,” said Cheryl.

“What do you think I can do?”

“You called forth the power of life itself. It hangs on you. You could make me as I was.”

“I don't know how.”

She moved toward me, slow and somehow predatory. She stopped in front of me and I could see the raw need in her eyes. It bordered on desperation. I wanted to help her, but I hadn't lied. I wouldn't know where to begin or how. The harsh truth is that I'm the big stick that wounds. I struggle with that reality. I saw the glimmer of hope fade from her eyes. It's a horrible thing to see. She held her hands against her stomach and shrank in on herself. The effort of the sustained conversation took its toll on her.

“I'm glad you know,” she said.

“Glad that I know what?”

“About who I was. All of who I was. It means we can talk about it.”

I groaned inside. As if all this hadn't been hell enough, she wanted to talk about her exploits as a dominatrix. I wondered what god I offended and then I realized that I'd offended more than one. So this is what penance is like, I thought. No wonder people avoided it. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to try to heal someone in this condition. She couldn't even follow a straight line of conversation for more than a few minutes at a time.

“What could you possibly want to tell me about that?”

She shrugged and said, “I'll think of something.”

I reached out and touched her arm, intending to say something to get her off this track. It was a mistake. My world exploded into a hurricane of lust. There is a hazy spot in my memory where I don't have any clear idea of what happened. When reality started making sense again, I had Cheryl's shirt half torn off. I slammed every mental, emotional and spiritual shield I had into place. I

stumbled back away from her, trying to understand what had happened. Her eyes snapped open and she started toward me.

“No! Don't stop,” she screamed.

A primal part of me howled that I should listen to her, social conventions be damned. The part of me that recognized that a hundred cataclysmic things could come from this took control. I held my hand out between me and Cheryl, fingers spread wide.

“Cheryl, stop.”

There was a cold authority in my voice that I didn't recognize. Cheryl took another step toward me. A thought later and a wreath of fire ignited around my hand.

“Cheryl, stop.”

This time Cheryl did stop. I felt a moment of relief that fire is scary. I stood there, hand surrounded by fire, Cheryl staring at the flames and tried to piece together what had just went down. There had been no warning. It wasn't an attack. I didn't think she'd done anything intentionally, which only left one, sobering explanation. I had just experienced, for a few moments, what she was experiencing all the time. This was the full force of her sexual desire, stripped of the years of self-discipline she had layered over it. No wonder she couldn't hold a conversation. I made a decision. I couldn't leave her in this state.

“I'll try to help you.”

A genuine whimper escaped from her lips and it cut me to the core. No one should have to live the way she did. She hugged herself and sank to the floor. I walked over and sat down on the floor near her. I made sure that I was far enough a way that we wouldn't accidentally touch. I wasn't even close to confident that I'd have the strength of will to deny basic nature a second time. I did my best to clear my mind. After fifteen minutes, I realized that I was going to have to settle for a state of semi-clarity. Real clarity was a distant dream after the emotional torrent I'd just been through.

“Are you ready?”

She nodded and I opened up my consciousness. I reached out with my own energy and prodded very gently at the irregular stitches holding her together energetically. I realized what had happened. The work the healers had done had happened over time. No single person had been able to do all the work in a single sitting. Rather than try to undo what others had done, each one had built on the apparent progress of the last. The problem was that, while it would hold her together, she'd never be able to heal properly. I was going to have to do what people with years of experience

hadn't been able to do. I was going to have to take it all apart and put it back together. That meant that I was going to have to hold her together through sheer force of will while I did it. I took a breath. A step at a time, Sam. Don't focus on the whole task, just take it a step at a time. I explained the situation to Cheryl.

“You're going to have to trust me, Cheryl. If you fight me while I'm doing this, it could kill us both.”

“I trust you. You saved me.”

She had a thousand yard stare that made me wonder if she really understood anything I'd just told her. I was just going to have to roll the dice and hope. A stray thought surfaced and I wondered if I had left my coffeepot burning or turned it off. I sighed. It was going to be one of those operations. I refocused briefly and wrapped Cheryl in a shroud of my own energy. I tightened it up and hoped like hell I'd made it strong enough. I counted backwards from ten and started cutting the patchwork of her energy apart. As soon as I started cutting, the raw, untempered energy that was Cheryl poured out. At least it tried to pour out.

I had to concentrate to keep her energy contained while cutting away the awkward outer shell. A piece at a time, I cut, rearranged and fused the bits and pieces back together. It was slow work and painfully imperfect. I was making it up as I went. I finally fused the last piece into place. It would never be taken for masterful work, but I'd done everything in my power to put things right. I cautiously released the shroud of my own energy. Cheryl sat there, eyes closed and motionless. I drew the back of my hand across my forehead and it came away soaking wet. A quick look at the clock showed I'd been at work for the better part of four hours.

“Cheryl?”

She opened her eyes, “I can – oh God – I can think again.”

“We'll call that a victory.”

“Thank you, Mr. Branch.”

“I think we've moved past the Mr. Branch phase of things.”

“Sam, yes, I think you told me that once before.”

“You've had more important things to worry about.”

“Yes. I'm sorry, about before. I didn't mean to,” she started.

“It's alright. I understand.”

Cheryl stood up and I glanced away as her torn shirt drifted open. I felt an embarrassed flush rise to my cheeks for tearing it in the first place. Cheryl laughed and I glanced back up her.

“Blushing. I never would have thought it possible. You never struck me as a puritan.”

“It's not that. I ripped your shirt.”

“Oh, of course.”

I fled the room to fetch another shirt for Cheryl. It was a move designed to allow me a chance to escape my own embarrassment. Cheryl seemed indifferent to, if not rather entertained by, her own partial nudity and my guilty response to it. I lingered in my bedroom for much longer than necessary, but I realized that waiting wasn't going to make the situation less awkward. I walked back out to the living room and held the shirt out toward her. She gave me a little half-smile and pulled off the ripped shirt. I looked away fast, but not before getting an eyeful. A voice from the basest part of my mind demanded to know why, in the name of all that was holy, I looked away, since she clearly didn't mind. I ignored the voice. I felt Cheryl pluck the shirt from my hand and I gave it a good ten count before I looked at her again. She still wore a little grin, but I could see the fatigue bleeding through from underneath her amused expression.

“I should go,” she said. “They'll wonder if I got lost.”

I walked her over to the door and opened it. Cool air from the spring night flowed into my house from outside, carrying the smell of freshly cut lawns and night blooming flowers.

“Well, Cheryl, it's been,” I paused, “unbelievably awkward.”

She laughed then. The sound of it reminded me of crystal chimes in the wind, beautiful and haunting. She stepped through the door and then turned back to me, placing a hand on my arm.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

She walked down the steps and out to a car that, as near as I could tell, must have been waiting for her there for hours. I felt bad for the driver, but how was I supposed to know? I waited until she was in the car before I closed the door and locked it. I dragged myself through the house, my own mental and physical fatigue were taking a toll. I crawled into my bed and I thought sleep would claim me in no time, but I spent hours staring at the ceiling. The energetic injuries Cheryl had suffered were tremendous, and the Jean's were even worse. Still, if I had helped Cheryl, maybe I could help Jean.

Chapter 2

I got up the next morning feeling a bit hung over, but actually hopeful for the first time in a

long time. I saw a potential path to a measure of redemption. I resisted the temptation to go see Jean immediately. While I could cross over into the Paths, a world between ours and the planes of pure energy, whenever I chose to, it wouldn't do to appear there smelling like a goat and looking like I'd just come off a five day bender. I set the coffeepot to brew while I took a shower and got cleaned up. It didn't help my appearance that much, but some improvement beat no improvement. I was finishing up my second cup of coffee, extra sweet with lots of cream, when I heard the knock. It was only 9 in the morning, bordering on rude. I went to the door, depositing the coffee on the dining room table as I went. I never answer the door with something in my hands. I believe in being prepared, like a good boy scout or someone who has learned some hard lessons.

Carmichael stood on the other side of the door, looking every inch the corporate master that he was in an Armani suit and silk tie. Both Smythe siblings arriving on my doorstep, inside of twelve hours of each other, was enough to set my teeth on edge. Neither had come here before, and now both of them just dropped by for a visit? Someone is ice skating in hell, right now, I thought to myself. I looked at Carmichael and groped for an appropriate greeting. Our friendship had been mended in many ways, but this unprecedented visit was throwing me. I looked over his shoulder to see a limo parked by curb and an innocuous man standing next to it. I took a deeper look at the man, opening my consciousness. He saw me "looking" and smiled. Underneath the unremarkable exterior there was a virtual tornado of dangerous, in every sense of the word. This was someone who could unleash a world of pain onto another person. Then he did something that caught me off guard. He gave me a slight bow, eyes lowered. I knew enough about the traditions involved with a bow to understand that he was offering supreme respect. Not merely an acknowledgment of my own power, but the belief that I would not break honor and attack while he was not looking at me. I stood straighter and returned the bow in kind. I turned my attention to Carmichael.

"Bodyguard?"

"Yes, my European counterpart in the family sent him as an insurance policy against something untoward befalling me again."

"He's very capable," I said.

"So is a wolf. It doesn't mean I want one in the car with me."

"You don't trust him."

"I trust him implicitly to do what the family orders him to do."

"But you don't always see things the same way they do?"

"That's an accurate way to describe it."

“Well then, do come in and away from wolf’s eyes.”

“I’d be much obliged,” said Carmichael.

I stood aside and Carmichael came into my house. The bodyguard gave me a knowing half-smile before casting a vigilant eye around my working class neighborhood. I had a moment where I hoped none of the local kids got the bright idea of setting off a firecracker. I closed the door and turned to Carmichael. I held out my hand and he took it in his own. There was a moment where I felt his power, held in place by the man’s incomparable will, and then we broke the handshake. He glanced around my home, his face a blank mask.

“The workmen I sent were adequate?” He asked.

“Yes, they were very professional. Everything is as it was.”

He gave me a hard look and shook his head in the negative.

“No, Sam, nothing is as it was, least of all your home. I can’t imagine how you stand it.”

“It’s mine, Carmichael, paid for in blood. I wouldn’t give it up now, for anything.”

“No, you shouldn’t give it up. It’s not safe for anyone else here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll figure it out eventually. It’s not something you need to worry about, as long as you’re alive and claim this place as your own.”

“Fair enough.”

I’d learned a long time before not to push Carmichael for answers. He knew things that other people didn’t. Sometimes he could share and sometimes he couldn’t. If he said it wasn’t something to worry about, I believed him.

“That isn’t what I came here about,” said Carmichael. “I had a conversation with Cheryl late last night.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

“You aren’t hearing me, Sam. I didn’t say I talked to her. I had a conversation, with complete thoughts and resolved threads. She told me what you did for her.”

“Should I be concerned or say you’re welcome?”

“Mostly the latter.”

“Mostly?”

“We’ll get to that in a minute. This is what I actually came here to deliver. I was going to have that infernal mother hen out there by the car do it, but after Cheryl called, I decided to come over myself.”

Carmichael set his leather briefcase onto the dining room table next to my coffee and pulled out a sheaf of papers. He dug around in a pocket, pulled out a heavy pen and handed it to me. He flipped the papers open to the back page and pointed at a blank line.

“Sign there.”

“What am I signing?”

“A very complicated and completed work order.”

I shrugged and signed the paper. I didn't think he was trying to get me to sign over my firstborn child. Once I finished signing, he took the pen and signed beneath my signature. He pulled out a second set of paperwork and we repeated the same process.

“What's the second one?”

“The second one transfers a bank account into your name. Technically it already was, but I needed to get the paperwork signed to make it legal enough for the army of lawyers I work for.”

“Don't you mean the lawyers that work for you?”

“Oh, if only that were the case.”

“Wait,” I said, my brain finally processing his words. “Did you say bank account?”

“Yes, it's your payment, for services rendered.”

“What services?”

“Take your pick. You could call it payment for saving my life, finding Cheryl, helping her last night or for preventing total anarchy on this planet. Honestly, I wanted it to be more, but this was all I could wrangle out of the family.”

“You already paid me for all that. I remember depositing the check.”

“That pittance? That was just to see you through.”

“It was a quarter of a million dollars.”

“Well, this is more than that. The taxes are paid already, so you can do whatever you see fit with it. Our investment team will manage it for you, if you like.”

“Okay, let's step back. How much money are we talking about?”

Carmichael flipped through the paperwork and pointed at a number on the paper. I felt my heart stop for a second. I'd never seen that many zeroes after a one before.

“That says ten million dollars.”

“Yes, that's what it says.”

“I can't take it.”

“You already did,” said Carmichael. “Remember from a few minutes ago, the signing of

paperwork and so on.”

“You know I never would have signed that paperwork if I had known what it actually was.”

“Why do you think I did things the way I did?”

“What am I supposed to do with ten million dollars?”

“My suggestion is that you invest it. I don’t want to bring up a sensitive topic, but you’ve got a very long life ahead of you, Sam. It costs money to survive in the world. You need to plan for that.”

“So you’re looking out for my best interests?”

“Not at all. I’m shamelessly abusing my position to give my friend money. Now that you have it, though, I’m giving you the best advice I can about it.”

“Well, it’s not like me or the money is going anywhere. I can decide what to do with it another day. Now, about this mostly you’re welcome and a little I should worry?”

“Yes. There is that. Thank you for helping Cheryl, again.”

“You’re welcome. Now what’s the other shoe?”

“The healers would like to speak with you,” answered Carmichael.

“No thanks,” I said.

“You should go, Sam. They never request meetings with anyone.”

“I’m sure you meet with them.”

“I do, because my sister is there and my family is pragmatic enough to make sure that this hospital has a ridiculous endowment. When you have as many enemies as we do, you come under all kinds of attacks. We’ve found it useful to have that kind of help available on call. This is different. They asked for you, specifically, by name.”

I really didn’t want to go chit-chat with the healers. I don’t like hospitals or doctors all that much and I didn’t expect to like these people any better. Maybe that’s a failing on my part, but I’m comfortable with my dislike.

“If I don’t go, are they going to show up on my door or send a rain of cherry gelatin bullfrogs to torment me?”

“I don’t know about dessert frogs, but I expect they’ll persist.”

“Dammit, Carmichael, why the hell is everyone so interested in me all of sudden?”

Carmichael cocked an eyebrow at me. It was a stupid question, but when you live in your own skin, you lose sight of how you change. The truth was that I didn’t want them to see how broken I was. It was hard enough to know it myself. I didn’t want to talk about it with them or

anyone else. I was being bullheaded and it wasn't going to help. I had been avoiding the outside world and it just came knocking anyways.

“Set it up and let me know,” I said, trying to wrap things up so I could get to Jean.

“I had the impression that yesterday would not be soon enough. We can go now. You'll be better company than the mother hen.”

“I should have known.”

Chapter 3

I discovered rather quickly that the mother hen didn't talk much. In fact, he didn't talk at all. He didn't introduce himself and Carmichael didn't acknowledge that the man existed. Carmichael and I sat in the back of the limo, while the mother hen drove. I watched the scenery pass by as Carmichael made a series of business calls to which I made a point to pay no attention. It wasn't my business, literally. Eventually, having finished whatever it was he was setting up, Carmichael set down the phone. When fifteen minutes had passed in utter silence, I finally got tired of both the silence and the waiting. We had been in the limo for over an hour and I was bored.

“I'm a good sport, Carmichael, but how much longer until we get to this place?”

“Technically,” he said, glancing out a window, “we've been on the hospital's property for the last fifteen minutes.”

I did a bit of mental math and came up with, “Damn. How big is this place?”

“Big enough to make it safe to treat people like us who have been wounded energetically.”

I did some more mental math, “Are you sure it's big enough?”

“It always has been, though, I'm not sure that there is any place remote enough to treat you safely, should you suffer a severe enough injury.”

“There is,” I said.

“Would you go there?”

“No.”

“Then let's hope this place is big enough even for you.”

We rode on in silence for another ten minutes. It was a gloomy ride. I didn't like considering the possibility that I might one day be forced to seek shelter and aid with the Lords and Ladies. If Carmichael was right, they might be the only ones who could safely help me, were I injured badly

enough. Damn miserable situation, being a virtual anomaly in human history. We pulled up in front of a complex big enough that I couldn't clearly see where it ended. It wasn't exactly a prison, but it had an air of security. It's the kind of place where the guards didn't wear uniforms because they didn't need or want to wear them. We got out of the limo and Carmichael addressed the mother hen for the first time.

“Stay with the car.”

“You could be in danger. There are powerful and unstable things here.”

Carmichael didn't bat an eye at the objection.

“I am standing next to one of, if not the single, most powerful human beings on the planet,” said Carmichael. “What do you think you could do to protect me that he can't?”

The mother hen gave Carmichael a hard stare before turning his gaze on me. It was one thing for my reputation to precede me; it was another to entrust Carmichael's safety entirely into my care. I did something I wouldn't have done in any other circumstance. I dropped all the masks I kept in place to keep myself under the radar. I let the mother hen see what he would really be dealing with if he threw down with me. It was the first time I saw real emotion cross the man's face. It was barely contained fear. I could see his hands shaking a little before he stilled them through an admirable force of concentration.

“Carmichael will come to no harm,” I said.

“Your word,” demanded the mother hen.

“Your name?”

Carmichael spun toward me, “What are you doing?”

I didn't say a word to either of them. The mother hen's expression was blank again. He waited, staring at me, staring at him. The moments stretched out, dragging like nails on a chalkboard, while we tested one another. Carmichael grabbed my arm, squeezing it hard.

“You can't do this. He won't tell you. He can't. It's forbidden.”

I didn't look away from the mother hen as I spoke, “Go inside, Carmichael.”

While he looked like he wanted to protest, Carmichael acceded to my wishes and went into the building. The mother hen moved toward me, slowly, with his hands loose at his sides. I wondered if he would try to attack me and if it would matter at all. I was locked into this course of action, though I couldn't entirely grasp the motive. He stopped just out of fighting distance.

“Why do you ask my name?”

“It's impolite not to call someone by their name.”

“You mean that, don't you?”

“I can't keep calling you mother hen,” I said.

“Yes, you could. You won't, though, because you think it's rude?”

“Isn't it? You could always lie to me.”

“No. I won't lie to you. My name is...Arjun.”

“You don't look Hindi.”

“You don't look like a demigod.”

“I'm not,” I said.

“Neither am I.”

“Named after a Pandava, who accepted exile for 12 years rather than fail in his duty. A strange choice of name for a child.”

“You know the Mahābhārata?”

“I've read it. Arjun, the great archer, a master warrior who received the Gita from Sri Krishna prior to the Battle of Kurukshetra. He eventually renounced the world.”

“Yes, so it is told.”

“Are you here in exile, Arjun?”

“Not as you mean and, certainly, no more than yourself.”

“I'm not in exile.”

“You are in exile from yourself, Samuel Branch. You try to move as though you are as you were. It's dangerous for you and everyone that knows you. Speak to the healers. Listen to them. You are not as you were.”

“Perhaps so.”

I turned and started toward to the building. I made it two steps before I heard the click of a gun cocking. I turned back to Arjun, who was aiming a large handgun at my head. He had the same blank expression on his face, as though this too had no more significance than a casual breath.

“Arjun?”

“We have not concluded our agreement. You have demanded and received forbidden knowledge. There is a cost for that knowledge.”

“Isn't there always?”

“Yes. Always.”

“What is the price?”

“Your word.”

“Regarding?”

“Your word that no harm will come to Carmichael Smythe while he remains in your care, no matter the cost to yourself.”

“You have my word that no harm will come to him while he remains in my care.”

“There is an additional cost for what you have asked. You may never use my name in the presence of another. Unless we are alone, you will not utter it.”

“You have my word,” I promised.

I felt a thump in the center of my chest. It resounded in my mind like an enormous gong. A binding then, I realized. I had entered into it freely. I couldn't very well complain after the fact. I strongly suspected that I would die before someone would be able to drag that name from me. I felt dizzy for a moment and then it passed. The gun vanished into Arjun's suit jacket and he strode over to me, placing a steadying hand on my arm. I gave my head a little shake and gave him a nod. I started toward the complex again.

“Samuel Branch,” said Arjun.

I turned back to the man. He looked afraid again.

“Yes.”

“You are not as you were. Accept it.”

“Why are you afraid, Arjun?”

“The last person who received that knowledge and binding spent a week in a coma.”

“It's never simple,” I said.

I nodded to Arjun and walked inside the complex to deal with a whole different kind of issue.