

SIX DAYS TO PROVE I AIN'T DEAD.

SIX DAYS TO FIND MYSELF.

SIX DAYS TO GET BACK MY LOVE.

READING SAMPLE

6 DAYS
~~TO~~
WHISKEY

CAS ROMAN.

6 Days to Whisky

Cas Roman

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6 Days to Whisky

After being discharged from the psychiatric hospital following a suicide attempt, Tristan returns to his life as a rock star. As the frontman of Nightstalker, he's determined to rediscover his passion for music while mending his relationship with guitarist Leaf. But the sudden, devastating loss of his brother Milo continues to shake him to the core.

Leaf is also struggling to cope with his grief. Plagued by guilt, he once again turns to drugs, jeopardizing the band's future.

But time is running out, as their first world tour concert is only six days away. Will the band manage to pull themselves together? And is there still a chance for love between Tristan and Leaf?

Six Days to prove I ain't dead.

Six Days to find myself.

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The Beginning

4.5 weeks before

Milo

“Are you guys ready?” Milo asked, turning his Chevelle onto Alvarado. “Only one week away.”

Leaf blew smoke out the open window and glanced over his shoulder at Tristan, who didn’t seem inclined to respond. Sprawled on the backseat with his head reclined on the cushion and eyes shut, Tristan enjoyed the breeze. With a smile, Leaf turned back to the front. Seeing Tristan so relaxed had a calming effect on him.

“I’m a little nervous,” Leaf admitted.

“You?” Milo exclaimed. “That’s hard to believe, my friend.”

“I know the album is good, but will the critics see it the same way?”

“Well, you set the bar pretty high with the first album,” Milo said with a wink. “You kind of brought this on yourselves.”

“Yeah … In a way, we can only mess it up.”

“I’m not worried,” Tristan chimed in from behind, leaning forward between the two front seats.

“Not at all?” Leaf asked, though it didn’t surprise him much. Tristan had a good sense of what was good.

“Not at all,” Tristan replied casually. “If Milo says the album is good, then it is.”

Leaf raised an eyebrow and turned to look at him. Milo burst out laughing as he stopped at a red light.

“Ha! Of course, little brother. When I tell you that you’ve recorded a legendary second album destined to go down in rock history, you better believe it.”

“I told you.” Tristan settled back in his chair with a satisfied smile.

Leaf chuckled as he extinguished the cigarette in the ashtray. “Yeah, you were right about the first album too,” he admitted inevitably. “Why should you be wrong this time?”

“I never go wrong with these things, my friend.” Milo grinned broadly. “I’ve got a sixth sense for this stuff.”

Leaf suddenly felt Tristan wrap his arms around him from behind and plant a kiss on his cheek. “You don’t need to be afraid,” he whispered into his ear, sending a cool shiver down Leaf’s spine. “Our songs are awesome, and people will love them. And if they don’t, remember: I love you more than anything.”

Leaf shifted his head and found Tristan’s warm lips. “I love you too.”

The intimate moment was interrupted by the annoying ringtone of Milo’s phone. Tristan slumped back into the backseat as Milo pulled his phone from his back pocket, glanced briefly at the screen, and answered the call.

“Yeah? Hello?” he said, changing lanes.

They were on their way to Santa Monica, and Tristan was adamant about stopping for a funnel cake before the tour. The idea of indulging in that greasy pastry made Leaf cringe. He couldn’t care less that the best ones were on the pier; he’d follow Tristan anywhere just to spend time with him. With the upcoming tour looming, Leaf cherished every moment with the two brothers even more. He had missed Milo during the last tour. Their conversations always lifted his spirits.

But seeing Diego’s name flash on the phone screen made him uneasy. Even though Milo hadn’t put it on speaker, Leaf could still hear Diego’s voice quite clearly.

“Where are you?” he heard him say over the phone with a strong Spanish accent..

“On Alvarado,” Milo replied.

“Oh, that’s convenient. Could you do me a favor?”

“I’m on my way to Santa Monica.”

“Please! It’s just a quick stop on the way. I would do it myself, but I have something else going on here.”

Leaf rolled his eyes. Considering he had worked for Diego Garcia himself for a few years, he could only imagine what kind of favor it could be.

“Alright, what do you need?” Milo asked reluctantly.

“You need to pick up a delivery for me. I’ll send you the address and the details. Everything’s already prepared. It’s as simple as that.”

“But I don’t want that stuff sitting in my trunk all day.”

“You can drop it off at my place on your way to Santa Monica. No problem. It’s not even out of your way.”

“Okay. Send me the details.”

“You’re the best!” Diego exclaimed and hung up.

“Guys,” Milo said, crestfallen. “Change of plans. We’re making a quick detour …” He peered at the screen as a message popped up. “To Koreatown.”

“Sure,” Tristan replied with a casual shrug.

Perhaps it might have been better to object. Leaf knew the area well and already had a hunch where Diego would send Milo; he only used one place in Koreatown as a drop-off point. While there were many crackheads in the neighborhood, Diego was keen on keeping the house clean. His sister, Ariana, even lived on the top floor while deals were made on the ground floor.

Leaf had a bad feeling, but seeing Milo handling the situation with Diego, he chose to remain silent. Despite his doubts, Milo had successfully concealed his financial issues from Tristan and resolved matters through hard work. Leaf, having settled his own affairs with Diego, felt it wasn’t his place to intervene in any way.

Shortly after, Milo stopped at the designated address. All the parking spots in front of the house were taken, so he parked a little further down the street. Leaf was okay with that. The farther away, the better; he didn’t want to run into Ariana.

“Wait here for a sec,” Milo said as they all exited the car. “I’ll be right

back.”

Tristan took a few steps and glanced around, his expression tinged with suspicion. The sight of the neighborhood was unsettling enough to make him uncomfortable. He rubbed his arms, as if sensing a chill despite the sweltering humidity of the day. A warm breeze rustled through the palm fronds overhead.

“Do you think the weather will hold up?” Tristan asked worriedly.

Leaf laughed as he crossed his arms and leaned against the car. “Don’t worry. The pier is covered. You’ll get your funnel cake.”

“I definitely will,” Tristan said, stepping closer to Leaf but keeping a careful distance. A sheen of sweat glistened his face, and his black curls appeared noticeably frizzier than usual, likely due to the oppressive humidity. His dark eyes sparkled with that affectionate expression that always left Leaf weak in the knees. Ever since they became a couple on the last tour, Leaf yearned to constantly touch Tristan. Any distance between them felt unbearable.

But Tristan wasn’t ready to make their relationship public yet, and Leaf respected that. Though it was tough for him, Leaf prioritized Tristan’s comfort above all else—that was the most important thing.

“Where are we, anyway?” Tristan asked, glancing around. “What’s Milo doing here?”

“He’s picking up something.”

“Hmm … Lately, he’s had a lot more secrets than usual.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“It’s probably because we’ve been away from home for so long, and the time we’ve spent here hasn’t been particularly long either.”

“You missed him,” Leaf said sympathetically. “So it’s normal for you to feel like there’s a gap in your knowledge regarding Milo now.”

“Yeah, maybe. I wish he could come on tour with us.”

“Did you ask him if he wants to come?”

“Of course.” Tristan threw his hands up in frustration. “He said his place is here. But I don’t get it. We have enough earnings, and room and board would be

free. Why is he still working so hard with these jobs? It seems completely unnecessary.”

Leaf nodded, a cold knot in his stomach. Why had Milo ever told him about those debts he’d been trying to pay off for months? Although Tristan didn’t voice his concerns aloud, Leaf could tell he suspected something. After all, Tristan knew his brother well enough to sense when something was amiss. The way Tristan looked around and nervously rubbed his arms suggested he intended to confront Milo after the quick stop. He would ask his brother if there was cause for concern and if he still didn’t want to join them on tour. While Milo may be the older of the two and had taken it upon himself to look after Tristan, Tristan did everything for Milo when he needed help too.

The wind picked up, and it looked like a storm was brewing. Dark clouds were gathering from the south and towering high into the sky.

“Urgh … Where is he?” Tristan asked impatiently.

Leaf shook his head in amusement and lit another cigarette. Waiting was never Tristan’s strong suit. He had learned to deal with it better on the last tour but still hated it. Leaf was different. He enjoyed the dead time when nothing was demanded of him.

A sudden bang caught their attention.

Leaf’s eyes darted toward the house where Milo had disappeared.

“Was that a gunshot?” Tristan asked, alarmed. “Did it come from the building?”

Worried, Leaf took a few steps forward to get a better view of the entrance. Then another shot rang out.

“It’s coming from inside!” Tristan shouted, moving into action.

Leaf tossed his cigarette and grabbed Tristan from behind, holding him tight. He would never allow Tristan to rush headlong into that damned house.

The door burst open, and Milo came running out. He bounded down the steps and raced toward them as if chased by monsters. A man appeared in the doorway. Leaf recognized him at first glance as one of Diego’s suppliers,

aiming his gun at Milo and firing. Milo stumbled, spat blood, and collapsed to the ground.

“Milo!” Tristan screamed, wriggling out of Leaf’s grip and running to his brother.

Leaf was momentarily paralyzed. Although the man retreated back into the house, Leaf knew he would escape through the back exit and vanish. Even if he could move his body, Leaf knew he wouldn’t be able to catch him.

“Oh my God!” Tristan fell to his knees and drew his brother into his arms. Panic surged when he saw his bloodied hands. “No, no, no …” He quickly tore Milo’s shirt that was tied around his waist and pressed it against the gunshot wound on his back.

“Call 911!” he yelled, applying pressure to the fabric on Milo’s wound.

Leaf hastily reached for his phone and dialed emergency services. He heard a woman on the other end, but as he watched the blood seeping through the checkered fabric and spreading on the street in a dark red pool, words failed him.

As Milo stared at Tristan with a pained expression, his breath grew shallower. Terror was evident all over his face, and the fear in his eyes sent a cold shiver down Leaf’s spine. He didn’t need to be a doctor to recognize what was happening here.

Tristan continued to press the shirt against Milo’s back, stroking his face with his other hand while softly whispering to him. When he noticed Leaf holding the phone to his side, he erupted like a volcano. “Leaf! Come on!”

The blockade broke, and Leaf put the phone back to his ear. Suddenly, the words flowed out of him, and after he rattled off the address, he screamed at the woman on the other end to hurry. When she asked him to stay on the line, he set the phone down and knelt beside Milo.

The shirt Tristan used as a makeshift bandage was already soaked with blood. Leaf then removed his own shirt, which he wore over a T-shirt, and took over the task of applying pressure.

“Please, bro. Hang on. We’re taking you to the hospital.” Tristan’s hands trembled, his voice quivered, and tears streaked his face.

As Milo slowly closed his eyes, Leaf shook him. “No, Milo. Stay with us. Stay awake.”

But Milo’s eyes remained closed.

Time stood still.

No wind blew.

Silence set in.

Tristan leaned over his deceased brother, clutching him even tighter in his arms and sobbing so bitterly that it ripped Leaf’s heart into shreds. A wave of grief he hadn’t anticipated overwhelmed him. The world around him seemed to spin faster and faster. His heart raced uncontrollably, and the rushing sensation in his head became a deafening roar.

Leaf jolted, shooting upright and gasping for air. Before running his bloodied hands through his hair, he paused, hearing Tristan’s sobs.

A man spoke to him from the side.

A siren approached from a distance.

Leaf felt as though he was trapped under a glass dome, his body numb, the sounds muffled, his head empty. He struggled to comprehend the events unraveling around him, his focus fixated solely on Tristan and Milo and the unfolding catastrophe.

“Out of the way!”

Everything around him was dark. An officer tugged at his arm, pulling him aside, but Tristan pushed him away. He wasn’t ready to let go of his brother yet. Leaf went to console him. As he placed his hands on Tristan’s back, he could feel him trembling all over.

He reluctantly stood up and stepped aside. Leaf feared Tristan might collapse, as he paced frantically, never taking his eyes off Milo. Two paramedics stood by, waiting, while an older man examined Milo. With a solemn nod, he signaled to them that they were no longer needed.

Milo was dead.

Leaf felt his blood drain from his face, leaving him feeling like an empty shell. He stood amidst a nightmare that he knew was all too real.

How did I get here?

Ambulance, police, flashing lights, sirens wailing, and him trapped in a silent movie.

Time held no meaning.

Milo is dead.

This fact gradually seeped through him. He needed time to absorb it, to let it penetrate to his core.

The shock slowly wore off, and he found himself next to a police car.

“We suspect a deal gone wrong,” a policeman said.

Had he just spoken to him?

Confused, Leaf scanned the street. In the open door of a patrol car, he spotted Tristan—or at least what remained of him. Leaf saw the toll that Milo's actions had taken. It was more than just Milo's life lost on this street. Like a ghost, Tristan sat there, staring into space, a blanket draped over his shoulders, his bloodied hands resting on his knees.

Leaf squeezed his eyes shut, but it was futile. Shadows danced everywhere, darting through his field of vision. Cops. Medics. Police tape. Onlookers. From all sides, they crowded in, eager to catch a glimpse of the unfolding drama.

Men and women craning their necks for a better view, their expressions twisted in grimaces and fear.

And Milo, covered with a white sheet.

Leaf clapped a hand over his mouth and staggered, his chest tightening as if squeezed by an invisible force. Breathing became labored. He stood amidst a mighty storm, its winds battering him from all sides. Feeling powerless, his body trembled uncontrollably as he sank to his knees, bracing himself on the unforgiving asphalt, gasping for air in sheer panic.

Monday

Today

Tristan

“I want to write and make music. Get my songs out there and play concerts everywhere. I want to show my fans that I’m still very much alive.”

Tristan forced a smile, flashing his white teeth, but he felt it didn’t quite reach his eyes. Could he convince the psychiatrist with just that? If he reminded himself enough of what had always been his plan, maybe he would find his old self again. His words weren’t a lie. After the incident with his brother, he had lost his drive and forgotten how committed he was about it.

Unimpressed, Dr. Snider scribbled something in his file.

How absurd, Tristan thought, running his hand through his black locks. A sharp pain shot through his right forearm, unpleasantly reminding him that his body was still healing.

“Mr. James,” the psychiatrist began, seeking his gaze. “You crashed into a house without any restraint and miraculously avoided life-threatening injuries. You clearly had more luck than sense. That wasn’t just a whim of a rock star. So please, don’t try to convince me that you’re fully motivated to return to your old life as if nothing happened.”

“One does what one must.” Tristan’s voice was too weak to be convincing.

“Do I sense a certain resignation?”

It was impossible to withstand the piercing gaze of the middle-aged man. Tristan shifted in his chair, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and wondering if he had exaggerated. Since the doctor remained silent, apparently waiting for a response, he cleared his throat and briefly considered how much of his true self he could reveal without destroying himself.

“Okay, listen, you just need to sign this paper and you’ll be rid of me. I’ll

even leave the city.”

Snider frowned in disbelief, looking far from happy, and flipped through his notes. “Last Friday, your manager called me. What was her name again?”

“Carol Davis.”

“Right. Carol Davis. A very … determined woman.”

“Politely put.”

At least that brought a little smile to Snider’s face.

“She tried to bribe me to release you from here.”

“Yeah, Carol has no scruples when it comes to money.”

“But money isn’t my concern, Mr. James. Right now, you’re under my care. I’m the one who, as you so aptly put it, gives you the drugs. If I sign the discharge papers, I’m literally releasing you into the world.”

“I just want to go home.” Tristan ignored the fact that an empty apartment awaited him there. “And … It’s not like I’ll go completely off the rails if you release me into the world. The longer I stay here, the sicker I feel. I’m not made to be locked up. I …”

“You’re an artist,” Snider said, sighing. “I know. We’ve been through this before.” The psychiatrist crossed one leg over the other and tilted his head slightly.

Tristan grimaced. He prided himself on his persuasive skills, but this man was a tough nut to crack. “Come on, Doc. I need to be back on stage soon. If I don’t show up there …”

“Do you want to be on stage?”

No.

“Of course!” This lie brought back the queasy feeling in his stomach. *What else do I have?* “Back to normalcy. That’s what you’re advocating for, isn’t it?”

“You won’t be able to maintain this façade forever,” Snider predicted. “I’ll ask you again. What do you want? Because if you don’t want to leave, don’t want to go on stage, and don’t want to go home, I can offer you refuge here.”

Tristan bit his lip, sitting back in the chair with his legs spread wide and

arms crossed, staring down at the gray linoleum floor as he searched for the right answer. When he opened his mouth to give the psychiatrist what he wanted to hear, a knot formed in his stomach once again. He felt like a hunted animal in a labyrinth with no way out. Tapping his right leg, he tousled his hair nervously. His locks were long again, falling over his forehead and ears, but he didn't have a hair tie to pull them back.

“Be honest with yourself.”

Surprised, Tristan raised an eyebrow. The fact that the old man suddenly sounded so understanding was something entirely new. After all, Tristan had been here for almost three weeks. What had changed? Or was it the pressure of the upcoming concert that was gradually becoming palpable? Just the thought of the next gig made Tristan shudder.

“How does it matter if I want to go back or not when the whole tour is already planned?”

“How do you feel about it? Is there anything you can do about it?”

Baffled, Tristan hung his head. “*O Captain! My Captain!* If I only knew.” Since the day Milo died, this poem had been swirling in his mind, as if it held the answers to all his questions.

“You’d rather quote Walt Whitman than tell me how you feel?”

“No idea why.” Tristan sighed, sweeping his locks from his forehead. “It seems fitting right now.”

“So you feel torn?”

“Not appropriate enough for you? Or are you more of a Wordsworth type?”

“Enlighten me with a passage,” Snider encouraged him, pleased.

“I guess, that would be: ‘We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind.’”

“And that would be?”

“Figure it out yourself. I’m not about to dishonor Wordsworth’s genius by vomiting it at your feet.”

Snider smiled understandingly, and Tristan knew that the doctor was familiar

with Wordsworth's Ode.

It wasn't the first time they had discussed poetry. Tristan found solace in poetry, and Snider enjoyed every verse he recited.

"They'll tear me apart if I don't show up," Tristan muttered, his voice barely a whisper.

"Who?"

He swallowed the heavy lump on his throat and rubbed his face with one hand. "Everyone who profits off us."

"As I said, I have the power to give you time."

"I appreciate that, but if I stay here, I'll never find it again."

"What have you lost?"

"The fire. The joy. What got me this far in the first place. The passion for my art." Tristan paused, inhaled a deep breath, and pressed his lips together in contemplation. Then, with a sense of disbelief, he exhaled slowly. "It's strange how quickly one can feel so pathetic."

Dr. Snider remained silent, patiently waiting.

"I left someone behind," Tristan continued. "Someone important to me. And because I did that, the fear for his safety is tearing me apart. I need to check on him and make sure he's okay—even though he probably isn't."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I know him too well." Tristan shrugged.

"You grieved. You don't owe anything to anyone."

"Yes, I do. I pushed him away when he wanted to help me. Besides, he was grieving too." Tristan shook his head in disbelief. "I was trapped in that dark storm for days. I have no idea what I did there, but I'm sure the accident was just the culmination of that hellish journey."

Snider flipped through the file and yanked out a paper. "As I also learned from Carol Davis last Friday, you've been charged with assault. The man you attacked is demanding compensation."

"Of course," Tristan muttered. "What else?"

“Do you want to talk about it? Remember why you attacked the man?”

The memories were blurry, but when Tristan saw the man’s face in his mind again, a chill ran down his spine. “He … was a jerk.”

Snider winced. “But that wasn’t all, right?”

“No. Of course not. He was drunk, insulted me, and provoked me. Called me a damn Indian.”

“People who know you from the media are aware of your indigenous roots; it’s even somewhat apparent.”

Tristan sighed. It was even more apparent with Milo that their mother had belonged to the Blackfoot tribe. “I’m well aware of that. But … the guy … He not only insulted me, but also my brother, as if he knew him. I don’t know.”

“That was just a few days after the funeral, wasn’t it? Why did you even agree to go to a bar?”

“José just wouldn’t let up, and I thought …”

“Mr. James, listen. It’s not my intention to sabotage your career by keeping you here any longer. If you feel up to it, if you can perform in six days, then I won’t stand in your way. Moreover, I think the circumstances speak for themselves. Since this morning, one of your bandmates has been waiting for you. Like a meditating monk, he sits in the waiting room and refuses to leave without you.”

José.

Tristan smiled sadly. Only his drummer possessed the calmness Snider spoke of. But why did the doctor choose to reveal this information now? When all his defenses had collapsed and he felt like a wreck.

“I’ll give you some medication and a prescription. That will help you focus. Additionally, I’ll provide you with a medical report, which I’ll also send to your manager.”

“What? Why?”

“She asked me to issue one, intending to forward it to a lawyer. Probably has to do with that lawsuit. I’ll send it by email tonight. Miss Davis also gave me

your email address.”

As the psychiatrist stood up, Tristan remained seated. His gaze wandered to the clock above the door. It was only half past nine; the week had just begun. Snider went to his computer and clicked the mouse a few times. Shortly after, the printer behind him started whirring. The doctor took out the paper and signed it. He then retrieved a medication from a drawer and added it to the document. As he came around the table and stood in front of Tristan, he frowned.

“Or do you want to stay after all?”

That got Tristan moving, and he abruptly stood up.

“You’ll find my number here as well,” Dr. Snider said, handing him the prescription and medication. “Call me anytime if you need to talk.”

Without a word, Tristan accepted everything, nodded, and folded the paper. “I guess I’ll first have to get a new phone.”

Dr. Snider laughed. “Do that. Anyway, I wish you all the best for the future.”

As Tristan left the consultation room and stepped into the corridor, he suddenly felt dizzy. A thick lump lodged in his throat that he couldn’t swallow, and his hand trembled as he gripped the piece of paper. The short bursts of panic had become less in the last few days, so he tried to ignore this one as best as he could and returned to his room.

When he arrived at the psychiatric hospital, he had hardly anything with him. Aside from himself, the only items salvaged from the car wreck were a keychain, a wallet, and a small notebook, which he had kept in his back pockets. His phone was broken, and of the clothing not cut by the paramedics, he was left with only a denim jacket and his sneakers. For almost three weeks now, he had been walking around in clothes from the shelter—a simple pair of jeans and a black shirt.

He folded the prescription neatly until it fit into his notebook and tucked it into his right back pocket. Next, he slipped the wallet into his left pocket and slid the key into his jacket.

Walking toward the exit felt strange. As he turned the corner and spotted José, his breath caught for a moment. With his red, sleeveless shirt, short-cropped hair, and fully tattooed arms, the drummer looked completely out of place in the waiting room. He was focused on typing something on his phone when he glanced up, and their eyes met. A grin spread across his sun-bronzed face as he jumped up from his chair and hugged him tightly.

“Good to see you,” José whispered into his ear.

Tristan hesitantly wrapped his arms around him. Just hearing his Spanish accent again gave him a good feeling. José was always dependable.

The native Venezuelan, who had lived in the States since childhood, stepped back and inspected him from head to toe. “Damn, have you grown? I didn’t remember you being so tall.”

Tristan forced a smile and patted his buddy on the shoulder. “Thanks.”

“No, thank you for not making me wait any longer.” With a nod, he gestured toward Tristan’s bandaged arm. “What’s this?”

“A cut,” he replied curtly. When the airbag deployed, a shard of metal slashed his forearm in half.

José nodded thoughtfully. “Alright, then let’s get out of here.”

As they left the clinic together, Tristan followed him across the parking lot, relieved to take a seat in an air-conditioned car. They sat in silence for a while, Tristan gazing out the window at his old hometown as it whizzed by, while José focused on the traffic.

Now that Tristan was about to leave once more, he wondered how reckless he had been to come back here. But it was necessary. He had no other choice. His parents were here. Even though Milo had been buried in Los Angeles, he wanted to return their pendant.

“We’re all meeting at the Redwood tonight,” José said as he turned on the blinker and merged onto the freeway. “Carol thought a neutral place like a bar would probably be better than her office.”

“The Redwood?” Tristan furrowed his brow in disbelief. “Not exactly

neutral.”

“I know. Maybe she thought it was better to hide among sharks than to try to swim away from them.”

“Or she thought she wouldn’t have to get back into the car and could walk there.”

José laughed. “That sounds more like her.”

A heaviness settled over Tristan, and he felt incredibly tired. Surely, José wouldn’t mind if he took a quick nap. But a thought jolted him out of his daze.

“How’s Leaf?”

José fell silent, staring intently at the road.

“Is he okay?”

“We’ll probably find out soon.” José muttered and stepped on the gas.

As the expanse of the desert opened up before them, Tristan breathed a sigh of relief.

Survived Las Vegas once again.

The sun still stood behind them, but soon they would be chasing after it. Westward. Back to the City of Angels.

Leaf

The sun relentlessly poured through the cracks in the wooden cabin, slicing through the smoke-filled room with its golden rays like spears. A dense fog of grass and tobacco hung in the stale air. Outside, the leaves of the trees rustled, yet the warm wind failed to disperse the pent-up heat.

Leaf sluggishly rolled onto his side and opened his eyes. His supplies were spread out and within reach on the coffee table. For days, he had been numbing himself in his cave, but his thoughts kept drifting back to the day that had changed everything.

A single gunshot, and before him appeared a gaping hole. The moment Tristan disappeared into it was seared into his brain. It had been too late to reach out for him, to grab him and hold him tight. Completely in shock, Tristan sat in the open police car, only physically present but lost in mind.

Leaf had been left behind.

Alone.

And then he had slipped away from the world.

Plunged headfirst into his own darkness.

Where he could numb himself.

Forget everything.

He would have preferred to dissolve into the intoxication.

The storm was brewing again. Like ghosts, images raced through his mind, stirring up the past that he had tried so hard to keep in the dark. His body tensed, trembled, his breath caught.

The effect wore off.

Dazed, he sat up and gasped for air. With a shaky hand, he reached for the

half-full glass of Jack Daniel's and downed it in one gulp. Then he poured another and lit a cigarette.

He was good at disappearing, but he couldn't escape. The path he had chosen at least made Tristan's absence bearable. But the fear he had been left with ate away at him internally.

Seeing no one. Speaking to no one. He had committed a sin. Only the drugs brought him relief, sometimes a fresh breeze that he gratefully inhaled. Afterward, he felt ashamed for allowing himself to feel carefree for a moment.

Accustomed to the darkness, he wondered how much longer he could endure it? Weary, he rubbed his face and ran his fingers through his long, greasy hair. A cough escaped his throat, and he took a swig from his drink, but it wasn't enough. Placing the burning cigarette in the ashtray, he reached for a baggie with the sticky black lump. Forming small balls, he stuffed them into the glass pipe. Holding the lighter underneath, he took a deep hit of opium, the sweet white mist filling his lungs.

A pleasant heaviness settled over his body, and his muscles relaxed. He leaned back, blowing out the smoke, giving in to the intoxication. Flashes of light flickered in all colors before his eyes. The scent of lilac, lavender, and pine filled the air. Then he left his confined body and disappeared from the surface.

For an entire week, they had resembled ghosts, trapped in a reality that demanded they act like robots. The funeral had been a disaster. Tristan was a shadow of himself on two legs, barely able to stand upright. A whole day lost in the thickest fog.

When Tristan had vanished from the scene, Leaf realized this was only the beginning of something he felt responsible for. He had searched for the right words over and over again, but he had remained silent and had hated himself more with each passing day.

It wasn't what Milo had taken with him, but what he had left behind. The great catastrophe. The void that had swallowed Tristan like a monster.

"Oh my God! What should we do?" Andrey panicked. "What about the tour?"

Do we need a replacement? Carol!"

"The tour will go on," the manager said sternly. "There's a lot of money at stake. Damn it! What was he thinking?"

They discussed finding replacement singers and guitarists, and brainstormed ways to keep the show running. Leaf let it wash over him, sitting dazed until he eventually toppled off the chair.

Since then, he had been busy erasing the past. Everything should disappear into thin air until the annoying ringing of the phone had pulled him out of the depths of his stupor.

"Leaf! Can you hear me?" Carol called, sounding breathless.

Leaf had placed the phone next to his ear and closed his eyes.

"We found him. He's in Vegas and had an accident. They transferred him to a psychiatric facility. He's okay. I spoke to the doctor. No cause for concern. There's nothing that won't heal in three weeks."

His heart tore apart. Angry, he threw the phone away and fled into the haze. He knew that Tristan—plagued by crippling pain—had found no other way out than to turn his overwhelming despair against himself.

The blood burned hot in Leaf's veins and thundered through his head.

Blow after blow.

What would he give to free Tristan from grief?

I have nothing but my life.

He can have it if he wants.

The thought calmed him, gave him strength to let go again and sink even deeper into the haze.

"Leaf! Are you here?"

Someone was impatiently banging on the door.

"Leaf!"

Probably just a dream.

One of many that had been haunting him lately. Just as often as he had thought he saw Tristan in his cabin.

“I’m sorry! I’m so damn sorry!”

But there was no one—just the haze.

“God, what’s that smell?”

Andrej.

Far away.

“Leaf! Wake up!”

And suddenly so close.

No door separating them anymore.

Leaf slowly opened his eyes and stared down at himself like a ghost. In the sour fog, amid scattered pizza boxes, beer, and whiskey, he lay out on the couch, completely out of it. He wore torn jeans, a Sepultura shirt, black Converse sneakers, and a three-day beard.

“He’s completely gone!” Leaf heard Andrej pacing behind him, his frustration evident in every word.

Is he on the phone?

“He needs a doctor!” Then a growl. “I’m not his damn babysitter!” His voice echoed through the entire cabin. “Fine! I’ll see what I can do. Are you guys already in L.A.?” Andrej stopped. “Okay, then we’ll see each other later. Bye.”

Something shifted in the fog. Fresh air flowed in, and the smoke escaped through the open door to the balcony. The rattling sound as Andrej pulled back the curtains startled Leaf, propelling him to feel trapped in his body again. With his eyes closed, he noticed the light flooding the cabin and felt a warm hand on his upper arm.

Go away!

“Leaf, wake up.”

Leave me alone. We both don’t want this.

Andrej put his arm around his shoulders and hauled him up.

When was the last time I stood upright?

How do I stay that way?

“How can anyone let themselves go like this? It’s unbelievable,” Andrej

ranted as he lifted Leaf to his feet.

No, staying upright is impossible.

Leaf's knees buckled, but that wasn't a problem for Andrej, who regularly went to the gym and concealed the sculpted body of a bouncer under his plain blue T-shirt.

Leaf noticed the cool wall against his back. When Andrej let go of him, his legs buckled again, and he sank to the floor.

"Oh man! You stink! When was the last time you showered?" Andrej turned on the water and stormed out of the bathroom.

Leaf leaned his head against the wall and stretched out his legs. The water sprayed down on him, and the roaring in his ears drowned out his jumbled thoughts. But his clothes became heavy; more weight was pulling him down. Exhausted, he buried his face in his hands.

What a battlefield.

It's tearing me apart.

Though he could still hold himself together, the fight had already lasted too long, three cursed weeks in total. Leaning back, he pushed the wet hair out of his face, breathing out haltingly. The screams remained.

If I could turn my insides out, they would escape. I could shake them off. No more memories. Go up in smoke and disappear. Back to paradise.

Where's the substance that'll take me back there?

He gradually opened his eyes. The noise of the water echoed in his ears, but it couldn't get rid of that one thought. There was a way back to paradise. Leaf raised his hand and turned off the faucet. Disgusted by reality, the dark wooden walls, the red curtain at the window, the black carpet, the toilet, the sink, and himself, he closed his eyes again.

A hand touched his shoulder, while another brushed against his forehead. His head fell back as Andrej's voice echoed from a distance.

"Wake up already. Come on!"

Leaf laboriously opened his leaden eyelids and tried to focus on Andrej. He

couldn't. The lamp above his head blinded him too much, so he closed his eyes again.

“Leaf, damn it! Get yourself together!”

Andrej grabbed him under the arms, hoisted him to his feet, and pinned him against the wall. A slap brought Leaf back to reality.

“Can I let you go, or are you going to collapse again?”

Dazed, Leaf straightened up and brushed some brown strands from his face. His hand was shaky, his limbs numb, but he felt life returning to them and the carousel in his head gradually gaining speed again.

“Get dressed. And don't forget to shave. I brought pizza—it's about time you eat something,” Andrej stated in a monotonous tone, tossing a towel at him before leaving the room.

With heavy legs, Leaf stepped out of the shower. His eyes burned, and his mouth was dry. He knew the moment would come. Eventually. And now he felt like he'd been run over by a steamroller. No wonder. Days of drug use didn't go unpunished and left their mark.

He sat on the toilet lid and removed his wet trousers, along with his T-shirt and pants. Once more, he stood under the water and washed himself with soap and shampoo. He couldn't smell anything, but he was sure Andrej was right.

With wobbly legs, Leaf finally made his way to the sink to brush his teeth and shave. As he combed his hair, he noticed the dark circles under his eyes. It was obvious that he was suffering. His gaze was dull and lost. He tied his long hair back and pushed a strand behind his ear. No matter how deep and dark the circles were, the more orderly his appearance, the better the impression.

Still weak on his feet, he went to the bedroom and put on fresh clothes. Black jeans, an Iron Maiden shirt, and a black jacket. Unfortunately, the last thing he needed for a decent appearance was in the living room. Cocaine. As he staggered out of the room, he nearly collided with Andrej.

“Back from the dead, huh?” Andrej teased as he rounded the corner into the kitchen.

Leaf looked at him in confusion before plopping down on the couch and prepared two lines.

“What the hell is that?” Andrej entered the living room, holding a pizza box.

“I’m coming back to life.”

“Dude, we’re going on tour. The first gig is on Saturday. You should get back on your feet—without this shit!”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing.” *With this shit.* Leaning forward, he snorted the coke.

“You’re living in a total junkie den!” Andrej exclaimed, astonished. “Look at yourself! You’re a wreck. Tris is coming back today. I thought ...”

“I know!” It took all his strength to interrupt Andrej’s flow of speech. Yes, he knew he would meet Tristan soon, but the love for him, which bubbled up at the mere mention of Tristan’s name, choked him. So he drank the last sips of whiskey and lit a cigarette.

Andrej took a deep breath. “You really should eat something,” he said in a conciliatory tone.

As Leaf stood up, he rubbed his nose and grabbed a beer from the kitchen. “I’ll drive myself,” he said nonchalantly.

Paradise Rock

“Paradise Rock FM! It’s Anna Banana in the house! Welcome back to the most rockin’ news in town! The week is still young! Monday afternoon, and you won’t believe the news that just hit me. The man of the hour, Tristan James, has resurfaced! After three weeks of radio silence. How do I know? A little birdie told me! Clint, why don’t you tell your listeners what happened?”

“Hi, Anna! Well, until two hours ago, I was on pins and needles myself. An interview with Nightstalker had been scheduled for Wednesday. But since Tristan James disappeared after the release concert ...”

“The band’s been through a total rollercoaster these past few weeks!”

“Indeed.”

“For those who haven’t been following ... First, Tristan’s brother got shot. Then there’s a bar brawl that leads to Tristan getting arrested. Just twelve hours later, he’s released and delivers what might be the most disastrous performance in rock history at the House of Blues. No wonder he’s gone into hiding.”

“Yes, I was there. The concert was really bad. I’m still lost for words today. Tristan could hardly stand; he was so drunk. His voice kept failing him. He couldn’t even get through a single song. And Eliot Parker ...”

“You mean Leaf.”

“Exactly, Leaf, the guitarist, who’s usually a virtuoso on his instrument. But that evening—whoa—that was already frightening. Physically, he was there, but mentally ... I don’t know what he was on. Even all the efforts from José Martinez, the drummer, and Andrej Novak, the bassist, couldn’t prevent the disaster.”

“I heard the concert was canceled?”

“Not until Tristan tied a noose with the microphone cable and tried climbing up to the spotlights. I think it was a technician who brought him down, and then Tristan punched him in the face. At least the criticism afterward was directed at the management, not the band, but that didn’t change the fact that Tristan James vanished.”

“Phew … yeah, well … A bit too much happened all at once.”

“You can say that. Anyway, I had no idea if the interview appointment for Wednesday was still on. But just now, Carol Davis, the band’s manager, contacted me and I’m telling you: Get excited! The interview is happening!”

“With Tristan?”

“Maybe with him, maybe without him. I’m not sure yet, but I’m staying optimistic.”

“How do you assess the situation, Clint? Will we see Nightstalker at the Whisky a Go Go on Saturday? I mean, we’re talking about a historically significant venue they’ve chosen for the tour kickoff. Or is this the end of this promising band? As announced this morning, Frank Chelsea has filed assault charges against Tristan James. He claims to have been attacked by Tristan in a bar. And it wouldn’t surprise me if Tristan’s disappearance has something to do with his brother’s death. Could it be that the singer has completely lost his grip? The events just keep piling up.”

“It’s nothing new that James reacts emotionally; he always has. We’re talking about his brother, who was shot dead in broad daylight right in front of him. Anyone would be a wreck if they had to take the stage and play a concert just a few days later. But I hope that the three weeks off have helped them out and that the guys have been able to pull themselves together. It would be a huge loss if the band couldn’t bounce back from all this mess.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Well, Tristan is 27 years old. The literary scene has been celebrating him as a great poet for years. Nobody wants to see him join the 27 Club alongside Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, or Amy Winehouse.”

“Please no! After the disastrous release concert, it remains to be seen what the band will deliver in six days. Their second album has been out for three weeks. It’s hot! And if you haven’t heard it yet, now’s the time to perk up your ears! Here’s Nightstalker with ‘Yesterday’!”

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Reunion

Leaf stubbed out his cigarette in the sand bucket by the entrance and stumbled through the doorway into the Redwood. Just in time, he caught himself on the door and squeezed his eyes shut for a second to stop the dizziness.

“My goodness,” Andrej groaned. “I can’t believe I let you drive yourself.”

Leaf rubbed his eyes, glanced back at the ominous threshold, and then at Andrej. Andrej shook his head incredulously. “Come on,” he said, pulling Leaf by the arm into the bar.

After three steps, Leaf wriggled out of his grip and turned longingly toward the entrance. The cocaine’s effects were already wearing off. Mixed with raw nervousness, the trembling returned to his hands. It wouldn’t be long before he couldn’t pretend to be normal anymore.

“The others are waiting.”

With a reluctant sigh, he followed Andrej past the counter into the back of the bar. As the words echoed in his head like a mantra, a sudden cold shiver ran down his spine.

The others?

Tris?

His body froze. Just the thought of him threw Leaf off balance, and he nervously chewed on his lower lip.

“What’s wrong?” Andrej asked as they passed between two tables. “Are you having a panic attack?”

Leaf would have preferred to turn on his heel and leave the bar right away. But there was also this deep-seated desire to see Tristan. He had to see him. Had

to make sure it was really him. Alive and well.

Carol's choice of the Redwood for their meeting caught Leaf off guard. *Doesn't she know what kind of place this is?* The L.A. Times building was just around the corner, and it was widely known that journalists frequented this spot. The bright red phone with a direct line to the newsroom still hung next to the entrance. *At least they cut off the line.* Leaf also gratefully noted that they were the only guests.

He followed Andrej past the wooden posts wrapped in thick ropes, tilting his head to avoid being blinded by the glaring red light. The decor was mostly dark wood and reminded him of a pirate bar.

“What the hell was that?” he heard Carol exclaim. “First, you disappear, and then we find you in a clinic. If you’re going to kill yourself, then do it properly and don’t keep us in the dark!”

“Damn it!” José gritted his teeth. “Calm down, Carol!”

“We held a damn audition because we thought you’d never come back,” she continued to rant. “I’ve aged ten years. I got wrinkles! For fuck’s sake!”

As Andrej stepped aside, Leaf watched as Carol wrapped her arms around Tristan’s neck and hugged him tightly.

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