

PATERNUS

Sample Chapter 2

Dyrk Ashton

Copyright © Dyrk Ashton

DBA Paternus Books Media®. All Rights Reserved.

Kabir

Sixty miles north of Toledo, the full moon is a gray smudge in a murky Detroit sky. Tinted beams of searchlight wave at it lazily from the rooftop of a sold out concert hall. The heavy *thump--thump* of the bass can be felt for a quarter mile around.

Inside the auditorium, Kabir stands with his arms crossed near the roped off hall that leads backstage. Six feet two inches tall with a thick mane of gray hair combed straight back and sideburns speckled black, Kabir is built like a linebacker, in spite of his age--all shoulders, pecs, and biceps tucked into a finely tailored gray Armani suit, with a silk heliotrope tie.

Kabir is a bodyguard. It's what he does. Always has. They call him a legend in the business of rock & roll security, in spite of his best efforts to keep a low profile. In

the thirty-six years he's been doing this, no one he's been assigned to has ever been touched.

Thirty-six years, already? A blink, really, but in practical terms, plenty long enough. He'll miss it when he moves on. The music, the noise, the crowds.

Over his shoulder, the half-naked teen pop diva under his care for the evening prances on stage in glitter and lights, belting out one of her latest chart-toppers. It's her last song of the main set and people with backstage passes are already lining up along the wall. The crowd goes wild as she builds to the song's climax, something about brushing your teeth with whiskey, threesomes, and other youthful naughtiness.

Kabir isn't listening to the words. He's busy doing what he does best. Being vigilant. Protecting. He surveys the mass of ecstatic fans with sharp copper eyes that seem to x-ray rather than just see. Searching for signs of malice, seeking out bad intent, looking for trouble.

And here it comes.

"Hey, that's Stag Larsen!" one of the bouncers from behind the rope near Kabir shouts above the pounding music.

Kabir's seen him already. How could he not? 6' 5" tall, 290 lbs., wearing a two-sizes-too-small t-shirt tugged over his thick sculpted torso and a satin jacket thrown over one shoulder, Stag is Detroit's latest and greatest

hope for a mixed martial arts heavyweight title. He high fives fans, winks at girls despite the gorgeous swimsuit model draped on one arm, and grins back at his entourage. The crowd parts before him like a shoal of herring in the path of a shark.

“Did you see Stag fight Dinky Suarez last night?!” Kabir hears the bouncer continue, speaking to another security guard next to him. “Stag’s better, but Dinky got fucked on that call...”

Kabir’s already moving. He smelled the other man before he saw him. Being able to pluck the stink of rage out of the air and pinpoint its source, even in a sweat filled, beer soaked, disinfectant layered auditorium full of people--well, for Kabir, it’s a gift. Dinky Suarez, who lost to Stag in the cage just last night, is stalking through the crowd. All 340 lbs. of him. Sweat glistens on his tattooed face and there’s murder in his eyes. Dinky’s an inch shorter than Stag but a big heavy bastard. A lot of it’s fat, but he can dish out some serious punishment, and take it too. They say he hits like a wrecking ball.

This isn’t Kabir’s purview. He’s personal security, not a bouncer, but innocent people, not to mention Kabir’s fellow security personnel, could get hurt. He’s acting on instinct. The instinct to shelter, shield, defend.

The singer finishes her song in high crescendo. Unaware of the impending brawl, she heads backstage, throwing kisses to an audience that screams for more.

Dinky reaches Stag well before Kabir does. “Hey Larsen, you faggot!” A couple members of Stag’s entourage, two smaller and less established fighters themselves, happen to be in the way. Dinky takes them out with a single punch each. Each one falling topples three of the crowd. People scream and jump back, pressing the surrounding mob into a tightly packed ring. Stag shoves his jacket at his girlfriend, pushes her out of the way and starts bouncing on the balls of his feet, fists raised, a twisted smile on his craggy face.

“Punk ass bitch!” Dinky taunts. “No ref to save you now!”

“Bring it, pussy!” Stag shouts, and Dinky brings it all right--long black hair, denim biker vest, skull tattoos on swinging fists, and wrath. They go at it hard, blow after blow sounding like baseball bats on sides of beef.

The crowd is thick in a circle around them, and Kabir won’t just toss people out of the way. “Excuse me folks,” he growls, “pardon me.”

Three good-sized bouncers break through before Kabir. Two leap on Dinky, the third grabs Stag from behind.

Bad idea, guys, Kabir thinks. And he’s right.

Dinky jerks away, throws a jab and a round house and the bouncers who jumped him are both out cold before they hit the floor. Stag ducks out of his man's grasp, lifts him by arm and groin and sends him flying into a couple of Dinky's biker buddies who've shown up at just the wrong time. They take down another half dozen bystanders.

Kabir's going to have to hit these guys hard. Not so hard as to do permanent damage, but enough to get their attention--to show them they aren't really at the top of the food chain. Not quite.

Stag and Dinky square off again but Kabir breaks through and pushes them apart.

Stag bellows, "Outta the way old man!"

"Take it easy, fellas." Kabir doesn't shout, but his deep crunchy voice is easily heard over the racket of those in the crowd who haven't noticed the fight and are chanting for an encore. "We don't want anybody to get hurt."

"Stupid fucker!" Dinky dips, rolls his shoulders and delivers a perfectly executed uppercut to Kabir's heavy square jaw, giving him all he's got--and what he's got is a lot.

Onlookers wince and groan as they see and hear the punch land.

Kabir doesn't budge.

Dinky's eyes go wide and his hand goes numb.

Kabir turns his copper eyes upon him and aims a quick jab at his ribs. Dinky's whole fatbody quivers and he drops to his knees like a slaughtered bull.

Stag grabs Kabir's shoulder. "Hey, fucker!"

Nice vocabulary these guys have. Kabir spins and open-hand slaps Stag right across the face.

The crowd gasps. Stag's ears ring. He sees stars. His legs noodle. He's never been hit so hard, so fast. He feels a sharp blow to his solar plexus and his breath rushes out. He goes to his knees. Kabir turns his attention back to Dinky.

"No no!" Dinky shouts, clutching his injured hand to his chest and holding up the other in an attempt to fend off Kabir. Kabir snatches his outstretched hand, twists, and Dinky flops to his back.

The onlookers can't believe what they're seeing. Kabir, crouched between the two men, holding them close in a huddle, as if the three of them are best friends having an intimate conversation.

What they aren't close enough to discern are the agony in Stag's eyes, the veins popping beneath the roid rash on his forehead, the chords of muscle that stand out from his neck, the back of which Kabir has in a grip so tight that Stag doesn't dare move due to the icy pain and popping sounds of his vertebrae. The crowd can't smell the full weight of Stag's tangy cheesy B.O., or that Dinky

reeks of a massive over-application of Axe cologne. They also can't see Dinky's hand turning purple, the tears in his eyes from Kabir wrenching his wrist to the brink of snapping, or hear Kabir's softly spoken question, "We done?"

What the crowd *can* see is both men frantically tapping out in surrender on Kabir's broad back. And very soon, thanks to a multitude of smartphones, so will a lot of other people.



Kabir marches Stag and Dinky into the outer lobby. They're surrounded by a boisterous mob snapping pictures and shooting video with their phones--and there are more in the lobby.

Who needs paparazzi these days?, Kabir groans to himself. He considers the aftermath of his actions appearing on social media everywhere. He can already visualize the tagline: "Stag Larsen Bitch Slapped by Aging Bouncer." *What was I thinking!?*

He hands Stag and Dinky over to a half dozen of Detroit's finest then ducks into a "No Access" hallway that leads backstage. The cops can talk to him later if they need to, he's got work to do. His earpiece chirps.

"Hey Kabir." It's Rosen, head of security.

"Yeah."

"Nice job out there. Impressive, as usual. Thanks."

Kabir doesn't respond.

"Anyway," Rosen continues, "the boys out back say some homeless guy made his way into the car port. They don't know how he got there. Could've been sleeping in the trash all day, I guess. Will you check it out?"

"Why not just bounce him?"

"Well, they say he asked for you by name."

Kabir scowls. *Must be some mistake.* "I'll be right there."



Kabir continues along the hall toward the back of the building. Through the walls he hears the cheering of the crowd and the music kick in as the encore begins.

Maybe it is time to do something else, he considers. It's been on his mind of late. He's known too well in this business, by too many people. *They'll begin to wonder, if they haven't already.*

Kabir pushes through the heavy double doors to the private section of the parking garage that's reserved for talent. In the car port near the exit to the alley, two personal security guards in suit and tie, and a driver, lean against a stretch limo.

The taller bodyguard, Hansen, sees him first, "Hey Kabir. Sorry, man. We were just gonna haul his ass out until he said he knew ya."

Kabir grunts in reply. Hansen is young and not real competent, but nice enough.

“We asked him to wait out in the alley,” the shorter bodyguard, Spelling, adds. Kabir’s worked with Spelling for years. He’s an ass but good at his job. “Just a little bitty dude. Fucking weird, though. Creeps me out.”

“Wearing like three coats,” Hansen adds.

“And sunglasses.”

“Definitely has a thing for sunglasses.”

“And smells like shit.”

“Nasty.”

“Real nasty.”

Kabir rounds the limo and heads to the exit.

The limo driver watches him go. “Strong, silent type, huh?”

“I think he invented it,” says Spelling with a grin. “Did I tell ya the guy’s a legend?”

Kabir squeezes past the gate arm into the alley and takes a deep breath of the cool wet air, inhaling the familiar scent of dirty water and diesel fuel. *Ah, Detroit.* He checks the sky, a flat gray haze dimly infused with the light of the city, and the position of the blurry blot of a moon. *Just after midnight.* Colored beams of searchlight slice the thick atmosphere. The vibratory beat of the music can still be heard from inside.

The alley where Kabir stands runs between buildings alongside the concert hall. Access to the main street is a half block up to the right, where a key card is required to

open the ten feet high gate topped with razor wire. Not the kind of climb the homeless usually tackle. Like Rosen said, the bum could have been sleeping in the trash. Right now there's no sign of him. To Kabir's left the drive ends at an adjoining building and turns right into a blind alley. Kabir heads that way. This guy was probably a roady some time ago or an alcoholic door man, maybe a washed up junky musician. Or it could be Kabir doesn't know him at all. Anyway, he'll get this straightened out and get back to work in short order.

Kabir's mind wanders back to his previous line of thought. Maybe he *could* take some time off. He'll find another job eventually; he always does. He'll have to change his identity, give up his most recent name, the one he took in honor of his mother's side of the family. No big deal. It's not like he hasn't done it before. Maybe he'll go to someplace remote and relax. He used to travel for work. That got too risky, increasing the chance of running into people he used to know too soon. Unlike some of the others of his kind, he can only alter his appearance so much. But a chance to see the world again might be nice.

A genuine smile spreads across his ordinarily stony face. *That's what I'll do. See some old friends, visit family. Hell, I might even see if I can track down Father.*

He rounds the corner to the blind alley, lost in thought, then slows as he hears a male voice singing a nursery rhyme, high, soft and angelic:

“Oh, the Incy, Wincy Spider,
Climbed up the water spout.
Down came the rain,
And washed the spider out.
Out came the sun,
And dried up all the rain,
And the Incy Wincy Spider,
Climbed up the spout again.”

A foul odor reaches Kabir and the voice becomes creaky and discordant.

“Here, *kitty kitty*.”

Kabir balks as his mind grapples with the vaguely familiar scent and voice. Ahead of him to the right are two dumpsters against the wall. Beyond them the alley is blocked by a chain-link fence topped with coiled razor wire like the gate out front. There are usually plenty of lights back here, high on the walls. All are now broken but one back in the main alley, striking inky shadows. There’s no sign of anyone.

Kabir stalks forward cautiously, then makes out the shape of a figure crouched in the darkness between the dumpsters. It stands slowly, no more than five and a half

feet tall, but Kabir's skin prickles and the hair on the back of his neck and all down his back bristles straight.

This is the "homeless man" who knew Kabir's name-- or at least what Hansen and Spelling *saw* as a homeless man. In that form it wouldn't be in the least menacing. What Kabir sees is no vagrant, however, but the creature's true form, its trueface. And it sees Kabir's.

Kabir reproaches himself harshly--how could he have let his guard down?! His *guard!* It's been so very long. He's gotten soft.

"*Max...*" the name passes Kabir's lips as an exclamation of deepest loathing.

Max hunches low to the ground. "Hello, Zadkiel." He chortles. "My apologies. I mean, *Kabir.*"

Kabir has never fled from anything only to save himself. Now, faced with this little "homeless man," he considers it for the first time in his very long life. But he knows, running will not save him. Not from Maskim Xul. And it's always better to go down fighting. Always.

It leaps.



In the garage, Hansen, Spelling and the driver are jolted by a roar so inhuman and ghastly they question whether they heard it at all. Spelling tries his radio, calling for Kabir. No response. Hansen and the limo driver

stand frozen in place, but Spelling heads straight for the back of the car. “Open the trunk!”

It takes a moment for the command to register before the driver fumbles the keys out of his pocket and hits the button to pop the trunk.

Spelling snatches two shotguns from a case inside and shoves one in Hansen’s hands. “Come on.” He calls on the radio for Rosen to send police as he and Hansen approach the back of the alley, then pulls a small flashlight from his belt.

Hansen’s having difficulty differentiating between the muffled pulse of the music from the concert and his own pounding heartbeat.

They round the corner with shotguns raised.

No sign of Kabir or struggle, just scattered rubbish. They move carefully to the front of the dumpsters, shotguns at the ready, but the space between them is clear. Spelling checks inside. Empty. He tries Kabir on the radio again and hears a tinny squeak at his feet. He nudges a moldy piece of newspaper with his shoe, uncovering a coiled, shiny object. He trains his light on it and crouches.

“Shit.”

It’s Kabir’s earpiece. The squeaking sound they heard was Spelling’s own voice. He pulls the paper away and sees something else. He hands the flashlight to Hansen, reaches into his breast pocket, retrieves a pair of latex

gloves, the kind security employees carry in case they need to search someone.

“Is that a bone?” Hansen asks.

Spelling picks the thing up, hefts it, finding it surprisingly heavy. Six inches long, ivory white, serrated along one edge and tapered to a deadly point. He tips it up in the light. Bits of meat and tendrils of nerve hang from the wider end, dripping blood.

“Dude, I think it’s a *tooth*.”

CHAPTER THREE

Obsidian

The cavern pool is dark and still, the only movement the flickering reflection of amber torchlight and feathery mist that crawl on its surface. With barely a ripple, Ao Guang's bald head and long angular face rise until his nose is just above the water. Breath escapes in a slow huff, dissipating the mist, and he sniffs the humid air. His lime-green eyes scan a domed chamber of glassy purple obsidian. Wide chiseled steps lead up and out of the pool. In the middle of the straw-strewn floor above squats a roughly hewn altar of stone. Torches jut from the walls, held by crude sconces of pounded gold. Ao cuts through the water and trudges up the steps, a lumbering giant, long-limbed and intimidating.

Baphomet emerges next. Short white hair and goatee, noble features, light-complected, with eyes of the faintest

pink. He comports himself proudly to the floor of the chamber.

Dimmi follows, dark of skin, eyes and hair, sputtering as he stalks up to Baphomet's side. All three wear the same military-style khaki shirts, pants and boots, drenched and dripping.

"No need for cloaking here, I'd imagine," says Baphomet in Olde English. Ao Guang clacks his crooked angling teeth together once, loud and unnerving.

The men's images shudder like reflections in a shaken mirror--and become no longer the images of men...