

CHAPTER ONE

Friday, September 13th, 2193

Violet Garner is a biographer who has had the pleasure of talking with people of all walks of life, from presidents to celebrities to geniuses. Her work has taken her around the world, and into situations that even some journalists would not have gotten the chance to go into. Today, she is schedule to begin meeting with a unique person. Today she meets with Nyeusi Kifu, or as he was better known for many years, 'The Black Death'.

Nyeusi Kifu is a hybrid, a cross between a human and an animal. There are roughly fifteen hundred of these hybrids residing in New York City, many still staying in a small enclave of the city known only as 'Old New York'. They were a science project that overstepped its boundaries, and the hybrids were

forced to face the full repercussions of that overstep. Nyeusi was instrumental in changing those repercussions and working to give hybrids full freedoms. He was also a killer.

Violet is currently sitting in her car, outside of a warehouse on the very outskirts of New York, and within sight of the wall which demarcated Old New York from New York proper. She is early for her meeting, as she normally was, so she is currently scanning over notes she had taken down on her tablet computer, moving questions around into an order that she feels makes sense. This habit is usually not productive, as the conversations tend to veer off into multiple directions and never the direction she had intended, but she does it none-the-less. Once all the questions are in the order she wants, she locks the tablet's screen and puts it into a black backpack which she has carried for going on twenty years now.

She turns her attention to her Digicorder, a small recording device that stores all recordings directly to a central storage location, so she has access to them anywhere. She brings up the menu and clicks a small plus icon which brings up a keyboard. She types 'Nyeusi Kifu' and then presses the Create icon. After a moment, she is returned to the main screen, and she selects the new entry to make sure all recordings go into that directory. She slips the Digicorder into one of the

smaller pockets of her backpack and checks the time on her cellphone: five minutes to four. She takes a deep breath and mutters 'showtime' to herself.

She depresses the illuminated button on the dashboard of her car, which shuts the electric engine off, and takes the key fob out of the cupholder she always sets it in. She opens the car door, and after taking one more visual scan around the car to ensure she has not forgotten anything, she grabs the backpack and slams the car door. The doors on the car all lock and the alarm is armed. Long gone are the days of useless car alarms, these alarms sync up to monitoring companies who are far more efficient than the police ever would be.

She walks up to the door of the warehouse, the gravel crunching under her feet. That sound rattles her nerves slightly because she is now within minutes of meeting a person that was a killer beyond reproach. While she has heard from several who know of him that he has mellowed out greatly over the past twenty years, that does not mean that the instinct is not still there. She reaches the door and is startled to see Nyeusi standing inside, waiting for her. The door opens, and the black leopard smiles. "Ms. Garner, welcome. Please do come in."

She steps into the warehouse, smiling lightly. "Thank you, Mr. Kifu." If she did not know the history of Nyeusi, she would

say he was charming. His voice has a British accent and a very clean accent at that. He stands roughly seven feet five inches tall, and by guess must weigh three hundred and fifty pounds. He is wearing a pair of tan khakis and a long-sleeved, red polo shirt with one button undone. On his feet he wears a pair of what look like motorcycle boots. His eyes are those of a cat, yellow with no hint of white at all. His fur is short, and the rosettes that are typical of leopards are visible. She is still amazed that such creatures can exist, as they were once only the dreams of science fiction writers and cartoonists.

"Please, follow me," he says as he walks up the hallway and heads into a room that sits off to the right. She follows after and finds the room to be a conference room of sorts, with a long table in the center and a few chairs scattered around the room. Off in one corner is a small refrigerator, and sitting atop that is two ashtrays, one with a few cigarette butts in it. Nyeusi pulls two of the chairs up to the table, holding one out for her, which she settles into. "While I am up, can I get you a bottle of water?"

"That would be fine, thank you," she says as she begins to unpack her backpack. She pulls out her tablet, and her Digicorder, which she sets in between the two chairs. She also pulls out her pack of cigarettes and lighter and sets them out

on the table as well. Normally, she wouldn't pull those out but as there are ashtrays, she assumes that smoking is not prohibited here. "Also, if you do not mind, could I also have one of those ashtrays?"

"A smoker as well, very well then." Nyeusi moves over and flips a switch on a switch plate. A soft hum fills the room. "Forgive that noise, I do hope it will not hamper your recording. It is an air filtration system, helps to keep the smoke smell down." He then pulls a couple of bottles of water from the refrigerator and brings over both ashtrays. He sets the one with the butts in it next to where he sits down and slides the other one over to her. He also slides the water over to her, and opens his water.

She turns on the Digicorder and taps a noise cancelation button on the screen. She holds up a hand for a second until the button turns transparent again and then she lowers her hand. "No, the noise will not bother the recording. I just set it so it recognized the noise as background noise so it should eliminate it entirely." She opens her bottle of water, and unlocks her tablet, setting it front of herself. "I would like to thank you for accepting my invitation to be interviewed. I have followed you for a while now and have very much wanted to speak with you for quite some time."

"I would be lying if I did not say I am surprised you chose to talk with me," the leopard says. "While I did lead what many might consider an interesting life, I do not know if there will be much demand to learn more of me. That being said, it is my pleasure. Any chance to show the world that hybrids are not something to be feared is worth my time. That may sound odd coming from me, but others will come up in our discussions, others that are wonderful people and who live only to help those in need, and lead a good life."

Violet reaches over and presses the record button on the Digicorder. The button blinks red three times, and then goes green, indicating it has made a connection to the server it is hooked up to. She takes a drink of her water, and looks down at her tablet, scanning through a few initial questions. "As I know we have a limited time for this particular meeting, why don't we start with you telling me a bit about yourself. Nothing that involves your past, just some basic information."

The leopard unwraps a pack of cigarettes that he pulls from his shirt pocket and pulls a cigarette from the pack. He lights it with a lighter that he also pulls from his shirt pocket, and takes a drag off of it. He exhales the smoke and after a moment in thought, he begins. "Well, my name is Nyeusi Kifu. I am a product of the Human Hybridization Project that ran from the

year 2020 until the year 2140 and was then restarted for one last hybrid in 2142. I currently live in a small home with two other hybrids, which I have come to term brothers. They are Kes, a border collie and Dylan a black lab. I spend most of my time now doing whatever might pique my interest, as well as helping at Kes and Dylan's shop which they run in Old New York."

Violet flips through a few screens of notes, and scanned bits of news about the hybrid project, and can find no mention of 2142. She takes a moment to light one of her cigarettes, before speaking. "I have never heard of the project running in 2142. The only articles I can find show that it ended in 2140. It was condemned by the State of New York, as well as the University of Genetics for breaking a couple of treaties regarding certain genetic manipulation practices. Could you explain the 2142 restart?"

"While I do not wish to get into too much detail on that at this moment due to not having all the paperwork here with me, I can explain briefly. The project was shut down in 2140, yes, and also condemned. They were given a warning that if it were to be started again, the lab which was undertaking the project would be shut down and all those involved would lose any credentials they had. That being said, there was a bribe, of sorts, put forth in 2142 to reopen the project to create the perfect

soldier, or so I surmise as things get muddy around that time. That project was botched, and you are sitting across from the product of that restart."

Violet quickly taps out a note to see about getting the paperwork the leopard mentioned, as well as to go deeper into that subject at a later date. She picks up her cigarette and takes a drag off it as she again flips through some notes, and finally settles on the next question she wants to bring up. "I would like to hear a little bit about what changed you from a highly sought after assassin to an advocate for hybrids' rights. It seems like such a radical shift that it is almost surreal."

"It was actually quite surreal, I must admit," the leopard says as he gets up to walk over to the window and look out it. Luckily the Digicorder's microphone is sensitive enough to pick up quite a distance, so his movement away from the table is not a cause for concern. "You see, the initial years of killing provided a thrill to me. I had power and money and that drove me. Each and every job gained me more and more respect, as well as fear. As the years progressed, I found that I was slowly cutting myself off from society and from those I loved, as well as becoming an alcoholic. When I realized what I was doing to myself, when it truly dawned on me, I broke down. I could no longer keep that wall up, and I decided I either had to make a

change or I would end up going insane."

"That change must have been very quick," Violet says scanning a couple of newspaper articles. "The last mention I see of your nickname was less than a year before I see you making news for rebuilding an apartment complex in Old New York."

"Unfortunately, it was not that fast. No, the transformation is actually still ongoing, even after all these years. You do not go through everything that I went through and change in a year. In fact, the apartment reconstruction you see mention of was a purely selfish act, as I lived in that particular apartment."

"Might I ask what you are still working through?"

Nyeusi glances at his watch, before shaking his head.

"Unfortunately, you may not. For one thing, our time is up for this meeting, which I do apologize for. Secondly, the problems I face are a personal matter and are known only to two others."

Violet looks down at her tablet and notices that it is already nearing six in the evening, and this meeting was allotted only two hours. She reaches over, turning off the Digicorder, and puts it back into her backpack. "I had not even noticed the time, Mr. Kifu, so my apologies for that. Also, my question was a little too probing and again I apologize for that. I just got caught up in the conversation and must say you

are not at all what I expected."

"Please, call me Nyeusi. There is very little need for formalities if we are going to be frequently meeting. As to what you were expecting, what were you expecting precisely? Do not fear that you will offend me by answering that, I am merely curious."

Violet puts her tablet back into her backpack and puts her cigarette out in the ashtray. "Alright Nyeusi, you may call me Violet then. As for what I was expecting, I was expecting a brute to put it bluntly. I did not expect a British accent, nor did I expect you to be so well spoken. I only heard bits of interviews with you, and the accent did not come out in them, and I was sure you were given scripts."

The Leopard lets out a soft laugh at that, a smile forming on his muzzle. "You should not assume such things, simply based on someone's reputation. Some of the world's most prolific serial killers were brilliant individuals, so you can never judge a book by its cover. As for my accent, it comes and goes as it pleases. If I work to keep it, I can get it to where it is now; otherwise I begin to lose it. I appreciate your compliments, though, as I always enjoy catching someone off guard with my demeanor."

"Well, Nyeusi, it was a pleasure meeting you and I do look

forward to our next meeting." Violet reaches her hand out to shake his and he shakes his head lightly, instead stepping in and giving her a brief hug. "Handshakes are risky as I may actually hurt your hand, and we hug. Hybrids, in general, hug as opposed to shaking hands, as hugs are a more personal act and can be more binding than a handshake."

For a moment, the embrace catches Violet off guard, but it was gentle and not unpleasant so she returns it. Once he releases the hug, she releases her embrace and steps back, nodding lightly, "That is very true, I will admit. Well, I wish you a good evening Nyeusi."

"I wish you the same Violet. If any questions pop up before our next meeting, do not be afraid to reach out. Otherwise, I will see you in a couple of days."

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"You guys outside?" Nyeusi calls as he walks into the small three-bedroom home he shares with Kes and Dylan. "Yea, we are out here," Dylan calls back. Nyeusi makes his way through the living room, into the kitchen stopping at the fridge to grab a bottle of beer, and continues out to the back porch. He grabs one of the vacant chairs and pulls it up to the patio table and settles his bulk into it.

"Why are you still wearing your gear? You are walking

through the house with your boots on as well. Come on, we have been over this." Dylan shakes his head and tosses the bottle opener over to Nyeusi, which Nyeusi uses to pop the top off his beer and take a long swig of the beer.

"I am still wearing my gear because I did not take it off. Seems to be the obvious answer to your question, so why you asked it is beyond me. As for my boots, while we have had that discussion, I have largely chosen to ignore that discussion." Nyeusi begins to undo his riding chaps and hangs them off the side of the deck closest to him. He then pulls off his Kevlar jacket and hangs that on the riding chaps that are already on the railing.

"Boy, don't you look all fancy," Kes says grinning. "Were you expecting a date?" This gets a glare from Nyeusi, and he throws the bottle cap from his beer at Kes. "Hush up, dog. I didn't exactly want to look like a total slob. She already thought I was a brute initially, that would have only furthered that expectation."

"I would say that is a fair expectation, though," Dylan says. "I mean, you were not exactly the model citizen for a long time. Though, you did go all out, including bringing out that accent of yours again. I am not used to hearing it that thick much anymore."

Nyeusi pulls his pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and holds it out to both Kes and Dylan, "Either of you want a cigarette?" Dylan takes a cigarette out of the pack, and Kes shakes his head. Nyeusi shrugs, pulling a cigarette out for himself, and lighting it before handing the lighter over to Dylan. "The accent I am actively trying to keep around. It's one of those things that surprises people when they meet you. Big hulking leopard with this British accent...it disarms them to a small degree."

"I actually like it," Kes says. "I always thought it suited you, for some reason. So what are you doing back so early? I know you said the meeting was going to be two hours, but I didn't think you would actually stick to that." Dylan lights his cigarette and takes a long drag before leaning back in his chair.

"I hadn't intended it to be a hard stop, to be honest. I actually was going to let the meeting go on as long as Violet wanted it to. However, she asked a rather personal question and I decided to use the two-hour time frame as an excuse to cut it off." Nyeusi undoes the last two buttons of his shirt and settles back into his chair.

"What kind of personal?" Dylan asks eyebrow lifting.

"Not that kind of personal question, dirty-minded dog. She

just asked what problems I was still working through, and that is not something I want to discuss with someone I barely even know. The fact you two know is enough."

"Hey, I wasn't assuming it was that kind of personal question. I was asking what kind of personal question it was." Dylan takes a drag off his cigarette, his thumb rubbing just below his lip. "Do you think she asked out of inexperience or was it intentional?"

"Oh, hardly inexperience, as she has written a few books already. No, she was hoping I would answer it. I don't think she asked out of the typical 'Hey give us some dirty laundry' way that journalists always go for, but more just curiosity."

"Alright, so what does she look like? Is she pretty?" Kes asks, tail wagging slightly. That tail wag is one of pure curiosity, one that Nyeusi knows well. If he doesn't answer the question, it will come right back up, so he shrugs lightly.

"She's pretty in a tomboyish way. She's not a princess like you see quite often walking around with their coffee cups in their hands. Personality-wise, that is tough to gauge as she has to be somewhat dry when interviewing, so she could have a wonderful personality, or she could have a personality of a rock."

Dylan grins lightly, "You know the next question, right? Would you date her?"

Nyeusi groans, throwing the bottle opener at Dylan. The bottle opener bounces harmlessly off the lab's chest and lands in his lap. "I have never dated anyone, so I can't actually answer that question."

"Wait, you have never dated anyone, at all?" Dylan asks, finding that a bit hard to believe. "All those years, and you never once dated anyone? You have fooled around, though, right? Got drunk, had a little fun?"

"No and no," Nyeusi replies now getting up from the table. "Not that any of that is your business. I never wanted to get involved with anyone in either of those ways because of my job." He grabs his cigarettes, and the riding gear he had hung on the railing and heads back inside the house.

"Think you might have hit a nerve," Kes says.

"I was just messing with..." Dylan sighs, putting his head in his hands. "Fucking hell, I really need to learn when to stop pushing him. Now he's pissed off and probably won't talk to me for a day or two."

"Want me to go talk to him?" Kes asks. They all fully believe in the saying 'never go to bed angry,' so when one of them is upset, they try to address it so it doesn't fester. "No, I have to talk with him," Dylan says in reply. "I made the ass out of myself, I need to deal with it."

"When are you going to talk with him? You going to go in now and talk?" Kes asks head tilting.

"No, he will be locked up in his room, won't even open the door if he's pissed enough. He will eventually come back out here for a cigarette, and I can catch him then. FUCK...I even said 'got drunk'...yea great thing to say to someone who came from...dammit."

Kes gets up from the table, picking up the empty beer bottles. "I will go inside, and let you alone. I am probably going to go upstairs and read so I will be in my room if you need me."

"Alright, have a good night, if I don't see you before you hit the sack."

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"What are you doing up, dog?" Nyeusi asks as he walks out of the house for his last cigarette of the evening. Nyeusi is wearing nothing but a pair of black boxers, which is not out of the ordinary when he comes out at night for a last cigarette. In the dim light shining from the kitchen, many scars are visible on his chest, one that goes nearly the entire length of his abdomen.

"Waiting for you," Dylan replies, pushing a pack of cigarettes to the end of the patio table, and a lighter to go

with them. Nyeusi grabs the pack, shaking out a cigarette and lights it, taking a drag. He slowly exhales the smoke, before he walks over and leans against the railing of the deck. "Why are you waiting on me?" Nyeusi asks.

"I wanted to apologize about earlier, and felt it be best if I apologized when we were alone. I shouldn't have gone into your love life as that is not my business. In fact, it's nobodies business but yours."

"Nothing to apologize about," Nyeusi says, taking another drag from his cigarette. "You asked questions, I didn't want to answer them so I walked away. Nothing you have to apologize for."

"Oh come on, you don't just walk away like that unless you are angry about something. I know you too well to not know that, so don't pretend you weren't angry. I struck a nerve, and then to bring up getting drunk on top of that."

"You are over-analyzing things," Nyeusi says now turning to face Dylan, leaning back against the railing. "You do that a lot, you know? You think you make someone angry, then you go through everything you said and pick it all apart, finding even the most minute thing that might have angered that person. Yes, you may have struck a nerve, but I was angry at myself, not you."

"Why would you be angry at yourself, over something I said?" Dylan rises from his chair and steps over to where Nyeusi is standing.

"Let me give you an example. You want to go to a concert or show. You sit and analyze if you have the time; if you can fit it into your schedule; if the money is there to cover the cost of the show. In doing all that, you miss the chance to buy tickets, and then you kick yourself for worrying about the small stuff and not just buying the tickets. Now, if I were then to say to you 'Shouldn't have worried about all the minor things and just bought the tickets', you would be angry at yourself. That's what happened to me."

"Let me see if I understand this then," Dylan says as he rubs his chin, thinking through the example Nyeusi gave. "You are upset you never dated, or never even had a little fun. My bringing it up just made you think about it?"

"You have got it," Nyeusi says, walking over to put his cigarette out in the ashtray on the table. "I walked away so I didn't get angry and say something I regretted. I do know you want to know you are forgiven, however, for whatever transgression you think you did to me. Even though you did nothing wrong, I will say you are forgiven. Now, I am going to bed." Nyeusi begins heading back into the house, but then pauses

and glances back to Dylan. "Will you and the collie be around tomorrow?"

"We will be, as far as I know. The store is closed up tomorrow, and I don't think either of us have plans. Why?"

"Keep it that way," Nyeusi says as he disappears into the house.