

Jerod Scott's Twisted Tale of True Love

ETERNAL LUST



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Eternal Lust

(A Twisted Tale of True Love)

BY

JEROD SCOTT

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Prelude

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Ephesians 6:12

That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

2 Thessalonians 2:12

I am the hunter who is hunted, the predator turned prey, pursued by her servants. Yet even in my weakened state they fear me, for they respect my power. the power she has given me. They have pursued me for many weeks, her zealous slaves. across thousands of miles of ever-changing landscapes we have fought, whenever one of them felt froggy enough to leap. On isolated mountain peaks and in crowded city streets we have dueled to the death, and although I have emerged victorious, still I have not remained unscathed, and for each one I destroy she has a ready replacement. volunteers who are eager to win her favor. They seek the position I once held. They wish to rule beside her, to be her Chosen One, her Dark Consort. They lust for her, not knowing that what she offers is not a throne and a crown, but a prison cell and shackles; chained to her indomitable will more surely than the helpless slaves they already are. They think that she offers them freedom from their servitude, the fools, yet they shall always be slaves to her every whim.

I shall put an end to her reign of supremacy. She will grovel at my feet, begging for the chance to serve me before I end her evil existence. And then I will destroy this creature I once loved, for she is far too dangerous to survive. But I cannot afford to underestimate her in any way, so before I can destroy her, I must have strength. And to gain strength...I must feed.

Chapter I

And I will feed them that oppress thee with their own flesh; and they shall be drunken with their own blood, as with sweet wine.

Isaiah 49:26

Once I was a mortal man.
I walked the streets without a plan.
I lived my life day by day,
Craving excitement in every way...
B.F.R., "Thirst for Blood"

I was living in Nashville, playing in a band called Bugly with Victor Richards on drums and some guy you never met named Dimitri playing lead guitar. When my brother Chuck got murdered I quit my job at the Entropy Guitar factory and went back to West Virginia. As much as I hated that place, it was where I came from, and where most of my family still lived, and we needed close contact to deal with my brother's pointless death. I also needed to put some distance between myself, and the girl I had been dating in Nashville. Jennifer just happened to be married and had dumped me to get back together with her husband, in spite of the fact that she was pregnant and the child was almost certainly mine. Distance was the only way to guarantee she didn't show up on my doorstep one night with a change of heart. I couldn't have dealt with that after what she had put me through, so I made sure we would stay well away from each other by going home.

I got in touch with a drummer named Victor Richards and talked about putting a band together in memory of my murdered brother. Victor had been playing with another friend of mine, David Dean, on bass and they had a young guitar wizard named Damon Marcus throwing phenomenal lead solos on top of anything they could come up with. Until I called they had been playing instrumental pieces. What they desperately needed was a lead singer. David

Dean was an excellent bass player. He learned his licks from Geddy Lee, Cliff Burton and Steve Harris, just as I had, so I offered myself as their lead singer and rhythm guitarist, a position called 'frontman', for obvious reasons. I had never played a six-string guitar before, but a few days of coaching from Damon was all it took to translate years of bass playing into the rudiments of playing rhythm, and not a soul could object to calling ourselves Malingen in memory of the band I had originally formed with my late brother.

We started playing the local clubs, making a living at it, but it was a far cry from fame and fortune. But we hung in there, doing whatever we had to do to make some quick cash and keep the dream alive. David Dean got us a gig playing a birthday party one night. It was for one of his college buddies, and I didn't know anyone there. But David Dean was a figure larger-than-life to them. They had nicknamed him 'Coal Truck' because he had been hit by a 21-ton Mack truck while hitchhiking and bounced up out of the ditch as if nothing had happened. But I knew Dave, and this story was minor compared to some of the things I had witnessed. David Dean was indestructible. He had a tolerance for pain and punishment that was absolutely unbelievable, and he could kick ass like some sort of Viking Berserker. He never took shit from anybody, but he had a heart of gold with anyone he considered a friend, and he could drink anybody (with the possible exception of me) under the table.

I was a stranger at this party, but being a friend of Dave's made me accepted more so than the fact that I was the 'frontman' for the band. I hate that term almost as much as I hate to be thrust to the front. I have never come up with a better word for it, and believe me. I have tried. I have never been comfortable up front in the spotlight; I feel more at home in the shadows, hanging out with the drummer and pounding out the bottom end of a song, even when it's a song that I wrote myself. I was accepted without question, but the party was rather boring. I felt out of place in a house full of college students. The girls were pretty, but they looked so damn young to me, so shallow and inexperienced. But it wasn't so much a difference of age as a difference of attitude. At 29 I was less than ten years older than most of those girls, but it had been a very enlightening ten years

for me. And with Jennifer on my mind, I could not bring myself to even pretend that I was interested in any of them. I started drinking heavily, trying to flood Jennifer out of my head with alcohol.

I was standing in a circle of Dave's friends (my band was taking a break), vaguely responding to questions about the places I had been and the things I had done as a sniper in the Marine Corps. Dave had told them some stories about me, and they wanted to know more. But I wasn't interested these people, so for the most part I was trying to ignore them as politely as I could. And then she walked through the door.

At first glance I thought her to be about my age. But a closer look told me that she was older, mid-30's or maybe a young-looking 40. Her waist-length hair glistened like delicate strands of silk in the pale light, a rich shade of walnut so dark that it was nearly black. Her unrestrained tresses danced in waves of loose curls, the air itself their partner as she moved across the room in my direction.

She took off her knee-length fur coat and underneath she was dressed rather simply in faded jeans and an emerald green velvet sweater. Yet there could never be anything simple about her, not even her clothes; her jeans clung to every curve as if tailor-made, without squeezing a single inch of her perfect form. Her sweater was also a snug fit, not hiding her voluptuous figure, but rather outlining her perfect curves with delicious fuzzy ambiguity. Her eyes were deep pools of unfathomable shadow, compelling me to drown in their depths; so wide and inviting, so dark and mysterious. So many powerful emotions, so much worldly experience I could see reflected within these mesmerizing orbs as she returned my stare, our eyes locking for an electrifying moment.

I realized that I had stopped a conversation in mid-sentence, but no one had noticed. All other eyes around me had also seized upon her, but they all quickly looked away, pretending that they had not even noticed her. Yet I couldn't help but stare. I wondered who she was, what she was doing here. It wasn't until she walked past me that I realized she had someone with her, a tall, nervous young man with haunted eyes.

I asked around discreetly, but no one seemed to know who she was. She

caught me staring at her several times. Our eyes locked. Her smile told me that we were sharing a secret beyond the grasp of those around us. We were like two wolves in a room full of sheep.

I watched her slip casually into a room, leaving the door cracked open behind her. After a moment I followed her inside. It was a bedroom, and judging from the posters of half-naked women and the cluttered mess, it was the bedroom of a teenaged boy, probably the birthday boy at tonight's party, whatever his name was.

She was standing in front of a computer keyboard, tapping keys in what appeared to be a totally random fashion, as if it were some alien artifact from another culture. I stepped up behind her, so close that I lightly sniffed her hair as I leaned over her shoulder. It smelled like autumn, full of rich, earthy scents that spoke to me of open spaces and brisk fall nights, even though it was mid-winter outside.

I whispered in her ear, "What are you doing?"

"Waiting for you," she replied. She turned to face me, rubbing her hands down my back. I had not expected such boldness, but I tried not to let my surprise show. Instead, I followed her lead and placed my hands on her hips, pulling her closer. "I thought you might have the courage to follow me in here," she said, "and I wanted to get you alone." Her hands slid down to my ass, and squeezed.

"What about the guy you came in with?" I asked, for she had taken the initiative away from me.

I had spent most of my adult life trying to get what I wanted from women, but in the end it always seemed they manipulated me. Women have an advantage over men, and I was more susceptible to their charms than most. The flash of a smile was all it took, and I would slay a dragon or laugh in the face of the devil himself to win her favor. She left no doubt in my mind that she wanted me, but I suddenly needed to know what situation I was stepping into. All I wanted was a night of sexual release; I did not need to get involved in another love.

“What about him?” she replied, running her fingers through my hair, her body pressed firmly against mine.

“Is he the ‘jealous husband’ type?” I asked, pulling away from her without conviction; I put maybe a half-inch of air between us, and even then my face hovered above hers, ready to kiss her full, red lips.

“Don’t worry about him,” she replied, tossing her head dismissively. “He is completely...under my thumb.” Since she and her male companion weren’t wearing wedding bands I decided that whatever their relationship might be I would follow her advice and not worry about it. “Let’s go outside,” she said, and abruptly left the room. I followed after her toward the front door. The party seemed to be winding down, only the most serious drinkers still on their feet. My band had played our last set, and I caught a glimpse of David Dean drinking beer straight from a pitcher. We got our coats and went outside.

The house was nestled between two fingers of a mountain, situated at the narrow end of a private valley. The nearest neighbor was out of sight down the narrow drive. It was bitterly cold outside, with about six inches of snow on the ground. I was grateful for my heavy leather jacket and the fact that the wind was still, even though I had plenty of alcohol in my system to numb me. As for my mysterious companion, the cold did not seem to affect her in the least. Her fur coat hung open and she strolled through the snow as if we were walking along the beach on a warm summer night. She led me toward the woods behind the house, and we were as alone as two people can get, the party behind us like some sort of half-remembered dream.

“I love the night,” she said, breaking the silence as we walked.

I looked up at the moon in its third quarter, but especially large and brilliant, as if it had moved closer to us to eavesdrop on our conversation. I readily agreed with her, for I was no stranger to the lures of darkness.

“Yeah, it’s so peaceful and quiet, especially around here.” The blanket of snow on the ground and the barren trees made everything look sterile and subdued. The rest of the world seemed to be in hibernation.

“The night is far from peaceful,” she replied. “It is alive with passion and

secret desires. People try to deny Nature during the day, paving it over and conforming it to their 'civilization'. But at night Nature re-asserts herself, reclaims the world from human whim. Nocturnal predators take full advantage of the depths of shadows; the hunters come out to feast in the night by the pale pastel beauty of the moon." She turned to look at me. "So what is your name, handsome?"

"Mike," I replied.

"Your friends call you Mike. What is your real name, your full given name? Tell me who you are," she demanded, a command thinly veiled by her compelling gaze.

"Michael David Solomon. Singer, musician, lover extraordinaire, and a hundred other things, all rolled into one. You could call me King Mustache, and if your wet little pussy ever fucked my face, you would understand why."

She tossed her head back and laughed loudly. "My, what bold self-confidence. So, tell me, Michael David Solomon. Are you always so forward with strange women?"

"Only the most beautiful ones," I replied. "Besides, you seem like the kind of woman who knows what she wants, who isn't afraid of the naked truth. Veiled hints and implications would probably bore you."

"And you feel you know me so well, after such a short time?" She was looking at me intently, an amused smirk on her face.

"I would like to know you a whole lot better. Is there anything wrong with that?"

She stopped and grasped my hands, and I was surprised at how warm her hands felt. Had I expected them to be cold? "That depends upon your definition of 'wrong'," she replied, watching me closely for something, but I did not know what.

I did not know what to make of that statement, either, but I got a grip on myself. I decided to lighten the conversation. "Well, I told you who I am..." I put her hands behind her back, so that my arms encircled her. "So who are you?"

"For you, my love, I shall be Marie-Constance Quesnet."

I repeated her name. "Marie-Constance Quesnet. That's beautiful. Like you." She was smiling at me, more in amusement than at my simple flattery, and I realized that she had spoken with certain intensity, as if she were telling me something very important. I wondered about this for an instant, but the answer eluded me, so I took the easy way out. "What sort of accent was that?" I could tell she was definitely not a local.

She laughed a sparkling tone. "That was no accent. I was speaking French," she answered, and I realized that she was right, and that she had just done it again.

"And I understood you perfectly," I replied, answering her in French. "How is that possible?"

I could not explain it. I had learned a few French words and phrases in the military, and I could recognize the inflections of the language even when I didn't know the words. But I had never been fluent; so why had I understood her so well that it was like my native language, so familiar that I did not even realize it was not English? I was stunned, and she offered no explanation, but I decided to play it cool and see what happened next. Things were getting very strange, but I wasn't about to let such an enchanting and mysterious beauty get away from me.

"You speak French flawlessly. Are you from France?" I asked.

"I am from everywhere and nowhere," she replied, in English this time. "I am the embodiment of night, the Queen of Darkness." She pressed me close against her body, her fingers swimming through my long hair. I smiled at her as she gazed at me with a quiet intensity. "Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

"You're trying to tell me you're a vampire," I replied.

I can't explain how I arrived at this conclusion based on the subtle hints she had dropped, but I knew it was the answer she was looking for. I had never met such an intriguing woman before, and I couldn't wait to see what surprises were yet to come.

"That does not frighten you. Good."

I found it hard to believe that she was an undead creature, but at the

moment it didn't seem entirely impossible. "Nothing frightens me," I replied. "You don't know what sort of man you're dealing with. I'm willing to try anything once, and I laugh in the face of death," I said, not taking her seriously at all.

"I know you much better than you realize," she replied. "But are you strong enough to handle what I offer you?"

I looked her in the eyes, and grinned. "By the end of the night you'll be calling me god. They always do."

She laughed. "Well, you're certainly bold enough. Come, let us leave this place."

We walked back toward the house at a brisk pace, and I led her to my Mazda RX-7. I was thoroughly aroused and couldn't wait to get her in a warm, private room. I held the door open for her and she climbed inside. I went around the car at a trot and jumped into the driver's seat.

"A star window," she said. "How marvelous." She was looking up.

"It's called a sunroof," I replied, turning the key in the ignition.

She chuckled softly. "You can call it a 'sunroof', but I prefer to see the stars."

"I like the stars," I said, letting the car warm up. "When I was eleven years old I wanted to be an astronaut, the Christopher Columbus of the Solar System. I dreamed of being the first man to set foot on Mars, of watching a sunset from the Red Planet and seeing its two moons chase each other across the heavens."

"So what killed your dream?" she asked, quietly.

"Reality." I sat in silence for a moment. "It was just a childish fantasy. As I got older, my fantasies matured as well, taking me in other directions."

I put the car in gear and popped the clutch. The roads had been salted, but they were still treacherous, and I pushed my sports car to its limits of traction and handling on the narrow, twisting road, stopping at the first roadside motel I could find. I signed the register as Mr. And Mrs. Juker P. Funkenstein, and the clerk accepted a glance from Marie as payment. We went to our room and her body was writhing against mine even as I closed the door. She was showering me with kisses, her hands groping and tugging insistently at my clothing.

“Well, Michael, King of the Mustachios, show me what you can do,” she said, with a grin.

I grinned back at her. I took her in my arms and kissed her deeply. Her mouth was warm and sweet, her tongue an undulating serpent. My hands slipped under her sweater and caressed her skin. Her belly was firm and smooth, her flesh silky. With my right hand I unbuttoned her jeans while with a quick motion from experienced fingers I unfastened her bra with my left. We undressed each other quickly, and then our naked bodies were pressed together, stroking each other's flesh as we stood in a circle of discarded clothing.

I picked her up by the ass and she wrapped her arms and legs around me. I could feel the heat and wetness of her crotch as my stiff penis nestled between her ass cheeks, but I was not ready to enter her yet. I carried her to the bed and laid her down, and we continued to caress each other as we pressed our taut bodies together. I broke free from her grasp and laid back in the center of the bed.

“Now,” I said. “I want you to fuck my face with that hot little pussy of yours.”

She grinned at me. “Yes, your Majesty.”

She straddled my head with her knees and squatted above my face, gripping the headboard. I ran my hands up and down her thighs, staring at the treat before me. With my thumbs I spread her lips, exposing a stiff little clitoris, nearly as big as the last digit of my pinky.

“Damn, that is beautiful,” I said, and I could hold out no longer.

I pressed my mouth against her pussy, and was thrilled by how wet she was. She tasted sweet, as I knew from her scent she would, like a honeysuckle. I sucked at her clit, my tongue flickering and dancing around it. She twisted and moaned above me, grinding into my face as I sucked her and fucked her with my tongue and my fingers. With the middle finger of my free hand, lubricated with her own juices, I tickled her tight asshole until she came, shuddering and squealing in delight. She slid down my chest and straddled my waist, and my cock was painfully stiff as she lay down on top of me, trapping it between us.

“So, how was that?” I asked.

“Mmm...you’ve been practicing,” she replied, as if we had done this before. “But now I want something else.”

She rose up placing one hand on my chest as her other hand gripped my cock and guided it towards her portal to bliss. She was hot and dripping wet as I slid inside her, so tight that my breath hissed in between clenched teeth. She eased down on me slowly, until my full length was inside her. Her back arched, her gorgeous breasts thrust upward, hands behind her head, twisting and swaying like a charmed cobra. I placed my hands on her hips as her subtle motions drove me to a maddening state of arousal, her inner muscles gripping and squeezing my cock like loving fingers. The sight of her flawless beauty above me was like a drug, filling me with a feverish desire, and then she placed her hands on my chest and began to ride me, moving up and down slowly at first, and then with passionate aggression until I cried out.

“Jesus, that is fucking sweet!”

I gripped her ass cheeks and spread them apart as I thrust my hips upward to meet her, matching her pace so that we slammed together with each stroke. I rolled us over so that I was on top, my cock still buried deep inside her. She held her legs up high and wrapped her arms tightly around me, pulling me in close to her, and then suddenly she bit me. A moment of sharp pain as I felt her teeth break the skin on my neck, and I repaid her by doubling the force of my strokes, driving into her as if my stiff cock were a weapon. The instant of pain as she bit down harder became a warm ecstasy flooding my mind, drowning out all other sensation in a pleasure more intense than anything I had ever felt, and my orgasm erupted inside her.

When it was done she rolled me onto my back with surprising strength, kissing and licking tenderly at my sore neck. I was dizzy and panting heavily, covered in sweat as she looked down at me. Her lips were bright red, her skin flushed with a healthy pink glow. But the only sweat on her body had come from me.

I raised my hand to my neck, feeling for the lacerations. My neck was very

tender and sticky with blood, but the wounds seemed to be gone as if they never existed. She was staring down at me, and I was suddenly too tired to think. She gazed intensely into my eyes.

“You will forget me,” she said. “When you awaken, you will remember only that you were with a woman. You will not remember what she did to you. You will forget our conversation; you will forget my name. Sleep now, and forget me when I am gone.”

I woke up alone in a motel room with a pounding headache. I was dizzy and sore all over, possibly the worst hangover in my life. The last thing I remembered clearly was my band playing a birthday party, and deciding to drink Jennifer off my mind. I must have left the party with a woman, but I could not remember who she had been, just a feeling of intense pleasure, coupled with a blurred mental image of dark hair and compelling eyes. And a scent of autumn. I could smell the sweet scent of a woman on my hands, and my moustache was stiff with dried sex.

I was shocked when I saw myself in the bathroom mirror. I was pale and trembling, my eyes bloodshot and sensitive to the light. One side of my neck showed traces of a faint bruise, but it was nothing compared to the bruises and scratches on my shoulders, the imprints of strong fingers and sharp nails. I turned and inspected my back, and found similar bruises and tiny crescent shaped fingernail marks on my buttocks, and angry red claw marks down my back. Whoever the woman had been, she must have been enjoying herself. It was a real shame that I couldn't remember what had happened, but I didn't think it was anything that would change my life. I was dead wrong.

Chapter II

And the priest shall sprinkle the blood upon the altar of the Lord at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and burn the fat for a sweet savour unto the Lord.

Leviticus 17:6

According to S****, it is more important to follow one's nature than local custom as far as kisses, embraces, scratches, and bites are concerned.

The Kama Sutra. Part Two, 5:34

Winter faded away, spring came and went, and then one summer day I was sitting in my apartment on a Friday afternoon trying to talk myself out of driving to Nashville for the weekend. Jennifer was on my mind again. I missed her, had been dreaming about her. I knew by then she would have had the baby, and I wondered if it was a boy or a girl. I wondered if it looked at all like me. I wondered about a lot of things, but since she hadn't bothered to call me I figured that she intended to exclude me from her future life. Going to see her would be wrong, but there was a void to be filled that would remain until I saw her again, even if she did not want to see me.

And then Nikki called me. She was married to Dimitri, the guitar player in my first band. She had left him behind in Nashville and was staying with her mother. She wanted to see me, and the implications she left hanging made it clear what she had in mind. My conscience tried to tell me to leave her alone, but why should I? She was single now, even though I suspected that Dimitri might not see it that way. Nikki had only had one lover in her life, and I felt that I could show her things about sex that she had never thought possible. She was pretty, and had just turned twenty-one with the petite body of a young girl. We had been friends for a long time, and sex is the quickest way to ruin a friendship, but all I could think about was getting my hands on her firm, young body.

I went to her mother's house to pick her up. She answered the door in a slinky green outfit that went well with her long red hair. She looked gorgeous, and

sexier than I remembered, but as I walked her to my car I spotted Dimitri walking down the street. He was still some distance away when I pointed out his presence.

“Shit,” she said. “I can’t let him see me getting into your car.”

“I’ll circle the block,” I said. I hopped in and started the engine.

“Okay,” she replied, and started walking down the street away from Dimitri.

When I came back around Dimitri had caught up with her and they were deep in what looked like an argument. It was not really my place to interfere and so I drove on. Oh, well. So much for that.

I suddenly had absolutely nothing to do on a Friday night, so I just drove around smoking and thinking. I ended up driving past a bar called The Nugget and decided to go inside. It was billed as an exotic show bar, and the sign above the door said ‘Totally Nude!’ It had a bad reputation, mainly because it was the first and only strip club in the county. People claimed it was a good place to get into trouble, even stabbed or shot. I had never been inside, but I had been in countless places like it in the military and figured the reputation was probably undeserved. Besides, I was capable of taking care of myself, and it was my experience that if you leave people alone and mind your own business you generally stay out of trouble.

Our society has a problem with the profession of exotic dancer, and I could spend weeks analyzing why this is so. People tend to read the worst into something they don’t understand, and stripping is not a very pleasant way to make a living. But the best exotic dancers are artists, every bit as valid as musicians or painters, but their art is not captured on canvas or stored on CD; it is only valid as art when seen in person. A stripper viewed on film is nothing more than an erotic image devoid of personality, a male fantasy draped in flesh. This attitude has pervaded our modern age, evoking Victorian-era outrage at a form of self-expression for its sheer sensuality.

Some women say that strip clubs are degrading to women, but only crude and obnoxious men degrade women, not the woman’s profession. In a perfect

society free of sexual inhibitions and insecurities women could walk naked through the streets without fear of molestation. Some women are by nature exhibitionists, just as some women have low self-esteem. The problem our society has with this occupation is based on feelings of inadequacy from the women who are afraid to do it, and the fact that the women who have the courage are looked upon as objects. Most men look at these women and do not see a real person with feelings and dreams; they see a fantasy wrapped in flesh. But exotic dancers deserve the respect granted to any other artist when they display true skill. Anyway, back to the story.

I paid the cover charge and signed my name as Juker P. Funkenstein. I looked the place over with the skills of a trained observer. I had spent the past eight years trying to forget my military training, yet sometimes it automatically asserts itself. I mapped out the floor plan, spotting the doors, looking for alternate exits. There was a long bar running the entire length of the right wall with a huge mirror behind it, and a door at the far end leading through the opposite wall. A hand-painted sign hung on that door which read 'Employees Only (This means You, Dipshit!)'. There were no windows. Two pool tables sat directly across the room from the main entrance, with the bathroom doors marked on the wall behind them. To my left was a long L-shaped stage, the short leg sticking out from the back wall, the long leg jutting out toward the center of the room. A curtained doorway at the back of the stage led into what I assumed was the dressing room, and in the far corner behind the stage was an open arch labeled 'Private Dances' in neon colors. A completely naked woman was hanging upside-down from a pole by nothing more than the strength of her thighs at the near end of the stage, arching her back and twisting like a snake on a pitchfork. The place was nearly empty, with only a handful of customers sitting along the stage and a few at tables talking to some of the girls who worked there.

I walked up to the bar and ordered a beer. I lit a cigarette and watched the club behind me through the mirror with one foot on the brass railing and my forearms on the bar. One of the girls left her seat at a table and walked to the bar. She was tall and slender, with long blonde hair, and she was dressed in a

black leather mini-skirt and matching leather bra, both covered with chrome studs and chains. She was halfway across the room when I recognized her through the mirror. She had been sixteen years old when last I saw her, but she had hardly changed at all. She had the same slinky body; even her sandy blonde hair was the same as I remembered it. But she was a full-grown woman now, and her long, shapely legs brought her to my side.

“Hi, I’m Sunshine,” she said.

I turned to her, and couldn’t keep my smile from splitting my face in half. “Hello, Sunshine,” I responded, wondering how long it would take for her to recognize me.

The last time she had seen me I was fresh out of the Marine Corps and still had my hair cut short. I had been letting it grow long, and it now fell in loose curls halfway down my back.

“Don’t I know you?” she asked, and I could see that she was trying to place my face, which was both familiar and new.

“Yes, Christina, you do,” I replied, using her real name.

She was startled, but tried real hard not to let it show. “Who are you?” she finally asked, the answer being more important than the game.

“Michael Solomon,” I replied simply, smiling at what her reaction would be.

Her eyes flew open wide, and she took half a step backwards, as if she had been physically struck. She clasped both of my hands in hers, bounced twice in that very delicious manner which only well-shaped young women can, and squealed in delight. She threw her arms about me and pressed her firm breasts against my chest.

“So, can I buy you a drink, or are you too busy to talk?” I asked her.

“Sure, Mike,” she said. We sat down together at the bar and grinned at each other like a couple of fools. “God, you’ve changed!”

“Not really. My hair’s just a little longer, that’s all.”

“A little longer?” she repeated, reaching behind me to feel my hair. “Why, it’s half-way down your back. And you’ve grown a moustache, too. You look like that pirate on the rum bottle, what’s-his-name.”

“Captain Morgan?” I laughed. “I’ve been told I look like one of the three Musketeers or Frank Zappa, even though I don’t, but I’ve never heard that one before. You’re going by the name Sunshine now?”

“That’s what Papa Smurf calls me,” she said. “He owns this place.”

“Sunshine, eh?” I grinned at her, and stroked my moustache. “He must call you that for the way your cute dimples light up the room.”

Of course this made her smile letting me see those very dimples. She asked me what I had been doing for the past few years, and I filled her in on some of the less important details. She told me a few things about herself, and then I asked her a delicate question. I distinctly remembered one night when I was playing music with my brother. There had been the usual party after practice, and late that night she had got into bed with me without warning, waking me up. I had been surprised, but I knew that she was only sixteen. So I held her close and went back to sleep. But I had been sorely tempted, just the same. If I had it to do over I might have done things differently. I decided to ask her about it.

“Do you remember one night when you came sneaking into my bed in the middle of the night?”

She smiled and looked down, and I thought she was going to blush. “I remember,” she replied, looking back at me.

“So, what would have happened if I had made a move on you? Did you want me to?”

“I guess we’ll never know, will we?”

“But did you want me or did you just need a place to sleep? I’ve wondered about that for years.”

“I was just a girl then,” she said. “It’s hard to say what I was thinking.”

“So, you’re not going to tell me.”

She grinned, and said, “It’s my turn to dance next. I have to get ready.” She stood up and kissed me on the cheek. “Come sit up by the stage and watch me.”

She walked toward the dressing room, and I stood and watched her go

leaning back against the bar on my elbows. One of the other girls walked up to the bar beside me and ordered a drink. I looked over at her, noticing her beautiful hair, dark and curly like my own, but even longer. I turned to get a better look at her, my eyes wandering down her body. She was wearing a black and purple teddy, with black fishnet stockings and black spike-heeled shoes. My eyes locked on her ass. It was perfect; firm, round, and delicious. I whistled softly, and let my gaze travel down her athletic legs with fabulous calves picturing those legs wrapped around my face.

Suddenly she said, "I saw that."

She attempted to seem indignant, yet grinned at me in spite of herself. When she spoke to me my heart melted, and I was in love again. I never believed in love at first sight until that moment, but her silky voice and beautiful smile captured my heart even more than her perfect body. She must have been watching me in the mirror to catch me staring at her. It was the same covert tactic I had just used, and I was impressed.

"You are a very beautiful woman," I said, peering into her dark eyes. Her face was full of energetic charm, and her smile was positively radiant. "You have an enchanting face. And a perfect ass."

Her smile broadened, but the bartender brought her drink and she walked away, teasing me with her sensual stride. Such a lovely sway in her hips, the sort of motion that can drive a man insane. I watched her walk away, hypnotized by her athletic, voluptuous body.

I ordered another beer and went up to the stage when Sunshine came out. She made her way around the stage collecting tips as she went. She stopped in front of me and locked her eyes with mine as she removed her top in a manner calculated to stir frustrated desire, taunting me with the fact that I could not touch her. She dropped her leather top in my lap, and I folded a bill and stuck it between my teeth, not checking the amount. She leaned toward me, cupping her breasts in her hands. I leaned on the countertop meeting her halfway. She pressed her firm breasts against my cheeks, using them to snatch the money from my mouth. I had not expected this, but I certainly did not complain. By the

third song she was totally nude, as most of the girls in The Nugget are by then, as long as they are being tipped well.

The bar was still far from crowded. Yet people continued to trickled in as others left, maintaining a pretty good turnout for a small club with a bad reputation. Apparently not everyone in the county was of a conservative mind frame. When she was finished dancing, Christina came and sat with me again. I tried to get used to calling her Sunshine, but I knew her as Christina and old habits are hard to break. She pointed out to me all of the other girls, telling me their names and a little bit about each of them. She eventually got around to the one I was interested in; the one with the perfect smile and beautiful hair who had caught me staring at her ass.

“That’s my best friend Angel,” Christina said. “She’s a great dancer. Wait ‘til you see her.”

“I’ll bet she is,” I replied.

I had a feeling that Angel would have the best stage show in the house. Angel had captured my attention and my heart, and she was by far the most sensual girl I had ever seen. When her turn to dance did come around I was truly amazed. She had great rhythm, and her athletic moves drove me mad with passion. She was graceful yet aggressive, stimulating and suggestive, and sexual energy radiated from her like an aura, a glow that surrounded her. Angel had a flawless figure like a Greek statue brought to vibrant life. Her long dark hair, her beautiful and compelling dark eyes, and her succulent body reminded me of someone I knew, but this thought fled from my mind before I could grasp it. There was a brief feeling of déjà vu when she flashed me a wicked grin, and then it was gone; a moment of blissful agony that I could not explain. I shuddered; a warm wave of pleasure coursing through me caused my spine to arch. I knew that I had to have her. I tipped her well, and I could smell her sweet sex as she gyrated in front of me. My mind’s eye pictured glimpses of me kissing her naked flesh, feeling her writhe beneath me as I explored her body with my experienced fingers and mouth. Sunshine was mingling with the other customers while I watched Angel dance, so when Angel came off stage I offered to buy her a drink.

She accepted, and we sat and talked.

“God, you are incredible,” I told her, trying to sum up the impression she had made on me.

“Thank you,” she said, with a warm smile that made my heart swell.

“Really, I mean that. I’ve been in lots of places like this, but I have never seen a dancer who thrilled me the way you do.”

But before I could get any further, Sunshine came over and whispered something in Angel’s ear.

Angel turned to me, and said, “Do you want to go smoke a joint?”

“Sure,” I replied.

They led me through the door at the end of the bar marked ‘Employees Only’. The bartender gave us a funny look, but I strode on through like I signed his paychecks. The door led into a storage room that had been a kitchen in a previous life. I wondered what this place had been before it became The Nugget, but I could not remember, so I dismissed the thought.

“You ladies won’t get into trouble for bringing me back here, will you?” I asked, as Sunshine produced a bag of lime green buds and a pack of Job 1.5’s from her purse.

“Not unless Papa Smurf catches us, and he’s not here,” she said, breaking a medium-sized bud into tiny pieces.

I noticed that there were no seeds and that she discarded the stem. This girl knew good pot and how to roll a joint, so I watched her work while the two of them chatted, propping my elbows on what used to be a sink. Sunshine told Angel some things about me, drawing me into the conversation.

“So are you still playing music?” Sunshine asked, as she lit the joint.

“Yeah, I just put together a band with Victor and Dave, only now I’m playing rhythm guitar and doing the lead vocals.”

Sunshine passed the joint to me; I inhaled deeply and passed it to Angel. Sunshine exhaled.

“So, you got any plans for tonight?” she asked me.

“Well, I did,” I replied, “but they kinda fell through.”

She accepted the joint from Angel, and said, "Feel like hanging around 'til we get off work? Me and Angel are gonna go back to my apartment and do a few lines of coke. You're welcome to come along if you'd like."

She smiled at me, and I looked at Angel. She was holding her last hit from the joint. She grinned, and then suddenly coughed it up. We all thought that was extremely funny.

"Sounds interesting," I said, when we were finished laughing. "I'd love to."

"Great!" cried Sunshine. "I want you to meet my boyfriend, Syd. You'll like him; he's a guitar player, too."

My visions of a threesome with Christina and Angel were abruptly shattered, but I had committed myself, and there was still hope for something more interesting. It was Angel whom I was truly interested in. We went back into the bar and I bought Angel another drink. She sat with me until it was her turn to dance again. She said she had been staying with Sunshine and Syd for the past month, ever since she left her last boyfriend. I was tempted to ask her why she had left him, but I didn't know her well enough to pry that deeply into her personal life. Instead I talked to her about performing in front of an audience, doing my best to describe the rush I got from playing music in front of a crowd.

"But that's not the same as what you do," I said. "I don't mean to be forward, Angel, but tell me something. How does it feel when you're up on the stage? Do you feel anything like that rush when you dance?"

"I guess so, yeah. But I don't picture myself doing this for much longer," she replied, a faraway look in her eyes.

"Why not? I mean you're so good at it. You're young, you're beautiful...If I were you I would leave this little town and go where the money is," I said, giving her advice I should be giving to myself.

"Yeah, well, maybe I could. But this little town is home," she said, talking into her drink as she swirled it around in front of her, as if uncomfortable with the topic.

"So what? Until you've experienced what the world has to offer, you'll never know what you're missing."

She dismissed the subject with a promise to consider it. I asked her what she really wanted to do with her life, and she was evasive about that, as well. She had built up some serious walls around herself, and I was having trouble getting to the person inside. I decided to keep things simple and avoid topics like dreams and ambitions.

"You really turned me on tonight," I said. "You are the sexiest woman I have ever seen in my life. And when you dance, you take it to a whole new level." I managed to get some eye contact established, so I continued. "Does it turn you on to know that all these guys wish they could touch you?"

She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Sometimes, but most of the guys who come in here are sleazy and rude; I don't care what they think, as long as they give good tips."

"Does that include me?" I asked.

"If it did, I wouldn't have told you that. You're different. I could get turned on dancing for you," she said, with a teasing grin.

I stayed until the place closed. Sunshine and Angel changed into their jeans and t-shirts, and I wondered how many times in a single day these women changed clothes. I followed them back to their apartment. Christina's boyfriend was sitting on the couch with a battered guitar in his lap, putting together parts of various songs in a random manner. He did not look up; he kept on playing, his heavily distorted riffs moaning out of a small practice amp at his feet.

"Hi, sweetie" Christina said. "I want you to meet an old friend of mine. This is Mike."

First-name basis was a custom in my circle of friends. I had known Christina for years, but if I ever knew her last name I could not remember it. Syd continued to play the intro to 'Wish You Were Here' by Pink Floyd, and then set aside the guitar and glanced up.

"How ya doin?" he muttered, without really looking at me.

He picked up a razor blade and started cutting out lines of cocaine on the glass top of the coffee table. Christina and Angel sat down on either side of him, and I felt extremely out of place. I wondered why Sunshine had bothered to invite

me here.

“Mike’s in a band,” Christina said, breaking the ice. “Play us something, Mike.”

“Do you mind?” I asked Syd, gesturing toward his guitar.

Only a fool would touch another man’s guitar without permission; you might as well kiss his wife in front of him. In most cases your odds would be better. He waved toward the guitar, and I picked it up. It was designed like a Les Paul, but it was not a Gibson, merely a copy. It was chipped and scratched, but the neck was straight, and the action was set nice and low. The B string was missing, and the strings that were still intact were beyond retirement age; even if they were on a spare guitar that never got played, they should have been replaced. Wear and tear is inevitable on a guitar that sees a lot of use, but this was abused. The way a musician takes care of his instrument says a lot about him. A man who would abuse his guitar would likely treat his lover the same way. I was tempted to play something they would recognize, and I played a few bars of Black Sabbath “N.I.B.” to make sure the guitar was in standard tuning. But then I played one of my own songs: “Cocked and Loaded”.

I’m goin’ out on the town tonight and I’m dressed to kill...
Been drinking liquor all day and I still haven’t had my fill...
This bulge in my pants ain’t just a roll of hundred-dollar bills...
Yeah, I’m cocked and loaded and I’m ready to shoot to thrill!

(chorus)

Cocked...and loaded,
And I’m ready to shoot to thrill,
Cocked...and loaded,
Never seem to get my fill.
Cocked...and loaded,
I got you in my sights,
Cocked...and loaded,
Gonna take you down tonight!

Well, I'm ready for action; I'm a red-hot son-of-a-gun.
And if you'll cum with me, I'm gonna give you a barrel of fun!
I've got the ammunition; it's ready to explode.
I'm gonna let you have it; it's a hot and heavy load!
(repeat chorus)
Wrap yourself around my trigger...
You can feel it in your spine-
It's a mystical sensation...
As I slowly blow your mind.
Such a rush, you cum so easily...
It's out of your control-
The way you grip me feels so sweet...
Your eyes lay bare your soul!

I belted out the words as I played. I don't normally play lead, yet I surprised myself by improvising a pretty decent solo. I broke the A string and the bottom E string before I was through, so I ended, letting the last note ring out on a dead string. I spun the volume knob to zero and propped the guitar against the coffee table. My audience looked stunned. All three of them were sunk back into the couch staring as if hypnotized. Sunshine was the first to speak.

"Damn, Mike. That was really great! I didn't know you could sing like that."

"If you want to hear it right, come and listen to my band play," I replied.

"It's just not the same this way; you can't get the full effect."

I was merely stating a fact. My songs are a group composition, a joint effort, and without the full band the song was incomplete. Syd combed his straight brown hair back away from his face, giving me my first real look at his eyes. They were bloodshot and glassy, yet they burned with an intense inner fire. Syd would be a dangerous man to cross. He was not very big or impressive. His build was slight and he could not have been over 5'7" tall. Yet I could see in his face that he was the vengeful type, capable of violence, even cold-blooded murder without remorse.

“Did you write that?” he asked me.

“Yes, I did,” I replied, with my typical lack of modesty.

Syd nodded his head. “Killer.”

And that was it. Then he offered me a line of cocaine. I had been accepted. We smoked another joint and drank some tequila, and then things got strange. I was sitting on the couch with Angel, watching Sunshine and Syd as they put on a show for us. The stereo was on and they were kissing and gyrating against each other, mock-fucking with their clothes on. Their passionate display grew more intense, and they began to peel each other's clothes off. Angel had her legs stretched across my lap, and I had one arm around her shoulders while I caressed her thigh with my other hand.

Soon both Syd and Sunshine were topless, and then they took it into the bedroom. That left me alone with Angel, and she had been turning me on all night without putting any conscious effort into it. By then I was extremely aroused, and Angel was breathing deeply, her nipples erect. I placed my fingers under her chin and tilted her face to mine. Our lips met in a passionate kiss, and I knew that she was just as aroused as me. She wriggled around until she was straddling my lap facing me without breaking our intense kiss.

My hands explored her soft flesh beneath her shirt, and I undid her bra with a flick of my fingers. I cupped her breasts in my hands, rolling her stiff nipples under my thumbs. She purred like a kitten, and then she broke our kiss and gripped my arms. She stood up, leading me into the bedroom. We made love for hours, a night of passion that amazed me in its sheer intensity, as we tried our best to impress each other with our talents. Sometime near dawn we finally fell asleep.

I was the first one awake the next morning, and I went to the bathroom and then into the kitchen without bothering to dress. I drank two tall glasses of water, filled it a third time with water and ice, and then went back into Angel's bedroom. She was sitting up in bed, so I gave her the glass of water while I got back into bed beside her. She drank half of the water then sat the glass on the nightstand and leaned back against the headboard, closing her eyes.

“Good Morning,” I said, even though it was already past noon.

“Mmm,” she replied, her eyes still closed.

“Did you sleep well?” I asked, lying on my side propped up on one elbow.

She laughed softly, a sparkling tone that warmed my heart. “Hell, yes,” she said. “You nearly wore me out.”

I leaned over and kissed her. “Well, I hope you’re not too worn out.” I straddled her and slid my hand down to her crotch.

She spread her legs and wriggled underneath me. “You’re not serious, are you?” she asked.

I took her hand and placed it on my stiff erection. “What do you think?”

“Just a minute,” she said, and got out of bed and went to the bathroom.

When she came back we made love again, more gently and casually than the night before. Later I dug around through my clothes and found my cigarettes. I lit one for each of us, putting hers up to her lips for her.

“It must have been fate that brought us together,” I said. “After last night I could almost believe in love at first sight. You really are an Angel.”

She snuggled closer, resting her head on my shoulder. “My real name is Angie. Angela Dawn Solomon, for the record.”

I was inhaling a drag from my Marlboro, and choked. “What’s your father’s name?”

“Robert Solomon,” she replied.

“Jesus,” I said. “You gotta be kidding. That’s my father’s name. Robert Howard Solomon.”

“What?” She sat up and pulled the sheet around her; too late for modesty now. “Robert Howard Solomon? That was my grandfather’s name. My father is Robert Douglas Solomon.”

“Does he have a brother Darrel?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s my uncle.”

“Uh-oh.” I said. “Those are my dad’s cousins. My father was named after your grandfather.” I started laughing, and she slapped me on the chest.

“It’s not funny!” she exclaimed.

But this only made me laugh harder. Hillbillies are stereotyped as incestuous, and we had just become a cliché. After a moment I was able to gain control of myself, and we pieced together how we were related. My father and her father were first cousins, her grandfather and my grandfather were brothers, and my great-grandfather and namesake, Michael David Solomon, was her great-grandfather, all of which made us second cousins. Laying it out like that really freaked her out.

“I think you’d better leave.” She was still clutching the sheet to herself.

I could only view the situation as abstract, for a blossoming love that had just been consummated so perfectly, was strong enough to block out any rational feelings of guilt I should have. I had long since abandoned the rules of proper conduct, and lived by my own moral code. If it feels good, do it; but if it will get you in trouble, then don’t get caught. I wanted to explain this to her. I reached toward her, but she pulled away. That hurt me more than I would have believed it could.

“Just go,” she said, with finality.

I didn’t see any other option. She kept her eyes averted as I got dressed. I walked to the door, and then stopped to look back at her once more. She still would not look at me, which was impossibly painful.

“I know this is pretty crazy, but it’s not the end of the world. Please don’t hate me.”

“I don’t hate you,” she said, lowering her head. “I just need to be alone right now. So please, just get out!”

“All right,” I answered. “Good-bye,” I added, but she did not answer me, so I left.

Chapter III

For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar, to make an atonement for your souls. For it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul. Leviticus 17:11

And now midnight approaches, the Witching Hour.

Now at last I shall possess your power.

You will heed your master's beckon call.

Your flesh will tear, your blood will flow!

I drain your strength and twist your will...

Leave a touch of crimson on your windowsill.

I caress your lips, they open wide...

My Thirst for Blood must be satisfied!

B.F.R. "Thirst for Blood"

Later that afternoon I went to band practice, but David and Damon called to say they couldn't make it. Victor and I tried, but we couldn't accomplish much without a bass or lead player, so we called it quits early. Trying to keep a band together can be really frustrating. Turning four individuals into a smooth running machine that functions as a single unit with each other and in perfect agreement is nearly impossible. Finding talented musicians is hard enough, but getting everyone to agree on how a song should sound can erupt into chaos. And keeping everyone motivated so that they will show up for practice and for gigs is like trying to get the senate to agree on a balanced budget amendment.

That night I returned to The Nugget. I brought Angel a dozen roses and a poem I had just written for her. I called it 'Divine Inspiration'.

Music. Pulsing, throbbing; vibrating

Through my chest.

She dances with calculated abandonment,

Summoning a frenzied passion.

Her thoughts project as strong and clear
As a lighthouse beacon.
She likes to be desired, she feeds on it.
Watching me watch her, eyes lock in a loop of mutual craving,
Growing stronger through suppression.
Closer now, we touch each other briefly.
Electric fingertips, then she whirls away.
A heavenly scent left in her wake, it clings like ivy
To my mind, burrowing tendrils deep into my memory.
A slave to my emotions, I reach out and draw her near.
Her passion engulfs me, I smother gratefully.
Sweet ambrosia, heavenly nectar.
She is the portal through which I touch
The universe, inside-out.
She is me, and I am God
As comprehension briefly dawns.
The meaning of Life, the Universe, and Everything.

We discussed our unusual 'relationship'. She had calmed down, and was even able to laugh about it. I wondered why I had never met her before, but when she admitted to me that she was only twenty years old and working with a fake I.D., it made sense. She would have only been eleven when I left for the military, and I had not been around my relatives since then. I knew who her father was, but only well enough to recognize him if I passed him on the street, and I had never met her grandfather. Our great-grandfather had died before either of us was born. All of these factors served to distance the reality of the situation from my emotional attachment.

We agreed not to worry about it, and although the roses and the poem flattered her, she was a little distant. I was disappointed. After being so intimate I had hoped to work out a way to get even closer. It was too soon to say, but I got the feeling that she wanted nothing more from me than friendship, with the possibility of sex excluded. I have had plenty of female friends, women who

never once shared my bed, and if she wanted to play it that way I would go along. But I didn't want it to be that way, not after we had already taken it so far. It really had been love at first sight, and nothing could change the way I felt about her, not even finding out that she was my second cousin. Now that I knew to look for it I could see a family resemblance. But it was because I knew it was there; a stranger would never notice. We had similar hair, the same forehead, and even the same eyes. Looking at her eyes was like finding a part of myself, a part I had not known was missing until I found it, and it made me whole. Yet she was uncomfortable with the whole situation, and I couldn't blame her for that. If she wanted to be with me then she would let me know; meanwhile I would try to be her friend and do my best to think of her strictly in that regard.

I had told Victor where I was going, and he showed up a little later. When he sat down, Angel left me to mingle with the other customers. Soon, I noticed two women entering the bar together. I wondered why two women would come into this place unescorted, and then I recognized them. I had not seen either of them for a year, not since the party my brother's friends had thrown in his honor after the funeral. One of them was named Pamela Jean, but everyone called her PJ. She had been my brother's steady girl for years, right up until he was shot. But PJ's sexual appetites were not limited to men (although she preferred them), yet this had been a closely guarded secret. I knew about it, because my brother had told me of their threesomes. PJ would occasionally invite another woman into their bed, and he had once returned the favor by inviting one of his male friends to join them. The other woman was usually Valkerie, the woman who was with PJ that night. I never expected PJ to let her bisexuality become public knowledge, but walking into this place with her girlfriend seemed like a blatant giveaway. Then again, that was her business, and often people overlook the obvious. I eased out of my seat and walked up behind them.

"Well, well. If it isn't Val the Gal and PJ!" I said, and they turned to face me.

"Mike!" they cried out together, and it felt like instant threesome to me as I was smothered in a three-way group hug.

PJ was a petite brunette with a girlish figure, a sharp contrast to her friend Valkerie, who was a tall blonde with big tits and a figure that suited her namesake. They each had sex appeal to spare, but when put together as a package they were hard to beat. PJ was wearing a skintight black bodysuit with combat boots and a leather jacket; Valkerie had on tight jeans and a sleeveless Harley blouse. It was obvious when they pressed up against me that neither of them were wearing bras.

We went up to the stage and sat down. When Sunshine came out, Valkerie began tipping her to hop up onto the countertop and flash Victor a close-up glimpse of her muffin. Once Sunshine gripped him by the ears and put his nose right in her crotch. We cheered her on while we laughed at Victor's embarrassment. PJ was sitting on my lap, and on impulse I kissed her deeply. When I broke off, Val gripped my shoulder and pulled me close to her.

"Hey, that's not fair," she cried. "Where's mine?"

"Share and share alike," I replied, and I kissed her as I had kissed PJ.

A few minutes later Angel walked up, and whispered in my ear, "Is this your girlfriend?" she asked.

I told her 'no', and introduced Val and PJ to her as 'dear friends'. When it was Angel's turn to dance she did a fantastic job, as usual, then just before her final song she stopped in front of me and stepped onto the countertop. PJ was sitting with Val, deep in conversation. Angel put her feet on my chair beneath my thighs and placed my hands around her ankles.

"Hold on tight, honey," she told me.

Then she did something that is truly hard to describe. She leaned backward with her hands on her taut belly, then she arched her back and began to undulate, to rise and fall with fluid grace, thrusting her hips towards my face. Her wavelike motion brought her to within an inch of my nose before diving away again, and I was thrilled at the proximity of her beautiful and sweet-smelling flesh. When she was finished I rose to my feet and applauded, and she was cheered loudly as she disappeared through the curtains into the dressing room. When she came back I thanked her for her fantastic performance, and she gave me a quick

peck on the cheek.

"Now go back to your friends, sweetie," she said. "I have half a dozen guys waiting to buy me a drink."

I laughed and patted her on the hip. "No wonder. Take care of yourself."

She gave me a sultry smile before she walked away with her hypnotizing stride. I need not worry about her. She was a walking symphony with charms to soothe the most savage breast. A smile was all she needed to turn a man into putty, and she knew it as well as I.

When I returned to my seat PJ and Val wanted to go outside and burn a joint. I slammed my drink and we went out to my car. The little two-seater was crowded with three people in it, but since Val was taller, PJ agreed to sit on the console. I opened the sunroof to give her some more headroom, and she put her left leg across my leg, her right leg across Val's, and an arm around each of us. It looked uncomfortable to me, but she insisted that she was fine.

We talked long after the joint was finished, as the bar had been too loud to catch up on what had been going on in our lives. I poured my heart out, telling them about my disastrous romance with Jennifer, as I had kept it bottled up inside for entirely too long. They expressed sympathy, and then they filled me in on their own complications. After all, that's what friends are for.

PJ had recently married Leonard Lester, and I was shocked to hear it. Leonard was an infamous fool, with the distasteful ability to make an ass of himself at even the most informal of gatherings. No one would invite him to a party, yet he always seemed to find out and crash them anyways. Everyone called him 'Corpuscle', and for some reason the name suited him, even though no one seemed to know where it had come from. He was an obnoxious drunk and a total jerk that required constant supervision. I found it hard to believe that PJ had actually married him.

"Why in God's name did you marry that clown? What could you possibly see in him?" I asked, being rude and completely tactless.

She snorted, as if she had asked herself those same questions. "Money."

"Well, at least you're honest about it," I said.

Corpuscle came from a rich family, and had a trust fund that would support him for the rest of his life. I had never thought much about it, but then again I was not a woman. If I were a female I might have done the same thing, given the opportunity. We changed the subject. I already knew that Valkerie was married.

“So how are things between you and Eddie?”

PJ tried to suppress a giggle, and Val said, “You don’t want to know.”

“Is it that bad?” I asked.

“Not really,” she replied. “We get along well enough...he just...well...”

She trailed off, leaving me to try and fill in the blanks. But then PJ spoke up.

“He’s not giving her any peter,” she said.

PJ and I started laughing, but Val punched her in the thigh.

“Damn it! It’s not funny, you assholes,” Val cried. The expression on her face betrayed the truth, and I quickly gained control of my mirth.

“Well,” I said. “I know it can’t be your fault, Valkerie. If I were your husband, we would make love at least three times a day.”

I leaned across PJ and gave Val a passionate kiss. When I felt the last bit of tension drain from her I broke off, and gave PJ one just like it to avoid cries of favoritism. After that we were all wound up, and PJ suggested that we go in search of another joint. I could have gotten one simply by going back into the bar, but I was having entirely too much fun and wanted to see what else might happen. I appointed PJ my navigator, Valkerie my co-pilot, and started the car and declared us clear for takeoff on the heading of their choice. We went to half-a-dozen bars looking for their friend Rhonda. PJ scored a joint in the second bar, but we saw no sign of their friend. We stopped at a convenience store and Val went to the payphone to call Rhonda’s apartment.

I was in the passenger seat with PJ. We had the seat reclined as far as it would go, the door open for leg room, and I was doing my best to get her hot and bothered. By then it was late, so I suggested that the three of us go to my apartment.

"I'd like to, but I can't," PJ said. She was being uncharacteristically coy, so I asked her why not. "I'm on the rag," she replied.

"So what?" I asked. "That doesn't bother me."

"Well, it bothers me."

I told her in graphic detail how sexy I thought she was, but she insisted that she didn't feel sexy when she was on her period. I could see that she wasn't about to give in, so I backed off.

"It's not that I don't want to," she explained. "It's just not the right time."

"I understand," I said. "Maybe we can get together next weekend."

"We'll see," she said, and then we went back to making out.

Val walked up on us. "Are you two going to fuck right here in the parking lot?"

"Maybe," I said. "Wanna join us?"

I got back into the driver's seat and let Val in. PJ decided that it was time she went home, so we dropped her off and Val went home with me. Women are impossible to figure out. Maybe PJ was being honest about being on her period, but I suspected she had told me that so Val could have me all to herself. It was my intention to make love to both of them at once, but maybe Val needed a man to give her his full attention, since her husband was ignoring her. Val was sensitive about it, feeling unwanted and unattractive, so I did my best that night to prove to her that she was very sexy and desirable. The sex was good, but it would have been more interesting if PJ had not backed out on us.

A few days later I was coming out of the music store with a fresh supply of guitar strings when Angel drove by. She called out to me and waved, stopping traffic long enough to ask me to come and see her that night. My band had just been booked to play a new club, but when our last set was over I went to The Nugget, getting there just before closing time. I confessed to Angel that I had been having some very erotic dreams about her. I did not mention that in my dreams she kept turning into someone else, someone I could never remember who. There was only a hazy impression of intense pleasure and delicious agony...and teeth.

“So what’s the deal with those two women you were with the other night?” Angel asked me. “The three of you were putting on a show all your own.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, innocently. Could it be possible that Angel was jealous? I will never understand women if I live to be a thousand years old.

“You know what I’m talking about,” Angel said. “Everyone in the bar saw how they were all over you.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” I replied. “It was more like me being all over both of them.”

“And then you left with them. Where did you go?” Somehow it had never occurred to me that she would have noticed who I left with, and I didn’t think she would care, not with our situation being so bizarre.

“Do you really want to know?” I asked.

In the end she wrung a full confession out of me. I admitted that I had expected a threesome, but that PJ had backed out on us. Angel punched me in the shoulder hard, and then she chastised me for not inviting her along. She admitted that she had experimented with other women and found that she liked it. She told me of her fantasies and that Madonna was her idol. We left the bar together and she spent the night with me.

We started seeing each other on a regular basis after that. Angel was so much like me that it was spooky. We seemed to have nearly a million things in common, and the same opinion about nearly everything. She was a true soul mate, the better half of what I was meant to be, and she completed me. Angel shared her dreams with me. She was a poetic soul, and she let me see her carefully guarded poetry, something she had never shared before. She was a true inspiration, and I wrote some of my best music with her to inspire me.

My 30th birthday came and went, and the summer with it. All too soon winter once again settled on the land. My relationship with Angel continued, but we stopped short of sharing an apartment. I was deeply in love with her, but was afraid to admit it. I dropped hints instead, writing poetry and songs about her and showering her with attention, but I was not sure how she would react if I told her I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. I was afraid that I was only a

pleasant diversion for her, a brief stop on the path of her true destiny.

I was in The Nugget on night watching Angel dance when suddenly I felt as if I was being watched. I turned my head and my heart stopped for an instant for there she was, the woman from my dreams, sitting at a table in the darkened back corner of the room. I recognized her, and wondered how I could have ever forgotten her. It had been a year since I had seen her, but that forgotten night had been truly intense. She stared at me with her compelling dark eyes, the faintest hint of a smirk at the corners of her mouth. In a room full of nearly naked young women her facial expression alone made her the most seductive person in the place. She didn't even have to move; her eyes said it all.

My pulse began to race in anticipation as I felt myself drawn to her like a doomed moth to a flame. I stood up, leaving my drink behind and my cigarette still burning in the ashtray. My only thought was to be near her; the rest of the bar didn't even exist. The music became a faint throbbing sound, blocked out as if it were far away. I could see no one around me, as if we were completely alone in this crowded place. My eyes were only for her.

I found myself sitting next to her not remembering how I had crossed the room, and not caring. I opened my mouth to speak, but she placed a finger over my lips. She took my hand and led me toward the door, and I followed like an obedient slave. My mind was a whirling maelstrom of emotion, my thoughts jumbled and chaotic. Yet somehow I managed to think of Angel, and for an instant I turned to look at her.

She was still on the stage and hadn't seemed to notice that I was leaving. I wanted to go to her, but my dream-lover's grip stopped me short. When my eyes met hers all thoughts of Angel vanished like fog under a blazing sun. And so Marie led me through the door and out into the cold dark night.

Interlude

And whatsoever man there be of the house of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, that eateth any manner of blood; I will even set my face against that soul that eateth blood, and will cut him off from among his people.

Leviticus 17:10

...The result of passion is suffering, and the fruit of darkness, ignorance.

The Bhagavad Gita, 14:16

Some people would judge and condemn me; some would even consider me an inhuman monstrosity--a soulless, emotionless, undead creature. But I willingly chose to become what I am. A voluntary transmutation into something more and less than the mortal I was before. It may be true that my soul was forfeit by my decision, yet many people daily commit sins darker than my worst, and condemn their souls to eternal damnation, but the difference is that salvation is no longer an option for me. I am a Child of Darkness. Yet even though my soul may be 'lost' by Christian standards, it is far from missing. It still inhabits my undying body, a long way from any eternal pit of flame. Then again this could be Hell for me, but this is no time to be pondering that concept.

My soul is the essence that animates this material form, filling me with passions as strong as when I was truly human. Only now my passions are more focused. I most definitely am not soulless, and I am far from emotionless. As for being undead, well, I consider the term highly inaccurate, more suitable for corpses that shuffle and moan stupidly across movie screens in search of brains to eat, who are modeled after the ancient grotesqueries creeping through humankind's collective imagination. Condemn me and call me a monster for my deeds and actions if you must, but my existence does not automatically make me a monster; I am far less monstrous than many people I have known, even now.

I have changed, in most ways for the better, yet I miss the freedom to expose my flesh to the sunlight, to bask like a lizard on the beach, warmed by its

rays. But that sensation is nothing compared to the rush I get from hot blood as it pulses from my victims and the ecstasy it creates in me, filling me with a heat that radiates from within. It is a worthwhile trade. I remember what it was like to move about freely in the daylight, and I remember how limited my sight was. My perfect human vision was blindness compared to the way I see the world now. I see things invisible to the human eye, and the clarity of my vision at night is better than it ever was in the light of day.

The sun is the source of all life on Earth; vampires are agents of death. Yet contrary to some myths, sunlight is not necessary lethal to my kind. But we are creatures of the night, and our flesh is hypersensitive to the sun. A sunburn is mild compared to the scorching a few minutes' exposure to the sun can cause, and unfiltered sunlight will blind me temporarily. It takes a long period of rest to recuperate from such damage, but it is by no means permanent. A vampire can move about in the daylight when properly protected, but it is not our natural environment and we are stripped of many of our abilities during the day.

Chapter IV

And they shall no more offer their sacrifices unto devils, after whom they have gone a whoring. This shall be a statute forever unto them throughout their generations.

Leviticus 17:7

And now you're in my power as you can see...

You spend your days in lethargy.

Darkness falls; again you're filled with energy;

Thrilled and yet afraid that you belong to me!

B.F.R. "Thirst for Blood"

Marie took me under her wing and led me away from my former life. I was her slave to command as she led me out of The Nugget and into her world of darkness, deception, and death. I do not know how much control she was exerting over my mind that night. She has the ability to bend a person's will, but I was willing enough, and it is possible that I was acting of my own free will. Yet she must have exerted some control, otherwise I would not have abandoned my sweet Angel so easily. But I have always let women manipulate me, and it would take very little effort from Marie to convince me to do anything she wished.

I took Marie back to my apartment at her suggestion, and we made love with an uncanny familiarity, touching and caressing like we had been lovers for years. Just as she brought me to climax she bit me on the neck. I was not too surprised based on our last night together, yet this time she pulled me close and sucked at my neck like a straw until I was ready to pass out. I did not struggle; to do so would have been futile. But more than that, I did not want to resist her. I was experiencing a euphoria unlike any in my life, an ecstasy so powerful that it swept me away like a twig in a raging torrent. I knew that my life was in danger, yet I was not afraid. Just before darkness enveloped me she placed my head on her breast and fed me from her own thick blood. Just a drop was all she allowed

me, yet I felt completely refreshed. I lay back and held her close savoring the rush I was still feeling from her blood.

“I’ve been waiting all my life for someone like you,” I told her.

“I know,” she replied, sitting up in bed. “Now get dressed,” she commanded, and slapped me lightly on the stomach.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“All in good time, my sweet morsel. You shall know soon enough.”

In a flash she was out of bed and dressed before I could get my pants on. We took my car and I drove where she commanded. We took the highway and headed north. The hour was late, nearly 3 AM, and the road was practically deserted. I drove recklessly, my sports car eating up the miles. I was bursting with questions Marie was not inclined to answer. She would reply with evasive responses.

“Patience, my love”, or “You shall know soon enough.”

I still found it hard to believe that Marie could be a vampire, even if she did drink blood. Could it be possible that she was actually undead; a resurrected corpse? She did not look like a corpse, and her body certainly felt alive enough. Yet she was so mysterious with abilities unlike any woman I had ever met. I could not bring myself to ask her such blunt questions, so I stuck to more general topics, skirting the issue. She was evasive about even the most basic questions, such as where she was from, which deepened the mystery.

It was dawn when we arrived at a secluded mansion somewhere between Pittsburgh and Washington, DC. We were in the middle of nowhere. The nearest gas station had been eight miles back, and anything that could be mistaken for a town was even further away. The house was large and very old, but it had been well maintained and modernized with an automatic gate at the end of a long drive.

She took me inside and led me to her bedroom. It was huge and richly decorated in a very elegant style, a room that would have suited the tastes of Marie Antoinette. Her bed was canopied, standing high off the floor and large enough to sleep six people comfortably if they were really close. I could tell it

must have been a handmade antique.

“So this is where you sleep?” I asked.

“Sometimes. Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful,” I said. “Looks comfortable, too. But to be perfectly honest, it’s not quite what I expected from you.”

“What did you expect? A coffin in the basement?”

She caught me off-guard, and she laughed at the startled look on my face. I grinned back at her.

“I don’t know what to expect from you,” I replied.

She laughed again more softly, walking gracefully toward the window. The large window was hung with heavy drapes, which were drawn back to reveal a fantastic view of the breaking dawn. She pulled the blinds and closed the drapes shutting out the light.

“Some do, you know,” she said.

“Do what?” I asked.

She turned to me, and suddenly she had crossed the room and was standing in front of me. “Sleep in coffins.” I was startled by her astonishing speed, but I held my ground. “Such morbid senses of humor we possess. And, of course, some of them are merely ignorant.”

She took my hand and led me to the huge bed. Suddenly my limbs felt like lead and my eyelids were like sandpaper. I collapsed onto the bed beside her and in an instant I was sound asleep. If you will pardon a lame pun, I was dead to the world. It seemed like no time at all had passed when I awoke to find Marie staring at me.

“Good evening,” she said.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, dressed in a low-cut evening gown the color of a backlit glass of cabernet sauvignon...or dried blood.

“Evening?” I echoed, my mind still foggy.

It had been dawn a moment ago. Had I really slept for twelve hours? I looked at my watch, the only thing I was wearing, and saw that it was true. I looked around for my jacket and spotted it at the foot of the bed, neatly folded

with the rest of my clothes. I dug through my pockets and found my cigarettes.

“You will need those no longer,” Marie said.

I lit one and found out she was right. The smoke scorched my throat like a hot coal, and I thought I was going to choke to death when it reached my lungs. I broke out in a hacking fit, and then I looked around for anywhere to get rid of the foul cigarette. But Marie snatched it from me and ground it out in her palm. She was smiling at me, so I gave her a reproachful look, wondering what she was trying to prove. She ground the cigarette into powder and dusted her hands, letting it fall to the rug at her feet. She held out her palm to me and I saw an ugly red welt left by the coal of the cigarette. As soon as I noticed the mark it vanished like a drop of water evaporating in a hot pan, leaving her perfect skin unblemished.

“Jesus,” I said. “Will you ever cease to amaze me?”

“I doubt it,” she replied, with supreme confidence.

She pressed a button and a young girl in a maid’s outfit entered the room. I had never seen a servant dressed in livery in my life. It was something I associated with Hollywood movies and porno flicks, a job I thought obsolete, yet here she was; quivering with anticipation and willing to do anything to please her mistress. I wondered just how much the girl knew about her mistress. Was she oblivious, or was she like Marie? There was no way I could tell by looking at her, so I decided to accept everything I saw at face value and try to sort it all out later.

“Prepare a bath for our guest,” Marie said, to the servant.

“Yes, ma’am. Dinner will be served in one hour,” the girl said.

“Thank you. That will be all,” said Marie, dismissing the girl with a wave of her hand.

The girl gave a small curtsy and left quickly.

After my bath I dressed in the outfit Marie had laid out for me. My clothes were nowhere in sight, not even my wallet or prized leather jacket. I felt uncomfortable in the snug dinner jacket and expensive leather shoes; the clothes fit me perfectly, yet I had always been a t-shirt and jeans guy. In fact, wearing a dress uniform was one of the many unpleasant aspects of my short-lived military

career.

Marie laughed at my discomfort, but she assured me that I would get used to such things soon enough. If I were to become her lover I would have to learn to be inconspicuous in any sort of a crowd. This amused me, for Marie stood out like a flaming beacon, although I had to admit that no one else seemed to pay much attention to her unless she wanted them to. She had disposed of my personal belongings while I was taking my bath; she even got rid of my car. I was highly upset. I loved that little sports car. It was a special edition Mazda Rx-7 GSL with a larger rotary engine, capable of doing 155 miles per hour, and it jumped out from a full stop as if demon possessed. But she insisted it was necessary for me to break all ties to my former life, and promised to make it up to me, so I let it slide.

Looking back on it, I wonder how she convinced me so easily. I had come with her simply because she wanted me to with no thought to the future. Angie had been the only thing on my mind while I was in my bath, wondering how I was going to explain this to her. But as soon as I saw Marie again, all thoughts of Angie evaporated.

Dinner was a sumptuous six-course affair, and although she touched not a single morsel, I ate enough for us both. I had never eaten so much food in my life, and yet I could not seem to get full. Eventually I got tired of chewing and gave up, finishing off with a glass of some red French wine I had never heard of.

She took me on a tour of the world showing me humanity from her detached viewpoint and giving me valuable insights into her lifestyle. Being with her reminded me just how much I disliked people in general. The human race is overstocked with idiots and simpletons. There are far too many stupid people in the world, but this only makes it sweeter when you find somebody whose company you enjoy, and I enjoyed the time we spent together.

She owned a number of homes scattered around the world, each one fully staffed by human servants (with a vampire overseer loyal to Marie, as I would discover later). She took me to elegant parties and exclusive restaurants and watched as I feasted on exotic dishes. I consumed massive quantities of red

meat, liver, and fresh fruit; I ate anything I could get my hands on and did not gain an ounce, yet she never touched solid food herself. She took her nourishment in the form of fresh hot blood. She had not bitten me since that night in my apartment, yet she would often leave me alone in the early evening, and I knew that she was feeding on the blood of others. But I never mentioned it and neither did she.

My life changed overnight. I gave up cigarettes completely and I hardly touched alcohol at all; never more than a glass of wine with a meal. We were together constantly, and we made love every night as a grand finale to our evening. I would often wake up in the early evening while she slept. I would spend this idle time discovering what I could about her as she lay still as a corpse. This was very unnerving at first, and I found it difficult to accept. It was hard to believe that this statuesque figure was the same woman who made love to me with so much passion; I could detect no signs of life in her at all, not even a trace of breath. It gave me the chills, and I had to avoid looking at her while she slept. I wondered that she trusted me enough to allow me to see her in what was such a vulnerable state, yet I assumed that she was not as helpless as she seemed; she was too cunning for that.

I would roam freely through her homes examining the works of art and looking for insights into her personality. Her servants were polite and willing to cater to my whims, but they were tight-lipped about their mistress. I assumed any questions I asked of them would be repeated to Marie, so I limited my investigation to the evidence around me. She liked old stuff. Her furnishings were antiques, but it was her libraries that captured my attention. Every house we visited contained a grand collection of books, yet I could only read English and most of her books were in any language but English. The knowledge contained in those ancient tomes beckoned to me, and I vowed to correct my shortcoming. I asked Marie to teach me to read French, but she was in no hurry to further my education. She brushed aside my request like all other questions I put to her.

“The first thing you need to learn is patience, my love,” she’d say.

After hearing this a few dozen times I realized that she would tell me what

she thought I needed to know, and nothing more. Once this sunk in I began to keep my mouth shut and my eyes open even more, and by being observant I came to my own conclusions about things. I was not always right, but it was good exercise for the mind.

We had been together two months when she brought a man home with her. He was middle-aged, clean-cut and well dressed, with his dark hair graying at the temples. I suspected that he was a lawyer, although I cannot say what gave me this impression, unless it was the way he talked. It turned out that I was right. He was indeed a junior partner in the law firm of Dewey, Cheetham, & Howe. We were in Chicago at the time working our way back east from California.

I was waiting for her when she came in with this stranger. They were laughing with their arms around each other when she led him into the library. He was fairly drunk and she was pretending to be, quite convincingly at that. If I had not known that she never drank I would have been fooled myself; she even had the bleary eyes and flushed cheeks.

"There you are, darling!" she said. She suppressed a giggle. "I want you to meet my new friend. What is your name again?"

He told me his name, but I wasn't really listening. I was more interested in my lover's little game, wondering at the purpose of her charade. She led him into the bedroom and instructed me to follow.

"It turns me on to have him watch," she told her 'new friend'.

In the bedroom she undressed in front of him and he tore off his own clothes with clumsy haste, ignoring my presence. I settled back in a deep chair and watched, brooding. I was growing tired of her little game, and my anger was rising like bile, tightening my throat. My eyes were narrowed and my nostrils were flaring, but I tightened my lips and kept silent. I knew that she was up to something, but she was giving me no clue as to what I should do; my only option was to sit in silence. I was angry, but it wasn't only the thought of her with another man. It was being forced to watch and do nothing that pissed me off. If she were going to make love to him I would rather be an active participant or else

not be involved at all. And it bothered me that I didn't know what she was up to, and I couldn't stand being kept in the dark feeling helpless.

She pressed her naked body against his and guided him to the bed on shuffling feet, kissing and caressing him. She pushed him down on the bed and straddled him. Then she looked at me over her shoulder and gave me an exaggerated wink and a lecherous grin. I scowled at her, stroking my moustache.

Suddenly she leaned down and sunk her teeth into his neck. His body stiffened, and he put up a futile struggle. I leaned forward in my chair, watching with a morbid fascination, my anger draining away. I rose to my feet and approached the scene. He had ceased to resist by the time I reached the bedside, and I looked down at him.

His flesh was chalky and covered with a light sheen of sweat, and his eyes were rolled back in his head so that only the whites showed. His mouth lolled open making him look like an idiot. I realized he was unconscious just as my lover raised her head to look at me. Her skin was flushed and her lips were bright red, but there was not a drop of blood on her face; she had wasted none of his precious life fluid. She stood beside me, and even though I had let her feed on me before, I got my first glimpse of her fangs when she spoke.

"I saved the last sip for you," she said.

I was fascinated by this glimpse into her true nature, which she kept so well concealed. She was a mystery, a puzzle to be solved, an enigma within a secret, and this made her utterly irresistible. Yet I was repulsed at the same time. "Go on," she said, nudging me toward him.

I looked down at his unconscious form, watching the blood trickle from his neck. I had no desire to drink his blood; the idea was revolting. But Marie wanted me to, and with my overwhelming need to please her I had no choice. I reluctantly bent down over his naked form and sucked at his wounded neck. His blood filled my mouth with a warm metallic taste. I swallowed and rose to face her, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Very good, my love. Now I shall teach you a little trick."

She bit down on her lower lip, drawing two tiny droplets of blood. She

leaned down and kissed the wounds on his neck, smearing them with her own blood. She then licked his neck clean of blood and to my astonishment the bite marks on his neck disappeared, healed completely just as the marks on her lip. He somehow looked years older, his face ashen and his skin sagging like putty. And then I saw that he had cum all over himself, and still had a stiff erection. I snorted in amusement.

“Now we must dispose of the body,” Marie said, gathering up his clothes.

“Is he dead?” I asked.

He looked bad, yet I knew she did not have to kill her victims. I was living proof of that. Suddenly this was not even morbidly funny. She paused to glance at him.

“No, not yet. But he shall not live long with so much of his blood taken.”

She was matter-of-fact, speaking from long experience, and she disposed of the body with experienced callousness. We put him in his car and I drove to a seedy motel. She went alone to the desk and acquired a room in her unusual fashion. I stayed in the car while she carried him to the room and put him in the bed. She scattered his clothes around while I did my best to remove any trace of our presence from his car. I had worn gloves, so my fingerprints would not be a problem, but I was worried that a stray hair or strand of thread would implicate us. I had put his hands on the wheel, making sure his fingerprints were in place, but I was sure that we were going to be caught.

“This is insane,” I muttered, again and again.

When Marie came up behind me I nearly jumped out of my skin. I was on the alert, trying to look in every direction at once, yet she caught me by surprise with embarrassing ease.

“How are we going to get away with this?” I asked.

“It will look like he came here to cheat on his wife and had a heart attack in the middle of it. No one will ever find the girl, however, as the clerk will not remember me.”

“What about the blood loss? How will they explain that?”

“If the coroners are competent enough to notice the loss of blood they

won't be able to explain it, and people tend to ignore what they cannot understand. Anything that does not fit into their little picture of the orderly universe cannot be true. Besides, it is of little consequence for they will never be able to implicate us. They do not believe in our kind, and we two in particular do not exist by modern standards. You are likely presumed dead, and I died long ago."

Her lack of concern did little to calm me, and my heart was still racing. But the adrenaline rush was a thrill I could not ignore, and it was too late for me to turn back. I was in it up to my teeth.

"But you didn't need to kill him. Why did you do it?" I asked.

"A favor for a friend. Believe me, he deserved to die. He was a lawyer, after all, and not well loved by anyone. The world will not miss him."

We left his car at the motel and walked a few blocks away before hailing a taxi. She displayed her hypnotic abilities by convincing the driver to forget he ever saw us. She did not pay him; instead she took all of his money and told him to drive thirty miles south and go to sleep beside the road. When he awakened he would remember nothing about the night before.

Marie was very turned on, leading me impatiently to the bedroom. I was not in the mood to make love to her. The murder I had helped her commit weighed heavily on my mind. She helped me to relax, and before I knew it she had convinced me that we could get away with murder. Literally. All I could do was try to forget it, so I threw myself into making love to Marie, trying to drive the incident from my mind. She took a token sip of my blood, and once again I was filled with an ecstasy beyond compare. I soared like an eagle riding a wave of euphoria that cannot be equaled, and then she gave me my second taste of her rich, thick blood. It was so much stronger than the blood of the dead lawyer, like the difference between cheap beer and champagne. There was a narcotic quality to it, but it was sweeter than any drug. I realized that she was worth any risk. I would gladly help her kill; even kill for her if that was what it took to be with her. I was addicted to her, but I didn't know it.

Another month passed during which she showered me with gifts to replace

the material belongings I had left to become her lover as she had promised. She bought me several guitars, among them a Randy Rhodes Custom, which became my favorite. Then one night she did not go out to feed as was her custom; instead we stayed home and made love. We were locked in a passionate embrace when she broke free and stared intently at me.

“We have shared blood twice, and tonight will be your moment of truth. If you hesitate, or are uncertain I may very well drain you completely and end your life. But if you wish to share my dark fate with all your mind and soul, you must keep pace with me in our final sharing of blood.”

She saw the answer she was looking for in my eyes and sank her fangs into my neck, and drank until things became surrealistic. Then she offered her neck to me. My gums ached and throbbed with their own pulse, and the smell of her flesh overwhelmed my senses. I kissed her neck, and I could feel her slow and powerful pulse in her carotid artery so close to my lips. I sank my teeth into her neck. I was surprised at how easy this was to do; I had expected her flesh to be impenetrable. Then I realized I had grown fangs. Yet she had always opened her flesh for me before, and even those wounds had never stayed open for long. I rode a wave of ultimate ecstasy as her blood flowed into my mouth and her pulse beat loudly in my ears, like waves crashing on a cliff. All too soon she pushed me away.

“Easy, lover. Too much could spoil your evening. You did marvelously, darling. I am very proud of you.”

She was on top of me and I was still inside her, so I rolled us over, putting myself on top without pulling out. Our passions intensified, and we latched onto each other's necks feeding on each other's blood at a steady pace established by her. I felt her orgasm mounting and the intensity of it was greater than anything I had ever felt in my life. It compelled me to my own climax, and I exploded deep inside her as her legs wrapped around me and she clamped down on my cock with her vaginal muscles. And still my new fangs were clamped into her neck, just as hers were into mine. We rested for a moment, and I gradually realized that her pulse and mine had become as one. Then she began

to caress me and probe my ear with her moist tongue.

“We must share blood once more tonight if your rebirth is to be complete. Do you think you can manage?”

So much, so sudden? Already I could feel myself changed tremendously in my perceptions and my senses. What else lay in store? I felt drained by what we had done, sweating and breathing hard, yet I was filled with a restless energy and a power unlike anything I had ever known.

“Right now I feel like I could leap tall buildings in a single bound.”

I guided her hand to my stiff penis to show her how ready I was. She began sucking my cock, and then she turned around, presenting her ass to me, offering me her pussy to eat. As she greedily sucked on my cock, I sucked her clitoris. She gradually brought me to the verge of orgasm again, and my new fangs clamped down on her labia, buried themselves in her crotch. It was an instinctive reaction, as I was not yet familiar with these weapons or how to control them. I vaguely noticed that she was deep in the throes of climax, and I felt her fangs penetrate my scrotum as my cock, buried to its base in her mouth, shot forth a gut-wrenching load.

We lay beside each other, and I noticed that I was sweating profusely, while she as always did not perspire in the least. The agonizing bliss of her fang marks in my crotch was fading; the ache was steadily diminishing. Her fingers traced patterns on my chest and she muttered in my ear.

“And you, their best beloved one, are now to me flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood, kin of my kin, my bountiful winepress...”

Her words sounded familiar to me, and after a moment I realized why.

“Dracula? You’re quoting Dracula to me?” I was tempted to laugh. “Isn’t that a bit clichéd?”

“Bram Stoker captured much of the essence of what it is to be misunderstood and persecuted, yet he was wrong about so many details, as you shall soon discover. But Dracula was, after all, merely fiction.” She sighed. “You have a lot to learn, my darling child, but then again, I have a lot to teach.” She stared at me intently. “And now you will Rest for a time,” she said, and I could

hear the capital 'R' in the way she said it. I was feeling drowsy, and I knew somehow that sunrise was only minutes away, even though we were sealed away in her bedchamber. The heavy drapes and blinds were closed; not a trace of sunlight could enter the room.

“After three days you shall rise and you shall Thirst. Ravenously...”

She flashed me an impish grin, her voice faded out, and I knew no more.

Chapter V

And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. Matthew 24:12-13

Be at last convinced it is only by exploring and enlarging the sphere of his tastes and whims, it is only by sacrificing everything to the senses' pleasure that this individual, who never asked to be cast into this universe of woe, that this poor creature who goes under the name of Man, may be able to sow a smattering of roses atop the thorny path of life.

The Marquis de Sade. *Philosophy in the Bedroom*

When I came to my senses again Marie was sitting in a chair beside the bed, reading a timeworn book. She sat it aside when I sat up.

"What are you reading?" I asked her.

"La Philosophie dans le Boudoir," she replied.

"Philosophy in the Bedroom?" I had ceased to wonder how I understood her when she spoke French; I merely accepted it.

"Yes, by the Marquis de Sade. The second volume of the original 1795 printing, to be precise. I have selected it for you to read, and I have brought you both volumes. I am sure that you will enjoy it."

"But I can't read French," I objected, getting out of bed. I felt strange...different, and filled with a restless energy.

"Yes you can. You simply do not know it yet," she said, in her typical cryptic manner. I was getting dressed; rushing with an edginess I could not explain.

"Where are we going tonight?" I asked her.

I needed to get out of the house. I felt like a caged beast. She laughed at my restless energy.

"You are feeling the Thirst," she told me. "Do not resist it; embrace it! But you must control it or it will control you. Restraint is necessary for your survival."

This is where the patience I have been trying to instill in you will pay off. Go take a bath and relax. We will hunt soon.”

After I was bathed and dressed, I sat on the edge of the bed and did my best to relax. I looked around, adjusting to my awakening senses. It seemed that the world had changed while I was sleeping. I remembered Marie’s last words to me before I fell asleep.

“How long have I been asleep? Has it really been three days?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Only you were not asleep. You were dead.”

“Dead? But that’s impossible!”

“The universe is more complex than you can imagine; nothing is impossible. Indeed, you were truly dead, and now you are reborn. No longer human, but a god!”

She rose to her feet as she spoke, then she pirouetted into the air. She levitated toward the ceiling and hovered there, staring down at me with a wicked grin on her face. She drifted back down, settling lightly to the floor with the grace and ease of a drifting feather. This was the first time she had displayed this ability to me.

“How do you do that?” I asked.

“Surely, you can feel the power that courses through your body?”

I could. My senses were tremendously heightened and there was an energy in me similar to the illusion of great strength which drugs can instill, only this was no illusion. And my mind was free of the distortion drugs invariably induce.

“It’s true,” I said. “Things are definitely different now.”

Marie leaped into the air again. She floated as casually as a cork in the ocean for a moment, then she stuck her arms straight out and spun around like a top, so fast that her features should have been a blur, yet I could see her face just fine, a fact that unsettled me. Then she drifted lightly to the floor.

“It is simple. Give it a try.”

I jumped up and slammed into the ten-foot high ceiling. It was embarrassing how I squalled like a wounded otter and fell promptly to the floor

with a heavy thud, but I had not been injured, merely caught off guard. Marie had a hearty laugh at my clumsiness.

"It just takes a little practice. You will be able to perform many amazing feats soon enough."

"That didn't hurt," I said, smoothing the wrinkles out of my clothes. "I didn't feel it at all!"

"There are few things that can harm you now," she replied. "Pain will become a distant memory...at least in most respects."

I was excited and euphoric, yet I was overwhelmed by it all; she had explained so little to me and I had let myself be changed into something I did not understand. It had been a reckless act of passion, but now I felt a strong need to know just exactly what was going to happen to me.

"What have I become?" I whispered, thinking out loud.

"I told you, my love. We are gods."

"But what does that mean?" I yelled at her. "How can we be gods?" My mind leaped in all directions at once, my thoughts scattering like rats abandoning a sinking ship, and I snatched at one fragment and clung to it like a life preserver. "Tell me something, Marie. Are there many more like us?"

"That is a two-pronged question. In certain respects we are unique, you and I, yet this is neither the time nor the place to discuss that. But there is a common denominator that defines our existence. The Thirst. We are blood drinkers, and it is a craving more powerful than anything you have ever experienced. You cannot fight it; if you try it will destroy your mind and turn you into a raving monster. In this respect there are many like us. At one time there was nearly one of us to every thousand humans. That may not sound like much, but it is the limit of the fragile balance between predator and prey this world can endure. Even now there are thousands who prey on the pitiful mortals, but our numbers are limited. We cannot afford an epidemic like the one that swept through Europe in the 18th century; our secrecy is too vital to our existence. As long as humans do not believe in us they are powerless against us. But when they believe, to take measures to protect themselves, the hunting becomes far

more difficult. And so there are laws among our kind that keep our population under control, among other things.” As she talked I had begun pacing without realizing it. She laid her hands on my shoulders and looked at me, stopping me dead in my tracks, so to speak. “You are a bit dismayed, but trust me. Your uncertainties will be alleviated in time, and you will soon grow accustomed to your new self, become at ease with your new identity.”

She took me in her arms and we drifted to the ceiling. We hovered there, and then she released me from her embrace, maintaining a light grip on my hands. We drifted apart like clouds, and I remained afloat. I looked down at the floor and was reminded of something I had fought with all my life: a sudden urge to fling myself from high places. I had always been thrilled by heights and when looking down from a cliff or balcony I would be overcome with a senseless and suicidal desire to leap out into the open air. It was something that would overwhelm me suddenly; the thrill of the fall would possess me, but fear of the sudden stop held me back. And so, common sense had overruled the impulse, keeping me from putting such a drastic end to my life. I looked up into my lover’s face and she smiled. She maintained her grip on my hands and we drifted down to the floor together.

“That was easy enough,” I said.

“You will catch on very quickly once you overcome your uncertainties. It is like a suppressed instinct; your powers will assert themselves once you have accepted your destiny. And now it is time to feed.”

She flung the window open and took me by the hand. There was a thin layer of late winter snow blanketing everything, fallen while I was asleep (or dead), but the chill in the air did not really touch me. We stepped through the open window together, and Marie paused long enough to shut it, and then we were flying southwest over the mountaintops at a fantastic rate of speed. We came down on a hilltop, the lights of a small town scattered below us.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Just an anonymous town,” she replied. She offered her wrist to me, palm up.

“What?” I asked.

“Take a sip,” she said. “It will assuage your craving and ease the Thirst.”

I bit into her wrist and swallowed a mouthful of her blood, so hot and sweet. She pulled her wrist away too quickly, cutting me off, but I felt a wave of serenity wash through me, calming me. We walked out of the woods and into a residential area. I was fairly certain that we were in Kentucky, and when we entered the town the license plates confirmed my suspicion, although I could not say then how I knew.

We strolled through the streets until we located a small, crowded bar. The parking lot was packed and live country music filtered through the walls. We went inside and I was bombarded by the emotions of those around me. This took me off-guard, and I stumbled. Marie slipped her arm around me. After a moment I was able to separate the solid mass of empathy into its various sources, tracing the emissions back to the individuals where they originated. I detected no specific thoughts, that is to say I could not read minds, merely moods, sensations, what should have been private feelings that were very difficult for me to interpret.

“Your mind is an open receiver,” Marie whispered, guiding me through the crowd. “You must filter out the unwanted projections, concentrating only on those who are most susceptible to your influence. Calm yourself and close your mind.” I stood still, relaxing until Marie nudged me in the ribs. “Breathe, you fool. It is unnerving to these simpletons; you’ll give yourself away.” I was surprised to realize that I had been concentrating so hard that I had let my breath trickle out and neglected to inhale. Apparently breathing was no longer a reflexive action for me. “That’s better. Note that man standing alone near the dance floor. Can you feel his longing?”

I saw a tall, young man holding a bottle of beer in an easy grip, so that it seemed like a natural extension of his hand. He was dressed in jeans and a faded jean jacket, with a black cowboy hat and black boots. He was watching the band with his back to us. He looked bored. I opened my mind and felt a great need in him. His boredom was a cover for his true feelings. There was a strong

feeling of restlessness, a desire for something he could not seem to find. He was dissatisfied with his life, but I could not tell why; perhaps he did not know why himself.

“You stay here and watch,” she said.

She had singled out her victim with the stealth and cunning of a jaguar. He never knew what hit him. She approached him and allowed him to start a conversation and was lured in by her charm, just as I had been. They talked for a few minutes, and then she brought him over and introduced me as a friend.

“Billy, darling,” she said, her arm in his. “This is my friend Samael”

“Sam-who?” he echoed, with a heavy Kentucky drawl. “What the hell kinda name is that?”

I was wondering the same thing myself, but didn’t let on. “Well, it beats the hell out of Billy Joe Bob Junior, you fucking illiterate inbred troglodyte,” I replied.

I could feel my fangs throbbing, growing, the bloodlust overpowering me, and it was all I could do not to leap on him and rip his throat out with my teeth. My newfound strength coursed through me; it would be a simple matter to crush him like an insect. He took a step toward me, as if he were going to take a swing at me, then Marie grabbed both of us by the arm.

“Now, now, boys. Let’s be civilized, shall we?”

He was glaring at me and I scowled back at him. Suddenly his eyes widened and the blood drained from his face. Something he saw about me had frightened him a great deal. Marie leaned toward me and whispered in my ear.

“What is wrong with you? You could ruin everything! Control yourself, my love. I have found my victim; now it is your turn.”

She led Billy away from me, soothing his wounded ego. She had made it look so easy, but I was burning inside with the Thirst. If it had not been for that tiny sip of Marie’s sweet blood to keep it in check, I might not have been able to restrain myself, so strong and insistent was this new craving in my body.

I singled out a likely candidate, a young girl sitting at a small table with two of her girlfriends. All three of them had peroxide blonde hair, permed, and teased into elaborate hairstyles, each hairdo bigger than the next. I was drawn to the

youngest of them, as she had a lot of resentment radiating from her. I was not sure, but I had the distinct impression that she had just broken up with her husband or boyfriend. I made eye contact with her, and she returned my bold stare before looking away with a blush.

I watched my potential victim for a few moments, ignoring Marie and her 'new friend' Billy. The three women were giggling amongst themselves like schoolgirls, and the covert glances and smiles in my direction left little doubt that I was the topic of discussion. I walked slowly to the table, never taking my eyes from the one I had selected. I could hear her pulse quickening as I approached. I stepped up to the edge of the table and bowed slightly.

"Good evening, ladies," I said, acknowledging the presence of her friends, even though she was the sole focus of my attention. My eyes were locked on hers, and she returned my stare with a shy grin. The band began playing a new song. "Would you honor me with this dance?" I asked her, holding my hand out to her.

She glanced at her friends with a hint of uncertainty and they gave her the approval she was looking for. I took her by the hand and led her to the dance floor. I had recognized the next song by then: Looking for Love (in all the wrong places). How fitting. I held her close, and she put her head against my shoulder.

"My name is Carol," she told me.

"Mike," I replied.

I was not interested in who she was; my thoughts were fixated on her blood. I made a half-hearted attempt to flatter her with a few compliments, but conversation proved to be unnecessary. Her body language made it obvious that she was very attracted to me. I led Carol to where Marie stood in conversation with her young redneck Billy and introduced them. Marie suggested that we take the party somewhere more private, and the four of us left together. Billy had a jeep and he volunteered to do the driving. We agreed to go back to his place and he stopped at a convenience store for beer. He offered me one and I pretended to drink it, following Marie's example. Billy drove down a winding road that followed the course of a narrow creek. A few miles outside of town we crossed a

one-lane wooden bridge that led into a trailer court.

Billy's trailer was small and cluttered with the ransacked look of scattered belongings that is a trademark of bachelorhood. It was decorated with rebel flags, gun racks, and the mounted head of an eight-point buck. Like most bachelors, he had an impressive stereo system that he wasted on country music, which I did my best to ignore putting all my attention on the girl. Marie led Billy into the rear of the trailer, leaving me alone with Carol. I put my arms around her drawing her close, but suddenly she wanted to talk.

"You never did tell me where you're from," she said, avoiding my kiss.

I sighed deeply. "Does it really matter? Right now I'm here with you." I traced her jaw line with my fingertips. "And trying very hard to keep my hands off your beautiful body," I added.

Her eyelids drooped seductively and her chest heaved. I leaned closer to kiss her, and this time she responded, unleashing a passion that had been held back for too long. She ran her hands across my broad shoulders and down my back while I put my arms around her and pressed her body firmly against mine. She cried out, breaking off our kiss.

"You're crushing me!" she gasped.

I eased my grip on her. Unaware of my own strength, I had nearly cracked her ribs in my excited state. But her blood was calling to me, pulsing so close beneath her skin, and I could wait no longer. I gripped her hair in my hand and forced her head back exposing her lovely, arched neck. Her body stiffened as she made a futile attempt to push me away. She groaned as I sank my teeth into her flesh, then she began to pant breathlessly as I drank of her sweet blood. I could feel my strength growing as I stole away her life essence; it was in some ways more exhilarating than Marie's potent blood. Her body grew limp in my grasp and I realized that her pulse had grown weak. I pulled away from her reluctantly, holding her at arm's length. She was like a rag doll, pale and unconscious, her breath shallow and ragged.

I stared at her uncertainly, and then I bit down on my own lip, drawing a little droplet of blood. I kissed the bite marks on her neck, smearing my blood into

her punctures as my lover had taught me to do. The mark on my own lip healed in a few seconds, and her wounds did the same, disappearing as if they had never been. I knew that she would be slightly sore in that spot, and might even bruise. But she would not remember why unless I willed it so...if she lived at all. I might have gotten carried away by my new thirst, and perhaps drank too deeply. I had not wanted to hurt her. I would have preferred to be gentle with her, but I had acted on a compulsion I could not yet control.

I laid Carol gently on the couch and paced for a moment. Then I went to check on Marie. I found her on her knees on the bedroom floor, crouched between Billy's legs. He was stretched out across the bed, his legs hanging over the edge and his jeans pulled down past the top of his boots. Marie stood and grinned at me.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"The femoral artery is harder to reach, but it can be so much more fun!" She grasped my arms. "So how do you feel?"

I was filled with a new energy. I felt like a god; deified by Carol's blood. I laughed out loud, my laughter ringing in the confines of the small room. I grabbed Marie and spun her around, lifting her above my head.

"God damn! This feels fucking good!" I cried.

"Yes, lover! Shout your joy from the mountaintops. Revel in your blasphemy. Denounce God as your inferior!"

I sat her down, my mood sobering. "Well, I wouldn't go that far. I think I might have killed Carol."

"So what?" Marie replied. "What does she matter to us? She is insignificant. Go fetch her." I went into the living room and carefully picked Carol up. I carried her into the bedroom and laid her on the bed. Marie undressed her and Billy, arranging them in a natural-looking pose, naked bodies intertwined like exhausted lovers. "What a lovely couple they make," she said, pleased with her little joke.

"Will she live?" I asked, looking down at Carol over my lover's shoulder.

She studied Carol for a moment, checking her pulse and listening to her

breathing. "Perhaps. Too soon to say."

"What do you mean? Will she live or not?" I demanded impatiently. I had never intended to hurt her, let alone kill her, and I was way beyond upset. "I should've been more careful. You should have warned me, taught me what to expect."

"Oh, lighten up," Marie snapped. "She is young, her spirit and heart are strong; most likely she will spend a few days in bed recuperating and come out good as new. I told you, my love. Her life is of no consequence to us, neither her nor any of her short-lived kind. We are immortals; they are but food for the gods."

I was still feeling the strength of Carol's blood. "And what sweet ambrosia she was." I leaned down to kiss Carol's cool forehead.

Marie laughed. "Ah, my darling little romantic. Such a poetic soul."

Her good humor was infectious. Our laughter echoed from the hilltops as we left our victims and hurried home. Our lovemaking was very intense, even inspired. My lover baptized me with her own blood giving me a new name in honor of my first successful hunt. She baptized me Samael, and insisted that I refer to her as Lilith. Afterwards we lay together with sunrise approaching. The Rest was not yet upon me, but I felt calm and utterly satiated.

"Why me, Lilith?" I asked, accustoming myself to her new name. "The world is your playground. Why did you choose to make me your lover out of all the people you could have had?"

"Why, because I love you, silly boy," she said.

Only she could have called me a 'silly boy' without insult, yet I truly was a child, newly reborn into a fresh life. There was so much for me to learn.

"But what was it that made you fall in love with me, when you had the power to seduce anyone in the world?"

She considered this question for a moment, and whenever that thoughtful look came over her features I couldn't help but get the impression that she was deciding how much to tell me and how much fiction to invent. She was still very closed, and she never mentioned who she had once been or where and how she had become the enigma who now lay beside me.

“I singled you out as a victim, because I thought you were pretty,” she finally responded. “But I could tell that there was something different about you, a restless and rebellious nature. As I studied you more closely I could sense your torment, could feel the void within you, the emptiness. Your isolation and detachment from those around you was apparent. You were utterly alone in a crowded room. I tasted your pain and savored its bittersweet flavor, and it drew me to you as surely as my nature drew you to me.” She paused to kiss me deeply, and then she stretched out on top of me, looking into my eyes. “There was a gaping wound in your soul, and I knew how you would treat it. You would not heal properly, but would seek forgetfulness in hedonistic abandonment and utter debauchery. I knew that you would sacrifice your spiritual wellbeing for materialistic pleasures and sensuality, but that is how I choose most of my victims, as they are much easier to seduce. But you turned out to be different from most.” She caressed my naked flesh, grinding her hips into me. I rolled her over so that I could worship her body more freely. “Mmm,” she moaned. “You truly are insatiable. And that is why I chose to make you my eternal lover. Your passion is so intense and sincere; your lovemaking so skilled, and you are always ready to satisfy me again and again. You get more pleasure from my orgasms than from your own; a lover like you only comes along once in a century, and I was growing tired of looking.”

I was embarrassed to hear such praise, but it was not the first time I had been complimented for my talents as a lover. “But why do you bother to hunt in small towns? What brought you to my little corner of the world?”

“People in large cities tend to be callous and cynical, too mistrusting...they are too familiar with deceit. The inhabitants of rural areas are more vulnerable to my methods. The reports of violence and insanity that reach them from the outside world seem incomprehensible to them; they feel safe from it, secure in a familiar environment. Their security makes them so much easier to manipulate. But as you know I do not limit myself to any area. You said it yourself: the world is my playground. I am called the Queen of Darkness, and you are my Dark Consort. Every immortal pays homage to me, and even though they each have

well-defined territories, they dare not challenge me. Thus I am free to take my victims wherever I wish. As my consort you share my diplomatic immunity, and soon I shall introduce you to some of my subjects, beings who share our Thirst.”

Sunrise was nearly upon us then, and I was growing tired. Her voice was like a soothing lullaby guiding me gently towards a peaceful sleep. Suddenly she gripped my chin, forcing me to open my eyes and meet her gaze.

“You are safe with me,” she said, “but heed this warning. You must utterly forget your mortal life and vanish completely. The person you once were no longer exists; he has disappeared without a trace. You are Samael, Dark Consort to the Queen of Darkness. Modern customs such as identification cards and passports are designed to keep track of people, and since you are no longer tagged, you will be considered dead and forgotten. Although there may be some who will mourn your passing the joke is on them, for you shall outlive them all. You will find it increasingly easy to pass yourself off as a normal human, but it is imperative that you remember what I am about to tell you. Your closest friends and family may recognize what you have become. You will have strong hypnotic powers when necessary; you will be able to lure even the devoutly religious to you with the proper effort. But as for those who knew you when you were alive, they will be able to tell what you have become, and their revulsion can often override your hypnotic abilities. You died the last time we shared blood together, but you missed your own funeral.” She paused to let that sink in. “And now you must swear to me that you will forget everyone you once knew; consider them part of a past life. You must give me your solemn oath that you will not attempt to give them any clue of your new existence. You are mine now, and the world is our playground. Promise me that you will forget your mortal existence.”

I was amazed at the intensity of her plea; the expression on her face could almost be defined as concern, one emotion I had never seen her display. But I had no way of knowing if this concern was for me or for her own benefit. I was caught off-guard, and I hesitated.

“Swear to me!” she insisted. “Swear by the blood we share that you will forget your mortal life, and everyone you once knew.”

She had a strong grip on my wrists, so I raised my arms and clasped her hands between mine. I placed her hands over my heart and held them in place.

“Lilith, my one and only love. I swear to you, by the blood and everything else we have shared, that I shall always be Samael, your eternal lover. The man once known as Michael David Solomon is dead, and his family and friends are a distant memory. I am Samael, Dark Consort and willing servant of my Queen of Darkness, Lilith.”

She smiled and gave me a tender kiss. “Thank you, my love,” she said, and then we relaxed and let The Rest overcome us.

The Rest is like a short hibernation. I lie motionless while my body renews itself, maintaining a perpetual state of youth. My body works at peak efficiency now; the blood I ingest is the only nourishment I need. It is completely absorbed without any waste products at all, not even sweat.

We hunted together as a team and I was careful not to take too much from my victims, remembering what had happened to Carol. I still worried that I might have killed her, but Lilith assured me that I had not, and then insisted that I forget about it. A pint of blood was barely sufficient during the first few weeks, but soon I could tell that feeding daily wasn't truly necessary for survival. But Lilith fed daily, a ritual that gave meaning to her existence, and I followed her example.

I tested the limits of my new senses and abilities as I adjusted to a new lifestyle. Mortals are familiar with the basic set of five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. Each of these was enhanced now. I could see in total darkness, could hear the pulse of a person several feet away; I could even smell the emotions of someone near me. But there was much more.

I discovered the sixth sense, the sense of direction. Everyone has this sense to some degree, although in some it is completely atrophied. Gravity lets everyone tell up from down, but this is not the same. The electromagnetic field of the planet can be tapped to determine your location and direction of travel once you have learned to read it without any need of landmarks. The seventh sense is the sense of time. I am constantly aware of the Earth's position in relation to the sun and moon, as if I have an internal chronometer. This is important, as I always

know how long I have until sunrise. The eighth sense could be described as an empathic sense: extra sensory perception, or E.S.P. It involves self-awareness and perception of the thoughts and emotions of others, even to the residual traces a person leaves behind on the things they come in contact with. There are at least two other senses, but these are not only hard to define, they are difficult to use. I am still trying to understand them.

I also discovered abilities that are supernatural, such as the power to fly and the ability to manipulate the minds of others. I possessed superhuman strength, and could perform amazing feats of speed and dexterity. I was blissful, constantly amazed by what I was now able to do, and utterly enchanted by Lilith. We had a wonderful time together, traveling and amusing ourselves by playing games with our victims, prolonging the moment when we would satisfy the Thirst that defined our existence.

I eventually picked up the first volume of the book she had chosen for me to read, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* by the Marquis de Sade, and opened it to the first page. Even though it was written in French, I learned that I could understand anyone who spoke to me, no matter what language they were using. Perhaps it was a side effect of my empathic abilities, but I decided to see if it extended to the printed word.

The words came to me slowly at first, but within minutes I was reading French as easily as English. Soon I was flying through the pages, devouring the twisted tale. It was truly perverse, filled with deviant sexual acts, yet morbidly funny at the same time. De Sade had a truly twisted sense of humor. The word 'sadistic' as I understood it did not apply to this story; he used torture as a vehicle for comedy with a focus on the most deviant and bizarre sexual acts he could imagine, proudly waving his freak flag, as Jimi Hendrix would have said. De Sade was a true libertine, and proud of it.

I talked to Marie about the book, and she admitted that she had known the Marquis de Sade. In fact, he had been one of her lovers. She told me that his reputation was earned through his fiction more than his actual deeds, although his behavior was scandalous enough, he was not violent or evil, but eccentric to

the extreme.

“It is strange that his name has become synonymous with cruelty, but so few people remember that he gained his evil reputation primarily through his scandalous and blasphemous fiction,” she told me. “He was a writer, and it was for this crime that he was persecuted. His stories were too obscene and indecent for the delicate sensitivities of most, not to mention the fact that he preached anarchy and vilified the church. Even though France was in a state of upheaval and rebellion, total anarchy was not acceptable, and atheism was not only a sin, it was a crime. And sodomy was a crime punishable by death. He spent most of his adult life in prison, even though he was offered a full pardon on the condition that he never write again. But he refused to conform to suit the principles of others, and he died after a long incarceration at Charenton, an asylum for the mentally insane.”

I was fascinated by her opinions, yet I still did not know why she wanted me to read this disturbing novel, so I asked her.

“Merely to expand your mind,” she replied. “His manner of thought suits our lifestyle, and his opinions may help you to better come to grips with your new existence, help you to detach yourself from the inferior creatures we feed upon. You were once one of them, but you have evolved into a superior species. You must consciously accept this fact if you are to share my life.”

I thought about what Lilith had said over the next few days. I was superior to who I had been in many ways, but I still had my own views on humanity. There are many inferior people who inspire nothing but contempt in me, but I still had a great respect for the potential of mankind as a whole, even if it was mostly the visionary actions of an elite few who worked for the betterment of the brainless masses. There will always be heroes, great minds, and charismatic personalities to redeem the shortcomings of others. Humankind has the potential to accomplish wonders as yet undreamed, as long as they don't destroy themselves and the planet in the process.

I was blissful with my new abilities, but eventually the impact of what I had become and of how my mortal past was denied me began to sink in. Perhaps it

was the onset of fall, as the wilting leaves and bare branches were a stark reminder of death. Accepting what I had become was not easy. All of my old passions and dreams were meaningless. I spent increasingly less time with Lilith; we still slept together, but upon waking I would seclude myself among her books, lost in thought, while Lilith went out to hunt alone.

I tried to resist the compulsion for blood that drove me for as long as possible, but no addiction to drugs could compare to the insatiable craving for blood that ruled my every moment. Blood is a fascinating substance. I could not understand the sheer power it gave me, nor could I resist it. But I felt a strong sense of guilt over what I did to my victims. I felt like a rapist. I was a predator and a parasite, but the thought that what I did compared to rape filled me with revulsion and self-loathing. These feelings of guilt plagued me until I finally could not bear the thought of feeding at all.

I fasted for nine days, never leaving the house. I found myself holding my favorite guitar absent-mindedly, the Randy Rhoades Custom with starburst finish and pearl inlays, and it felt like a foreign object. I tried to play it, but the songs I had written seemed to be flat and lifeless, one-dimensional interpretations of a six-dimensional world. The things that had meaning to me as a mortal, those things that had inspired me to song, were absurd.

With all of my immortal strength I flung the guitar away from me. It hit the face of the far wall and shattered, exploding with a 'ping' of breaking strings into a hundred fragments of wood, leaving a gaping hole in the wall. But this was not enough to suit me. In my frustrated rage I leaped across the room in a single bound and snatched up what remained of the neck by the headstock. I smashed it against the floor, and wooden shrapnel flew everywhere. Splinters pierced my flesh with a stinging pain, and the metal truss rod twisted like an angry serpent, released from a wooden cocoon. Enraged and maddened by the Thirst I launched myself into the night sky.

I flew from Florida to Tennessee in just under an hour, a simple feat now that I was comfortable with my new abilities. I could levitate at will, and with concentration I could make myself intangible. By combining these skills I was not

only able to fly, but to soar over great distances with amazing speed. I spent the flight obsessing about my former girlfriend Jennifer, the married one. She had been on my mind lately, and I wondered what my life would have been like if I had stayed with her. I had to see her, and I replayed every aspect of our relationship in my mind as I headed towards her.

I was living in Nashville playing in a band called Bugly and working at the Entropy Guitar factory in the paint department. One night several of us got together after work and went to a bar just down the road, a thing we did often, and there was this girl named Jennifer White who sat down next to me. We had been flirting with each other ever since I started working for Entropy Guitars. She would always make time in her busy day to stop by and create some sort of sexual innuendo with me, like grabbing my air gun and squeezing the trigger really hard.

“Why did you do that?” I’d ask her.

She would tell me, “Oh, I just like playing with your tool.”

Then she would smile at me and walk away. Of course, I always flirted back, but it never went very far. Just a little game we played to make work more interesting. But on this particular night Jennifer and I ended up sitting next to each other at the bar.

She was young and sweet, and oh, so pretty. With long blonde hair, deep blue eyes, skin like creamy silk and a smile that could melt a frozen heart. She had a great body, too. Her tits were centerfold material and her tiny little waist seemed perfectly suited for me to put my hands around it. But no matter how much I wanted her I knew she had a boyfriend or a husband, because I’d heard her talking about him to one of the other girls at work. She never wore a wedding band, but when you work in a factory any piece of jewelry can be considered a safety hazard, so I assumed she was married, even though she had never told me so herself.

We were all having a good time, and Jennifer kept easing closer to me. Soon her leg was rubbing against mine, and then she slipped her foot over mine,

entwining our legs at the ankle. She began to rub my thigh under the table out of sight, and I wondered how serious she was. Was she teasing me, as usual, or had she decided to up the stakes for real? I returned the gesture my hand drifting over to her thigh, caressing her, testing her to see how far she would let me go.

Somebody told a funny story about our shift supervisor and she laughed a little too hard, laying her head on my shoulder and sliding her arm around me. I pulled her against me for a brief moment before we resumed our former postures. I thought the whole thing was played off in a pretty casual manner, but our co-workers were always on high-alert for gossip material and some of them were already speculating while they pretended to do no such thing. When Jennifer was ready to leave I walked her to her car. I took her hands in mine.

“So now what?” I asked.

She looked me in the eye and took a deep breath, and I knew that she was tempted to commit a bold act of infidelity. All she needed was a nudge in the right direction. “I suppose I’ll go home,” she told me, looking down at my feet.

I held her hands gently, and gave them a squeeze. “Listen. You live all the way down in Murfreesboro, don’t you?” She nodded. “That’s an awfully long drive, and my apartment’s only three miles from here. Why don’t you follow me to my place?”

She smiled and lowered her eyes again, and I was waiting on her excuse when she raised her head high, and said defiantly, “All right.”

I beamed at her before I leaned forward and kissed her. I expected her to change her mind and go home, but she rode my bumper all the way to my apartment. I parked and walked toward her car a few spaces away, but she couldn’t wait. She leaped on me like a lioness, throwing her arms around my neck and kissing me so hard that I was amazed at her passion.

Her lips parted to swallow my teasing tongue and I could tell that she had spent the past three miles working herself into a sexual frenzy, just as I had. There was nothing else for us to say, so I grabbed the back of her legs and picked her up, letting her wrap her legs around my hips as I carried her in the general direction of my apartment. I had to break our kiss to see where I was

going, and she asked to be put down, so I let go, but she held onto my arm like I was going to try to escape.

As soon as I unlocked the front door we were all over each other, leaving a trail of clothing that led straight to the bedroom. We fell onto the bed in a passionate knot of naked flesh, the blanket twisting beneath us. She rolled on top of me and pressed my shoulders flat on the bed, sitting on my stomach. She began to kiss her way down my chest, her long hair brushing against my sensitive flesh as she grabbed my stiff cock. She flipped her hair back behind her ear, giving me a clear view of what she was doing as her lips wrapped around me, warm and wet. Her tongue swirled around my shaft with skill, making me shudder.

“God, Jenny, that feels fucking fantastic,” I whispered, with quiet intensity, my hand stroking her hair as it cascaded down her shoulder and onto my inner thigh.

Jennifer raised her head and smiled at me. “I have some bad news,” she said. “I don’t swallow on the first date.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “That’s okay, I’m not even close to cumming yet.”

She flashed me her seductive smile again and went down on me once more. Her silky blonde hair brushed against my super-sensitive skin, a sensation almost as thrilling as her talented mouth. I propped myself up on one elbow and caressed her as her head moved up and down, back and forth and then I placed my fingers under her chin and signaled her to stop.

I steered her face to mine and kissed her deeply, then I rolled us over, putting her on her back beneath me. My hands explore her entire body, seeking out her pleasure points as I kissed her nose, her eyelids, her earlobes, and down her neck. I sucked and licked her skin as my fingers traveled up her silky thigh. I rubbed her clitoris with the top edge of my palm as my middle and ring fingers spread her open. Her pussy was dripping wet and feverishly hot and she gripped my ass with both hands and pulled me insistently toward her.

I rose up and signaled her to wait a moment. I leaned over and took a

condom from the drawer of the nightstand. I made a show of it as I opened the package there on my knees between her legs and rolled the rubber slowly down my shaft as she watched. I leaned forward and kissed her again, and by then she was ready. She gripped my cock in one hand, using her other hand to spread herself open as she guided me inside. I thrust into her until I was buried to my full length and held it there, then I slowly thrust in and back, a little further on the out stroke each time. Suddenly she sighed, and grasping my shoulders looked me dead in the eyes.

“Take that fucking rubber off,” she said.

Not a request, but a demand. In an age of safe sex I had never been told to do such a thing. I hesitated, but then I did what she told me to do. I pulled out of her long enough to rip off my rubber, and then I was inside her again. Her full passion was unleashed and it wasn't long before she came. So fast, so hard, her pussy gripping and squeezing my cock in a pulsating rhythm stronger than any orgasm I had ever felt from a woman, and I matched my thrusts to the rhythm of her climax until I couldn't stand it any more and then I paused inside her to let her catch her breath. She started squirming under me, so with my arms extended in a stiff push-up position I thrust into her again, faster than before, and she started to cum again, harder than before, and the sheer intensity of her orgasm brought me to the verge of my own climax.

“God, Jenny, that feels so good. Cum for me, baby. Yeah, that's it. Oh, shit, I'm gonna cum with you.”

“Oh, oh, oh, ye-yeah. Oh, yeah! Fill me up, baby. Fill me up!”

She pulled me in tight with her legs as her hands squeezed my ass, sinking her fingernails in and refusing to let me pull out. A few strokes more and I came inside her just as she hit the peak of her own climax. Her back was arched, her legs wrapped tightly around my thighs while I gripped her ass just as firmly as she squeezed mine, pulling each other as close as possible, as if we were trying to merge into a composite creature, each of us an extension of a more complete whole.

I stayed buried inside her, kissing her lips gently. I was still aroused, and it was

only moments before I was hard again and I started to move my hips in a circular motion. She was hypersensitive to every motion and soon she came again, and moments later again, until they began to come in waves and I quit trying to count them.

We spent the rest of the night trying out every sexual position we could think of until we exhausted each other. We were lying with our sweaty bodies pressed against each other, her head pillowed on my shoulder, when we finally fell asleep. A few hours later my alarm clock went off and we got out of bed and showered together, a playful delight that turned into another big orgasm for both of us. And then she went home.

That evening at work my supervisor Wesley came up to me, and said, "You almost got laid last night."

He had been with us in the bar, one of the co-workers scrutinizing my behavior with Jennifer. I laughed and shook my head, avoiding eye contact by concentrating on the guitar in front of me. He read what he wanted to into my reluctance to talk about it.

"You did get laid, didn't you?" he asked, a hint of amazement in his voice. I made a half-hearted attempt at denial, but he was like a hound on a scent. "Oh, shit, Mike, Come on. 'Fess up. How did it happen? I mean, you two weren't even talking to each other. What was it, body language or something?"

Wesley had somehow failed to notice the constant flirtation that had been going on between Jennifer and me, and I could see that he wasn't willing to let the matter drop. But Jennifer and I had to face him, and everyone else he would run gossiping to every day, so I had to say something. Here is my brilliant rebuttal.

"I'm not saying anything, man. If you're so desperate to know, go ask Jennifer."

"Okay, be that way," he said, throwing his hands up. "You know that she's married, don't you?"

He threw in a little jab to deflate my standoff attitude. I hadn't known it for certain until he said so, had not wanted to know it, but I was not too surprised. I

shrugged and went back to work, so he finally decided to leave me alone.

I caught up with Jennifer after work. We worked in different areas, and she had been avoiding me instead of going out of her way to flirt with me. I was waiting for her in the parking lot and when she came out of the plant.

I walked up, and asked, "Why didn't you tell me you were married?"

I was trying to blame her for not answering a question I had never asked. But she didn't bother to blame me for not asking sooner, and that surprised me.

"I didn't think it mattered," she replied, her voice so cool I could barely believe this was the same woman I had just spent the night with.

She had been so passionate, but now her blue eyes were telling me that it was none of my business. I had only wanted a one-night stand, but sex between us had been so intense that I wanted more, a commitment she was unwilling to make, and I didn't even know how to ask it of her.

"I guess I should have asked before I seduced you, because now I can't help but think that I ruined your marriage." I gave her my most devilish grin, trying to melt the ice in her eyes.

She tried to stifle a grin. "Look, Mike. You didn't do anything wrong. I wanted it just as much as you did. I had already made up my mind to leave Jeff weeks ago. I've been looking for an apartment, and my girlfriend Bianca needs a roommate, so I'm going to move in with her."

So I was not exactly a home wrecker, just the catalyst needed to put her plan in motion. I felt much better about the situation, but I still didn't know where we stood. I slid my arms around her waist.

"So what happens now?" I pulled her close to me, looking down into her stunning blue eyes, waiting for a signal to kiss her.

"We'll have to wait and see," she replied, trying to pull away from me, but she didn't try very hard, so I tickled her and she collapsed giggling into my arms.

We left her car in the parking lot and drove back to my apartment. We didn't even make it to the bedroom that night before we had to have each other. We started out on the living room floor and ended up on the couch, making love even more intensely than the night before, although I didn't think that was

possible, and as we lay together catching our breath I displayed my self-destructive nature.

“So, tell me about your husband,” I said.

She sighed and lay silent as the seconds swelled with tension. I was wondering just how big of a mistake I had made when she finally spoke.

“Jeff could never make me feel this...satisfied, like a real woman, the way you make me feel. We haven’t even had sex at all in months.”

She told me Jeff took her for granted and failed to give her the affection she so desperately needed. I found this hard to believe. She was so passionate and gave herself so fully to me that it was beyond my imagination that any man could be unwilling to stir such intense passion. Perhaps he just didn’t know how, but that certainly wasn’t my fault, and now I was reaping the benefits of his inattention. Jennifer’s orgasms were so explosive that they inspired me to fantastic feats of endurance. I told her so, and then I proved it to her.

Jennifer moved into an apartment with her best friend Bianca and we fucked like minks. We couldn’t get enough of each other. We never talked about her husband after our second night together and that was just fine. He was a touchy subject that she didn’t like to talk about, and I didn’t give a flying fuck about him anyway. We spent as much time together as possible, which meant I got to know her best friend and roommate Bianca. One night I was supposed to meet Jennifer at Calamity Joan’s, the same bar where we had first gotten together. When I came in through the front door I saw Bianca sitting alone at the bar, so I sat down beside her and ordered a beer.

“Jennifer’s told me some very interesting things about you,” she said, the moment I sat down. She was grinning at me like she knew a secret she was just dying to tell.

“Oh, really?” I asked, casually lighting a cigarette and giving her the most innocent look I could muster. “Like what?”

Bianca and Jennifer were of a similar type: blond hair, blue eyes, and charming smiles. I found myself wondering if Bianca was about to hit on me, and what I would do if she did.

“Let’s just say that I’ll never be able to look at you the same way,” she replied, flashing me a secretive smile.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I pressed, playing along.

Bianca stared back at me boldly, a satisfied grin spread all over her lovely face. “She tells me that you’re like some kind of gigolo or something, Mister Stud Muffin.”

“Well, I’ve had some experience in the art of explosive orgasms,” I replied, grinning back at her.

This was getting out of hand. I could visualize Bianca naked and on top of me, and if I let it continue I might end up doing something that would ruin a perfectly wonderful relationship. A relationship with a married woman, I should have reminded myself, but I didn’t. The thought of a threesome never even occurred to me at the time, but I probably passed up a perfect opportunity when I changed the subject.

“So how’s school going?” I asked her.

Bianca was a student at the University of Tennessee, and I let her tell me about college life until Jennifer showed up a few minutes later.

My affair with Jennifer was blissful for about two months, a whirlwind romance that put my head in a spin. She was so spontaneous and quick to laugh, a sparkling sound that gave me a warm feeling down to my marrow. Yet there were a multitude of facets to her personality that I could only rarely glimpse. I was getting the best of her as she indulged herself in self-gratification, but there was a lot more to her that she kept hidden from me.

One morning, as I was kissing Jennifer good-bye at my front door I blurted out those three magic words: I love you. I didn’t even realize I was going to say it. I was thinking it, and it was such a powerful feeling that I let it fly out of my mouth. I could tell she was floored by the sudden confession. She stared at me wide-eyed for a split second, muttered a quick ‘see ya later,’ and practically ran for her car.

I was unsure of what to make of this until I talked to Bianca. It turned out that Jenn had been talking to her not-quite-ex-husband a lot, and Bianca thought

that Jeff and Jennifer were trying to patch things up. Jennifer started avoiding me until I cornered her at work and confronted her. She confessed that it was true and then asked me for some time to herself so she could decide what she really wanted. What could I do? She was still married, after all, and if she wanted to go back to him, then so be it. I didn't like it, but it was not my decision to make.

We stopped talking to each other so that Jennifer could decide what she wanted. That went on for two weeks. Then, one night I was sitting at home reading a book about Alexander the Great when I recognized Jennifer's knock. I tossed the book aside and ran to the front door and flung it open. She had been crying, but she had done a great job of hiding it. Her makeup was all in place, but her eyes were still puffy and glistening with unshed tears.

"Hi," I said, trying to hide the tension I was feeling.

"Hey."

She smiled uncertainly at me, as if unsure what sort of reception she would receive. I stepped out of her way and waved her inside. I closed the door behind her and then I turned to look at her.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

"Oh, nothing," she said, averting her beautiful blue eyes. "I just need a friend right now."

She waited expectantly for my reply. I didn't know what she wanted from me, so I just told her the truth.

"I can be your friend. And a lot more, as well."

The tears welled up in her eyes, so I held my arms open and she rushed into them, crying on my shoulder. I comforted her until she was done crying.

"Did you really mean it when you said you loved me?" She looked as if she was afraid of my answer.

"I didn't mean to shock you by blurting it out like that, but I meant it. And I still do." I took her chin in my hand and it felt like my soul was drifting out of my eyes and into hers. "I love you," I whispered.

"God help me, I love you, too, Mike," she answered.

I kissed her and words were no longer necessary as we fumbled our way

to the bedroom locked together at the lips. For the next two months we continued to fool around, but she was spending a lot of time with her husband, as well. She hadn't moved back in with him, but there were nights when I would call her and she wouldn't answer because she was with Jeff.

What kind of a man would put up with this shit? No woman was worth this. I told myself that so many times, but when we were together I felt that it was indeed worth it. And then one night she told me she was pregnant. She had been trying to have a baby with her husband for four years. They had been to fertility clinics and everything. Apparently this was the main reason they had split up. This led me to believe that I was the father of her baby. She could not deny the possibility, but she wouldn't admit to it, either. She wanted to let me go and run back to Jeff, she wanted the stability of a mundane and predictable future with a man she knew as well as her favorite pair of jeans. But Jeff couldn't give her the passion she craved. She had grown attached to the way I touched her, addicted to my dick, so to speak.

My response only made matters worse. I asked her to divorce Jeff and marry me instead. She didn't say no, but she didn't have the courage to say yes, either. I was left with no choice, but to be patient while she decided what she really wanted. I promised her that I would abide by her decision, no matter what, but I begged her to choose me, and if not, at least tell me soon before I went insane from the suspense.

The very next day I was sitting at home eagerly devouring every word of Steven Brust's latest novel. It was a Sunday afternoon. When the phone rang I decided not to answer it, because the only person I wanted to talk to was Jennifer, and I knew she wouldn't call me for a few hours. But it just kept on ringing so I gave in and answered the damned thing.

"Yeah?" I said brusquely.

"Mike?" It was my stepmother, but there was a certain timbre in her voice that I had never heard before. She sighed heavily, and with obvious reluctance, she said, "Your father has something to tell you."

Her odd behavior told me that something unpleasant had happened. I

knew I should not have answered the damned phone. There was a moment of empty air as she handed the phone to my father.

“Hello? Mike?”

He sounded like a blind man groping around in unfamiliar surroundings, and that startled me. My father was always sure of himself, even when he was dead wrong. My nerves were a jangled mess. Something terrible had happened, something I didn’t want to hear about, but he was about to tell me anyways. I knew I shouldn’t have answered that goddamned phone.

“Yeah?” I responded.

“Son, I’ve got some bad news.” He took a deep breath. “Chuck’s been shot.”

Then he broke down, sobs of grief overpowering him. Suddenly the bottom dropped out of my world. This was my baby brother, my only sibling and closest friend. My mind could not wrap itself around such a concept. He wasn’t talking about a flesh wound. He was too upset for something trivial. My breath whooshed out as if I had been punched in the solar plexus.

“Wh-wh-what?” I stuttered.

“It was your cousin Dale MacGregor. I don’t know what happened, but Chuck’s down at the hospital and they want me to go and identify him, ‘cause he’s gone.”

I guess ‘gone’ was easier for him to say than ‘dead’, but it meant the same thing and his grief overwhelmed him. Never in my life had I heard my father cry, but he made up for all those unshed tears. I felt like I was trapped in a vacuum, a bubble floating on a breeze that would pop at any second. I dimly remember my father telling me that I was needed at home, asking me how soon I could be there. I realized that my lips were moving like a fish out of water and that senseless noises were escaping from my mouth. I gained control of my voice well enough to tell him.

“Y-yeah, I’m comin’ home, but, I-I g-gotta go.”

I hung up on him. We hadn’t been on very good speaking terms for several years, and I certainly wasn’t able to talk to him after such a bombshell. I

was shaking all over, and I staggered aimlessly through my apartment. I watched myself open a beer like it was an out of body experience, and I drank half of it without tasting it at all. It was like watching the actions of a stranger, as if I were a wandering spirit who had possessed the body of someone else. I vaguely wondered if I was in shock when I found myself in the bathroom, staring at a face I didn't recognize in the mirror, a tortured-looking face with dilated pupils. I was deep in denial, unable to accept the news of my only brother's murder, and unable to express grief. I forced myself to pack a bag, but once I got in the car I found myself headed for Jennifer's apartment. Sweet Jenn answered the door in an oriental silk robe, her hair still wet from the shower. One look at my face told her that something was wrong.

"My baby brother's been killed!" I blurted.

When those words left my lips that made it seem true, and I broke down and cried. Jenn pulled me inside and led me to her bedroom. She was naked underneath her robe, and I needed to touch her more than anything at that moment, but I suspected she had spent the day with Jeff. Even though I was out of my mind with grief, I remembered trying to call her and not getting an answer. But she was with me now, and nothing else mattered.

I kissed my way down her body, starting with her earlobes and making a detour at her breasts. They were so full and firm, so comforting and familiar. I kissed them gently, first one and then the other, and then I took her left breast into my mouth, as much of her 36D as I could fit my jaw around. I sucked on it hard, while my tongue danced across her nipple. Jenn arched her back and moaned quite pleasantly, then I cupped both of her breasts in my hands and brought them together so that her hard little pink nipples touched. I sucked and licked them, teasing her before I treated her right breast to the same sweet torture I had used on the other.

I migrated further south, leaving a moist trail of kisses along her ribs and across her belly. I paused at her belly button, teasing it with my tongue, and she squirmed in anticipation of what she knew I was about to do. My hands gripped the back of her thighs and she spread her legs wide, arching her back and

gripping the rails of the headboard.

I slid further down the bed, teasing her with kisses as I made my way to my real target. I used my fingers to spread the lips of her labia and her clenching muscles pushed forth a generous amount of moisture, but there was a little something extra mixed in with the juice from her hot little pussy. I recognized the unmistakable thick, white fluid of semen creeping from within her.

I paused, wondering if it was mine left over from last night, or was it Jeff's, from today? I decided to believe it was mine and forget about it as I wiped it away with a flick of my finger. I ate her pussy with all the talent I had in me, as if I were trying to prove that I was the best lover she would ever have. But I kept wondering who had been there last, and hot tears streamed from my eyes onto her silky flesh.

Suddenly, she grabbed hold of my long hair and pulled my face away from her wet pussy. I wondered if she was feeling guilty about letting me go down on her because she had just been with Jeff, but she guided my willing face up to hers and gave me a passionate kiss. I returned her kiss with desperate intensity then broke it off to sob on her shoulder. I was not sure if I was crying because my brother was dead or because the woman I loved was in love with someone else. Probably both.

"It's okay, baby, I understand. Everything's okay," she said, a pitiful attempt at comforting me.

I found myself laughing bitterly, hysterically, and I wondered what she would make of that. Yet somehow I was more aroused than ever, and I yearned desperately to be inside her. I believed that she really did love me and care about me, she just happened to feel that way about her husband, as well. Perhaps it was a need to prove that I was a better lover, and therefore a better man, that had me so aroused. I propped myself up with one arm and spread her open with my other hand. I slid my cock inside her and she gasped, drawing in her breath with a shudder. I took satisfaction in thinking that even if Jeff had been there before me he could not touch her to the depths I could reach.

She was almost virginal the way she clenched around my manhood, as I

applied myself to driving deep inside her, while dripping tears onto her neck. On any other night we would have gone through at least seven positions by then, but I stayed on top of her, first in a push-up stance, my hands planted on either side of her roving arms, and then with one arm wrapped tightly around her as I lifted her ass off the bed and bounced her hard against me in an attempt to crawl insider her, dick first. I continued to cry on her shoulder as I drove deep inside her. In spite of everything, being with her reminded me that I was alive and in love. In love with her.

Her first orgasm was quick, and then she came on me like waves crashing unrelenting on a shore. The way her little pussy squeezed my stiff cock as she came felt like total ecstasy and compelled me, insisting that I join her in orgasmic bliss. I came with pulsating vigor, driving into her as deeply as I possibly could with each spurt. Her nails dug deeply into my ass and my spine arched in delightful torture.

“God, Mike, no one has ever made me cum the way you do,” she gasped.

I leaned close to her ear, and whispered, “You bring out the best in me, sugar.”

Jennifer’s compassion for me was a lifeline for my sanity after my brother’s death. She kept me from falling into a pit of utter despair, and I fell asleep on her tear-stained shoulder sometime before dawn, exhausted in mind, body, and spirit.

I jolted awake suddenly, sitting bolt upright in bed with a shuddering intake of breath. A need to scream that I barely suppressed was my only thought. My body was coated with sweat and my mind was blank. I looked around disoriented, unaware of where or even who I was. My surroundings were alien to me, but then I saw Jennifer, concern for me radiating from her eyes, and my life returned to me, my memory unlocked by this beautiful face that meant so much to me. And then the reality of my brother’s death settled on me like a leaden shroud. I had been awakened by one of my frequent nightmares, but I could remember nothing about it now.

My sudden motion had awakened Jennifer and she was watching me. She

placed her hand on my shoulder and pulled me down to lie beside her. She wrapped herself around me and held me close as a clam while a chill caused me to shiver. I lay still, my eyes staring unfocused at the ceiling as my breath and heart rate slowed down from marathon speeds. I belatedly returned her embrace, rolling over to face her. She wrapped her legs more tightly around mine and squeezed as I pressed her against me with desperate intensity, the one thing solid I could grasp onto in my grief.

I relaxed my hug and looked again at her perfect face. Sympathy and compassion radiated from her so heavily it was like heat waves from desert blacktop. I kissed the tip of her nose, flashing her a feeble smile. I moved to get out of bed, and then remembered that she didn't drink coffee, and only kept it around for me.

"Do you have any coffee left?" I asked.

"Lie still, baby. I'll make you some."

She patted me on the chest and climbed over me, and I stared at her naked ass when she bent over to pick up her silk robe from the floor. She put it on, but didn't tie it closed and she turned around to smile at me before she closed the bedroom door behind her. I took advantage of her generosity for a moment, lying still as she had commanded. Then I got out of bed and went to take a morning piss. I didn't bother to get dressed.

When Jennifer came back I was sitting on the edge of the bed with my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. My mind could just not grasp reality. The logical side of my brain knew that my only brother had been murdered, but emotion has always ruled my actions, not logic, and I was emotionally numb. The brutal permanency of this reality had yet to make an impact deep enough to sink in.

I accepted the steaming mug she offered me with trembling hands, silently thanking her with a look. The hot cup touched my lip and the coffee singed its way down my throat. It also managed to cut through a layer of the fog that settled on my brain, so I took another smaller sip. It brought me a little closer to reality. I glanced around for my cigarettes and spotted them beside the alarm clock. It was

9.37 AM. Soon I would have to make the long drive home to my brother's funeral.

I finished my second cigarette and drained the last coffee from my mug before Jennifer led me to the bathroom. I followed along like a mindless automaton. Jennifer and I always showered together, a playful event that today felt like a formal ritual. The warm water and her gentle touch helped to lift another veil of fog from my mind, yet I was still detached as I washed her back and held her gently under the soothing water.

The drive back home was a grim obstacle to me, like a long walk to the executioner's block, and I could not stand the thought of facing it alone. A thousand times my lips were on the verge of asking sweet Jenny to come with me to drive back the isolation, but no matter how much I needed her, I had to consider the fact that she had a life separate from me with a baby on the way. No matter that I believed that her baby was mine, for I knew that she had managed to convince her husband that it was his offspring growing inside her. How could she tell Jeff that she was going out of town without revealing her relationship to me? And how could she get excused from work? It would be the same as asking her to choose once and for all between stability, her job, and a family life with Jeff versus an unforeseeable future with me.

In my vulnerable state I could not make her choose right then, for if she chose Jeff over me the rejection would crush me, break my spirit and leave me shattered and worthless. A hollow shell of a man with death a comforting release from my pain. So I could not bring myself to ask her to accompany me. I reluctantly pulled myself away from her and forced myself to make that long drive home alone.

The trip home and the funeral passed by in a blur. My nightmares were occurring at a rate of two or three a night, and I could not remember what it was like to get a good night's sleep. I think I was not quite sane at that point. I stayed in West Virginia longer than I should have, letting the days drag on as I made peace with my father. But what I really needed was Jennifer beside me.

Jennifer was faced with a hard decision. There were two men in her life, and she was in love with both of us. But the most important thing to Jennifer was

not who was the biological father of her baby, but who would be the better provider. She was faced with the necessity of saying good-bye to one of us, for she could not keep up her double life indefinitely, and I realized that her affair with me might have started out as a plan to get pregnant. She wanted a baby more than anything, she had admitted to me once in an unguarded moment, and I began to suspect that I had been to her at first nothing more than a sperm donor. She had never meant to fall in love with me. She had intended to use me and then toss me aside when I had given her the baby she wanted, but she was not as cold-hearted as she thought she could be. I had touched her heart and now she was torn between her husband and her lover.

Jenny chose Jeff while I was out of town. She couldn't bring herself to tell me, so she stopped taking my calls. And then Jeff started answering her phone. I knew then that we were through, but I needed to hear it from her sweet lips, that closure thing that women complain about. So I drove back to Nashville.

I tied up all my loose ends before I went to see her. I rented a U-haul, cleaned out my apartment, putting off the dreaded moment as long as I could stand to. Finally I had to get it over with. I needed to see her one last time, even though I had a good idea what was going to happen.

I went to the guitar factory and parked my car behind a van so that I had a good view of her red Celica Supra while remaining out of sight. She eventually came out and headed for her car and I walked up behind her as she unlocked her door. I was probably about to scare the shit out of her, sneaking up on her like this, so I decided to give her a little warning.

"Jenn!" I called, before I got too close. I saw her jump and then freeze in place before she turned to face me. I saw the stunned look on her face give way to a look of resignation and I knew what she was thinking. This is it; you've got to tell him. "Can we talk?" I walked up to her, probably too close for her comfort, but not close enough to suit me.

She sounded very weary, when she answered, "Sure, Mike, hop in."

She sat down in the driver's seat and unlocked the passenger door. I got in, turning in the seat of her little sports car to face her. I looked her over, wanting

to remember her as she was at this very moment. She was four months pregnant, according to what she had told me, but it was only beginning to show. It made her look even more beautiful to me. This was an awkward situation, and the silence dragged on forever as we stared at each other.

“So, how have you been?” I asked, not knowing what else to say.

She flashed me a mere shadow of the smiles she used to have for me, and then she lowered her eyes. “Fine. Jeff’s been taking really good care of me,” she added, a verbal dagger to my heart. She looked up, and I could see tears in the corners of her eyes, ready to break free and roll down her cheeks.

“Well, as long as you’re happy. That’s all that matters,” I said, and then her tears broke free. I gently brushed them away with my thumbs and she threw herself into my arms.

“Oh, Mike!” she cried, as sobs racked her body. “But I’m not happy. How can I be? No matter what I do, I’m going to lose one of you, and I love you both so much. How could I have let this happen? I wish I could die!”

“Shh,” I whispered, in her ear. “You know you don’t want that.”

I simply held her until her tears subsided. I was crying, too, but I had to be strong for her and accept her decision, as I had promised her I would, even though it was ripping me to shreds. She dug a tissue out of her purse and I wiped away my own tears with the heels of my hands, hoping she wouldn’t notice. I needed to appear stronger than I felt for her sake. I flashed her the most charming smile I could muster. Anything I said at that moment would sound sarcastic and bitter, but I had to say something.

“Well, you know what’s best for you, and if I’m not it, then I’m glad you have someone else to take care of you...” Then my emotions took control, as they always do, and the desperation I felt crept into my voice. I grasped her hands and pressed them urgently to my chest, staring into her glistening eyes. “God, Jenny, I would sacrifice anything for you. I would lay down my life for you, but letting you go is the biggest sacrifice I could ever face. I want to be with you! I want us to grow old together, to hold hands on the porch, watching our grandkids play in the front yard! I know that’s my baby growing in your belly. Please, Jenny,

go away with me. We could start a brand new life far away from Jeff and I would love you forever, and we could be together..."

But I could tell by the look on her face that I had said too much, so I let go my desperate grip on her hands and leaned back. She placed her hand on my knee and looked at me, gathering her thoughts, absorbing the barrage I had just hit her with. Then she spoke.

"And just where would we go, Mike?" She was crying again, but this time her tears were for me.

"I don't know," I replied. "Wherever you want. I have friends all over the country from when I was a Marine. I could get a job anywhere at all. You name it and we're there. I don't care where I'm at, as long as you're there beside me."

"You know that would never work out," she answered. "My life is here with Jeff. You go ahead and start over. Before you know it you'll find somebody else and forget all about me."

I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of this statement. Her hand was still resting on my knee, so I sat up and put my hand on top of it and squeezed it gently.

"I will never forget you...never."

She hugged me, but there was something I had to ask her before I could let her go. "What is it that Jeff has that I don't?"

She was silent for an excruciating moment, and then she replied, "Time."

After dating for five years and being married for four Jeff knew all her secrets and dreams, and they had lived together long enough to get used to each other's odd habits. They had arrived at suitable compromises about mundane things like where to squeeze the toothpaste tube. Jennifer and I had never had a single disagreement, and that scared her. We were too perfect together, and sooner or later there was bound to mess everything up. She was being realistic, and I was projecting a fantasy that couldn't possibly come true, because there is no such thing as happily ever after. At least that was her opinion.

Once she got that off her chest, I told her, "Well, don't worry about me. I'll be fine as long as Jeff doesn't hurt you."

“He would never hurt me,” she was quick to reply. “It was my own selfishness that made me leave him. He’s a good man and we love each other very much.”

Either Jeff had brainwashed her into believing that crap, or else my theory was right and she had only left him to get herself pregnant. Either way, all I could do was wish her the best and take myself out of the equation. I dug a pen and a piece of paper out of her crowded glove box and wrote down my father’s address and phone number.

“Here,” I said, handing it to her. “No matter where I am, you can get in touch with me through my father. If you ever need me for anything, anything at all, just call me and I’ll be there for you. A few hundred miles won’t matter. I’d drop anything and come back to you in a heartbeat. Promise you’ll call me if you need me.”

She averted her eyes, and placed her hand on mine. “I promise,” she said.

I had done all I could, and there was nothing more to say. I looked into her eyes one last time and then I kissed her forehead. I opened the passenger door.

“Good-bye, Jennifer...good-bye.”

Then I stepped out of her car and walked out of her life. I did not look back, no matter how bad I wanted to turn around and see her one last time.

Once I reached Murfreesboro I flew straight to Jennifer’s house. She had been on my mind while I was starving myself, and I had indulged in thoughts of what my life would have been like had she chosen me instead of Jeff. I found her with no trouble and I stared through the window at her.

Sweet Jenny, who could have been the love of my life had she wanted to. Had it been only two years? Time, as measured by clocks and calendars, had become meaningless to me. The days merged into a continual flow of endless nights, undisturbed by the sun. Yet the season of the year reminded me that it had been two years since the last time I saw her, since last I heard her voice...since I had felt her sweet body pressed against mine.

She looked very mundane and unremarkable now, locked deep into her

role as a mother and a wife, more comfortable with her fate than I was with mine. She was stretched out on the couch in a white t-shirt and a pair of green panties, her knees drawn up toward her chest and her eyes glued to the television. The view of her ass and the smooth backs of her thighs stirred fond memories, but it also increased the Thirst in me, the overwhelming lust for blood that governs me.

My view of the room was limited by the curtains and the blinds, so I did not notice the child until it began to cry. Joshua, a boy, I somehow knew; yet I could not explain how this knowledge came to me. Jennifer went to the child, who was on his knees, gripping the edge of the coffee table. I saw Jeff enter the room, asking her some question as she soothed the child. I ignored what they were saying, listening instead to the chorus of their beating hearts.

She shook her head, and Jeff walked up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders in a familiar way. I resisted the urge to scan their emotions, making a conscious effort to keep my mind closed to them. I should be feeling some sort of human emotion. I was deeply in love with this woman once, and I knew that it was my son she was comforting; a living testimony to our love was resting in her arms. And another man stood where I should be, usurping my rightful place, perhaps the catalyst of my ultimate destiny. Yet Jennifer was just another mortal to me now, a potential victim. I should feel jealousy toward her husband, yet I did not. He was no one to me now. I did not envy him, I did not hate him; I merely longed to drain the lifeblood from his veins. And not for a motive like revenge. For no other reason than because he was there, so readily at hand.

I stared through the glass at the crying child, wondering why I felt no love for it. A sudden bloodlust hit me like a physical force, dragging me toward this family. How easy it would be to gain admittance to this household. A simple knock, and most likely Jeff would answer. I could easily convince him or even Jennifer to invite me in, and then I could feast on the entire family, sucking the life from each of them in turn. Still the baby cried as I gazed through the glass, its cries growing more insistent, as if it could sense my presence; somehow feel my irrepressible craving for blood. The crying baby was more than I could stand, and the whole situation was just too bizarre, so I turned away to find less complicated

prey.

Chapter VI

Profit from the fairest period in your life; these golden years of our pleasure are only too few and too brief. If we are so fortunate as to have enjoyed them, delicious memories console and amuse us in our old age. These years lost...and we are racked by bitterest regrets, gnawing remorse cojoins with the sufferings of age and the fatal onset of the grave is all tears and brambles...But have you the madness to hope for immortality?

The Marquis De Sade. Philosophy in the bedroom

Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own. For he is a liar, and the father of it.

John 8:44

Lilith told me that I died, that I am more than re-born...I am re-created. But I remember nothing from the three days of my first Rest; it was as if no time had elapsed, yet my disorientation and the awakening of my new abilities told me that things were different now. I am not sure if my body died at all. It seems possible, and at first I was inclined to believe the traditional theory. But I believe it more likely that I was merely comatose and cataleptic. But the end result is the same. I transmuted into something other than human.

My biggest doubt regarding my death is that I still feel emotions, even if the focus has changed. If I were an undead creature would not my 'soul' have departed my body? And surely its absence would leave me changed in more severe ways. Even if it did depart and then return to this physical form, why can't I recall the incident?

My new abilities give me many powers, and among them is the ability to recall every detail of my life. There are no gaps in my memory of experiences I had while awake and aware, yet I am new at this, and I have not taken the time

to review all the memories stored in my brain. But I am unsure why I cannot recall any of my dreams or their details. I do not dream when I am at Rest, and the dreams I had as a mortal are lost to me. Could this be connected to the three days of lost time from my change? Lilith gave me space and allowed me to sulk, pretending to ignore my melancholy and brooding. But after my trip to Tennessee she decided it was time for me to come to terms with what I had become.

"Why so gloomy, my love?" she asked, as we prepared to go out for the evening.

I sighed as I tucked in my shirt and buttoned my pants. "I don't know." I had too many thoughts nagging me, things that were difficult to put into words, and feelings I was reluctant to admit to her.

"You made a promise to forget your mortal life, or have you forgotten?"

Did she know where I had gone last night? Did she know about Jennifer? I wondered if she was reading my mind. Her mind was totally closed to me, but was mine an open book to her? Was it possible that she had the ability to read my emotions? The idea made me uncomfortable. I needed her to open up to me, to tell me who she was, what her life had been like before she had become Lilith, a self-proclaimed 'Queen of Darkness'.

"Tell me, Marie," I said, emphasizing the name I had first known her by. "Were you ever just a normal woman? With normal dreams and desires, with human hopes and mortal fears? Or have you always been a cold-hearted predator, a blood-sucking fucking vampire!" My voice got louder, until I shouted the last word.

"Samael, please," she said, in a soothing tone. "Vampire is such an ugly word; it does not become us."

"My name is Mike, goddammit!" I shouted, cutting her off. "Answer me. Who are you? What are you? What the fuck have you turned me into?"

Her countenance darkened, but she immediately regained her composure. "You certainly are full of questions tonight," she said, crossing her arms. "Very well. You are the inquisitor, and I shall submit to your inquisition." She sat down, crossing her legs and adjusting her dress. "Just promise you won't stretch me on

the rack. I rather like the way my clothes fit, and this is such a lovely dress.”

Her flippancy disarmed my anger; I felt my rage subsiding in spite of myself. I scowled at her for as long as I could, but her whimsical expression forced me to give her a lopsided grin.

“You are impossible,” I said, running my fingers through my hair.

“Au contraire, my love,” she said. “I am very possible.” She stood abruptly and put her arms around me. “Or could it be that I no longer excite you?”

I gave her a passionate kiss. “You know better than that.”

“So, what is bothering you? After all, you did vow to be Samael, my loyal consort. Do you regret it?”

“No,” I responded, too quickly. I sat down heavily on the edge of the bed clasping my hands together and looking down at the floor. “Well, maybe that was a decision I should have considered before committing myself. In fact, I made a rash and impulsive decision to be with you, but I’m not sure I’m cut out to live like this, Lilith.” I stood up and paced in front of her. “What I mean is that it was all so sudden, so spontaneous. I had friends once, and family. Now it’s just you and me. Don’t get me wrong, I do like being with you, but I’ve given up all possibility of settling down, raising a family. I never thought I wanted those things before, but now that it’s impossible, I’m beginning to think that I might have made a mistake.”

She took my hands and sat me back down on the bed. She sat down beside me, sliding her arm around my waist. “Do I mean so little to you?”

“No!” I replied. “You know I love you. I guess I’m being a fool. You are fantastic, but I can’t help but wonder if I’m missing out on something. I had a girlfriend before I met you, and I went to see her last night. I spied on her through a window. She’s married, and she has a baby. But the baby’s not her husband’s child. It’s mine. I have a son. I know for certain that he is my son, and his name is Joshua. I was never sure before, but after last night I know, somehow.” I looked at her closely, trying to judge her reaction. “I knew she was pregnant, and I asked her to marry me, because I was pretty sure that the baby was mine. At the time I felt like I was making a big sacrifice, giving up my freedom to spend my life with

her. Yet I thought she was worth it. Even though I wasn't ready to get married I wanted to be with her more than anything. And then she dumped me for the man she had left to be with me. And I let her go. I told myself I was being noble, putting her happiness ahead of mine. But if I had been more persistent she would have stayed with me. I gave her up without a fight to retain my precious freedom."

"And now you think that these mundane things, a wife and a son, would make you happy? You are deluding yourself." She got a little terse with me, standing and looking down on me like a mother scolding an unruly child. "Be realistic, Samael. Look at us. Look at yourself. We are immortals. She will soon grow old and frail; her youthful beauty will fade and she will die like a wilting flower. And your son. All too soon he shall join her in the grave. Yet we shall endure. Ageless, immune to the ravages of time. Our strength and beauty shall not fade, our minds will not shrivel. Time is the enemy of humankind. Look at me, Samael. Am I not beautiful?" She turned gracefully, displaying her lovely figure.

"Of course you are," I replied. "And you know it."

I am three hundred and thirty-two years old, my love. I have lived through three centuries, and I do not age. Time only increases my power and knowledge." I was stunned, yet at the same time I was not truly surprised. It was not difficult to believe that she was three centuries old.

"Samael, dear, you are making excellent progress, and you have already learned many of the skills you need to survive. But you must realize your own superiority to be content. We have the one thing that all people would give anything for. Immortality!" I didn't agree with that, but she was on a roll. "But more than that, we possess an abundance of all the qualities most admirable in humans: beauty, strength, wisdom. Do you not agree that we are gods?"

"Technically, I suppose we do meet the qualifications for the job," I said, with a grin. "But just because we measure up to some vague standard doesn't mean we are 'deities'. You need worshippers to be a god. And no one in their right mind would worship the likes of us."

"Ah, but you are wrong," she cried. "There are thousands of people just

waiting to worship us. And all we need to do is accept their praise and their blood. We need not even pretend to answer their prayers; they will believe because they desperately want to believe!”

She sounded a maniacal, but for all I knew she was teasing me. “All right,” I said, “you’ve made your point. We are superior, and mortality is for losers.” I wasn’t feeling very superior, but then again I didn’t have three centuries’ of experience to build my confidence. “Are you really three hundred years old?”

“Three hundred and thirty-two, yes,” she corrected.

“Where were you born?”

“What does it matter?” she replied.

“Because I want to know,” I said. “I don’t know who you really are. I don’t know where you came from; I don’t know anything about your past. How long have you been like this? Who gave you this power?”

She sighed, with a hint of melodrama. “More questions. You are the most inquisitive bastard I have ever met.” I didn’t know whether to be pleased or offended by this remark. “Very well. You shall have your answers. But it will be easier to show you than to try to explain my past.” She sat down beside me again, taking my hands in hers. “There are still some things you must learn about yourself before you can learn about me. You need to master your abilities, and there are talents you possess which you are not aware of yet. You still have much to learn, and your education is truly just beginning.” She placed a hand on my cheek, directing me to meet her gaze. “Your mental control is severely lacking. You still project your emotions like a child.” She patted me on the knee. “It is time I introduced you to some of your peers. Just don’t be too disappointed if you find them poor company.” She paused again, composing her thoughts. “But you must show complete self-control in their presence. You must close off your mind, seal away your thoughts and emotions. You already know how to do this, but you display an appalling sense of security around me, completely letting down your guard too often. You must make an effort to shut out the probing tendrils of others, as well as keeping your thoughts from being so openly projected.”

My mind was suddenly flooded with images of Jennifer, mental pictures of her flashing by in rapid succession, smothering all other thought. With an effort I shut them off.

“How did you do that?” I demanded, leaping across the room to get away from her. I knew that Lilith was responsible. This was proof that she was picking apart my mind, and I was infuriated, by her invasion and by my own defenselessness.

“Those are just a few of the images you have projected to me tonight,” she answered, calmly. “I merely focused them and directed them back at you.” Frustration and rage were welling inside me. “Do not be angry, my love. I am flattered that you give me such ready access to your innermost thoughts. But I needed to demonstrate to you how dangerous this can be. Others could easily take advantage of your fears and your desires, using them to manipulate you.”

“Just as you have?” I replied.

My fists were clenched tightly at my sides. I could have strangled her, if she hadn’t made me feel so utterly helpless. I felt used and violated, believing that she had toyed with my mind from the beginning. We stared at each other from across the room for an eternity. I felt her mind reach out to mine, attempting to soothe me, but I shrugged her off with little effort. Then she finally spoke.

“You see? I knew you could do it. I know this was a painful lesson, but is it not better to have learned it from me than to have learned it the hard way? No matter what you think, I have never manipulated you. You chose to be with me of your own free will; I never once influenced your decisions. My defenses are down; see for yourself.”

I scanned her emotions. In one respect I didn’t want to, yet such an open invitation was too tempting to resist. Her feelings toward me were hard for me to decipher, yet I did get the impression that she was telling the truth, at least about never having manipulated my mind. I still did not like the idea that she knew my every thought, but it was my own fault. It was true that I had never made a conscious effort to conceal my thoughts from her. I had left myself wide open, like playing poker with my cards face up on the table. When you show your hand

you can expect someone to look at it. I vowed that I would never do so again.

I calmed down, and The Thirst made it easy for me to put the whole matter behind me. I was ready to hunt, even grateful for my bloodlust. But Lilith was not finished with our conversation. She took me in her arms, and I subjected myself impatiently to her attempts to soothe my wounded ego.

"I have a confession to make, my darling child and lover," she whispered, in my ear. "You are very special to me, for you are my crowning achievement, my masterpiece. I have created children before, but you and I are unique, for we have the one ability that all others like us would stop at nothing to possess."

I stepped back and looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"As my creation and my consort you have strengths and abilities that exceed those of others," she replied, "and their limitations will not apply to you. And foremost among those limitations is our one very special talent. Sex! The ritualistic and sexual nature of our sharing of the blood gave you this ability, and not a single one of our kind possess it except for we two." Her eyes were alight with a triumphant gleam.

"Do you mean to tell me that we are the only two vampires in the world who can have sex?"

"Yes, but I told you not to use that word," she said.

"Vampire? Why not? It's what we are, isn't it?"

"No," she said, with authority. "We are nothing like the disgusting creatures inferred by that hateful word. If the title of deity makes you uncomfortable, then refer to us as immortals."

"My other subjects would be infuriated to find out about your special talent," she continued, "for they believe it a part of their curse that they cannot experience sex; an even trade for the ecstasy of the blood. You would be anathema to them, an abomination to be envied and hated. Their jealousy would drive them to seek your destruction, for they are a vengeful lot. Therefore you must keep your sexual prowess a secret from our kind when you meet them."

"But that makes no sense," I said. "Why is it that you can give this ability to me when others are impotent? And how did you get this gift?"

“Even I do not have all the answers. That is one mystery I cannot explain.”

‘Cannot, or will not?’ was the thought that crossed my mind. I knew she was hiding something, and she realized I knew. Her eyes fluttered and dropped, and she continued.

“There is One who could tell you, if He so desires, but you must take his every word with a pinch of salt, and realize that even the most logical explanations are not always the entire truth.” Her gaze settled upon me. “You shall meet Him soon, but not until you are ready.” She paused, leaving me wondering what she meant with all these mysterious hints. “I do not know why others like us are impotent, but I do know why you and I are not. Yet this is one of the many things you must see for yourself; I can only show you, for if I tried to explain it you would not believe me.”

Coming from her that could be considered a straightforward answer. Hell, it even held some hint of imminent resolution. Perhaps she truly would show me, perhaps even soon, but not until she was ready. I was tired of secrets and half-revealed mysteries. My mind was reeling from all the things Lilith had left unsaid. I needed time to digest the information she had given me, and I needed blood to calm me.

We hunted together, and for once Lilith forsook her games in favor of immediate gratification. With our Thirst satiated, she informed me that it was time for us to journey back to the Old World. I was proud of my ability to soar across the heavens, but Lilith shamed me by taking me under her arm and guiding us upward at an astonishing velocity. In moments we were streaking through the very exosphere and across the North Atlantic like a Siamese comet, the horizon becoming a visible arc ahead of us. No mortal could have survived such a flight. The air was sucked from my lungs and the cold was deep enough to penetrate even my immortal flesh. Yet I ignored the chill and near vacuum, thrilled as I was by our outrageous altitude and velocity.

My attention was soon captured by the sight of Europe stretched out below us, city lights a pale imitation of the stars above. She slowed down and brought us closer to the earth, yet we did not land. Instead she steered us to a

frozen area above the North Sea. We finally came down on a tiny island; nothing more than a bleak mountain encased in snow and ice, jutting upwards like the fin of a giant, stone fish in a frozen sea. We assumed ethereal form and passed through a lava tube in the side of the mountain.

We descended along a twisting, narrow passage for what felt like miles, until we entered a carved antechamber. The stone was damp here, and had been for some time as the long-dormant volcano was heated by latent geothermic activity. The temperature had leveled off at a comfortable degree soon after our entrance. There were delicately formed yet disturbing images carved into the walls, while two rows of slender, undecorated stone columns led toward a pair of sealed stone doors at the far end of the room, each with a great rusted iron ring set in its center. A portal to an unknown world. It appeared to have been untouched for centuries. I hesitated to ask Lilith what we were doing here for I realized I would find out soon. I had a hunch that I wouldn't like her answer.

I stood back and watched as Lilith pulled open one of the massive stone doors, a feat that six strong men could have bragged about. A wave of trapped air rolled past me, laced with subtle aromas my mortal senses would not have been able to decipher, but now to me they were scent grenades exploding on my olfactory nerves. Foremost was the sickly sweet smell of burnt flesh and the stench of burnt hair underscored by dog shit and pig wallow, and a spectrum of offensive odors I associated with breeding animals in close quarters. I made a conscious effort to ignore the various odors as I stepped through the door behind Lilith.

The huge stone doors were cut at a forty-five degree angle along the vertical edges where they met, allowing them to form a nearly airtight seal on the triangular iron column they rested against. Great iron brackets were bolted to the backsides of the doors and a massive iron bar-rectangular in shape and probably weighing nearly a ton-could seal this entrance most effectively, yet it stood rusting in the corner. The high stone corridor stretching before us was unlit, but a faint source of light leaked in from an intersection ahead, giving ample light for

two such as we.

Before we could turn and close the door I heard a scrabbling sound ahead of us, the clicking of many claws on stone, and I looked to see charging towards us nine massive hounds. They glowed a ghostly white in the pale gloom, with red eyes burning like windows into Hell. I stood my ground calmly, silently. I had never met a dog I could not befriend, or at least dominate, no matter how aggressive. But I had never encountered dogs such as these. They charged forward in eerie silence, fully intent on rending us limb from limb and devouring the pieces, but Lilith halted them with a single sharp word, freezing them in place a mere foot in front of us. Another word from Lilith and the dogs made obeisance, lowering their heads to the ground and stretching their front paws towards her, tails tucked against their genitals. I studied them, trying to determine the breed, but I had never seen anything similar. They were all identical shorthaired albinos, the size of Great Danes yet much thicker, with a head that resembled something between a Bull Mastiff and a Rottweiler with unclipped, pointed red ears. Broad backs, deep chests, powerful necks, and overly large paws rounded out the picture.

“Enough!” Lilith commanded, and they glared at me with hate-filled eyes.

Such eyes. I saw uncanny intelligence there, and more fury and raw hatred and bloodlust projected at me than I would have believed possible from an animal. It takes a human intelligence to hate so deeply and without cause.

“Lead us to your master,” Lilith said, and they growled at me in chorus, showing gleaming wet fangs as they turned and padded back in the direction from which they had come.

We followed them toward the source of the light, turning left at the intersection into a hallway lit with candles. These candles were the source of the burnt-flesh odor, for as I passed them I could smell that the wicks were interwoven with human hair and that the candles themselves were partly made from animal matter. Antique oil paintings lined the walls of this rough stone corridor, and I stopped in front of a particular work that practically jumped off the wall and grabbed me. It was my lover, Lilith, with that suggestive grin I knew so

well, sitting on a windowsill with her back to a lovely garden bathed in radiant sunlight. Her dress and jewelry were stunning, the height of fashion in France before Marie-Antoinette fell to the guillotine. I glanced at the signature on this breathtaking work of art, but it was nothing more than an illegible scribble. My eyes were drawn back to the face captured perfectly on canvas centuries before I was born. I realized I was touching the oils, feeling the texture of the brush strokes and quickly snatched my hand away lest I inadvertently damage it without noticing that I had approached so close.

"It is a good likeness, is it not?" I heard Lilith whisper, and I nodded dumbly without taking my eyes from the portrait.

"This really is you, isn't it?" I asked, stating the obvious. "When was this done? And by who?"

Her indulgent grin gave way to an expression of thoughtful introspection. "This was done at the Chateau de Marzan in 1732 by a dear friend, the very one you are about to meet. He calls himself Anshar."

"Was he your lover?" I asked, feeling a slight amount of jealousy.

It seemed to me that only a lover could so perfectly capture someone's image on canvas. Lilith smiled and kissed me, placing her hands on my ass and pulling me close. When she broke the kiss, she looked at me.

"We tried, but his tastes ran in...other directions." She pranced down the corridor toward the pack of dogs that were waiting on us. "Come. And meet him for yourself," she called, over her shoulder and I followed after her with the same kind of obedience displayed by the dogs.

We came to a curtained doorway and the dogs sat in a semi-circle facing it. Lilith parted the curtains and we stepped into a dining room decorated like 18th Century France, although the room was actually a square cavern carved from the stone with a massive rectangular wooden table as the centerpiece. There were twelve high-backed wooden chairs on each side and one at each end, but only half of them were occupied.

Seated around the table were twelve young boys dressed in rags, ranging in age from perhaps fourteen down to about three years old. Each of them was

pale and blonde with the same vacant look of dreadful resignation as they watched the scene being enacted at the head of that long table; a sight that blasted my sensibilities to the point of murderous outrage. At the head of the table was a man partially dressed in period clothing suitable to one of the portraits lining the hallway, but his once-fine clothes were tattered and worn. The man was slight of build, 5' 3" or so and very slender. He looked to be middle-aged, and was wearing a ridiculous curled wig, powdered white to match his face. Standing stiff as a board beside him was yet another young boy. Pale, blonde and fragile-looking like the rest with one arm outstretched grasped firmly in the hands of the vampire who had just bitten the boy's wrist.

Every detail of that scene burned into my mind. Although I would not analyze those details until much later, I noticed the scent of stew that filled the bowls of each child; a mixture of mushrooms, vegetables and various spices, and something that smelled like pork. But peripheral details did not concern me at that moment. I was fixed on the young boy, the only one of the crowd wearing decent clothing, and the vampire who was about to seal the bite-marks on that boy's wrist. I had never seen anything so disgusting in my life. I was outraged at this abomination, and I took a step towards him with every intention of snapping his degenerate neck. But Lilith read my intentions, for she gripped my arm firmly.

"Remember. We are guests in his home."

This alone would not have stopped me, but a command from Lilith would, just as surely as she had stopped those ghostly hellhounds. Apparently this scene between Lilith and I attracted the notice of our host for he stood up, thrusting the young boy roughly away from him. A flicker of outrage crossed his face before he recognized Lilith, to be replaced by a mixture of fawning, hopefulness, dread and resignation.

"Ah! Lilith," he said, attempting to adjust his tattered outfit hastily as he came to grovel at her feet. "Have you finally come to destroy me? After all this time?" He gave her a pleading look as he stared up at her on his knees with his hands clasped before her, but I could not tell if he was begging for his life or for death.

“Far from it, you silly wretch,” Lilith said, kicking him playfully in the ribs, a gentle tap that made him fall flat on his ass. “I merely brought someone to meet you.”

Anshar glanced up at me, perhaps noticing my presence for the first time. “Forgive me, good sir,” he said, as he stood and affected a lisp, which I found amusing, although I am sure he considered it sophisticated. He gave me his most courtly bow. “For my failure to greet you properly, as well as for any display which may have been offensive to your obviously well-groomed tastes, I apologize most humbly.” He paused, casting a glance at Lilith. “But as you obviously know from the company you keep, I was not expecting visitors, and must ask that you give me a chance to receive you properly as a gentleman should.”

He bowed again, and I looked to Lilith for my cue. She nodded, and even though I thoroughly detested the creature, I said, “Very well.”

“Superb!” he cried, clapping his hands together. “Lilith, may I ask you to escort...my guest...to the reception hall so that we may be formally introduced?”

“I shall take him to the library,” she replied, grinning at me. “You can be introduced there just as well.”

“As you say.”

Again Anshar bowed deeply to Lilith, taking several steps backward before turning to stalk away. For one brief instant he made eye contact with me, and that seemed accidental. Lilith led me from the room, and I stopped her in the hallway.

“This is one of your dear friends?” I asked. I despised this abomination, this pedophile, to the core of my very soul.

“No. He was once one of my dear friends, but now he is someone else. I brought you here to meet the man I once knew, but the centuries have changed us. The man I want you to meet is inside, however, if you can find him.”

“But why should I bother? The twisted pervert I just saw deserves nothing short of death, and if I had a choice I would make sure it was neither quick nor painless. Like, anally raped to death with a red-hot steel rod, for instance. Where

did he get those children?"

She looked at me with a mixture of amusement at my naiveté. "Where do you think? He steals them, of course. As young as possible. He maintains their number at thirteen so he may feed on them without the need to hunt otherwise. And when they reach an age at which they no longer appeal to him, he drains them dry and feeds the bodies to his youngsters as a 'special treat'."

"And you allow this to continue?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"The children! Don't you have any sympathy for them?"

"They are mortal and expendable. What Anshar does is his own business. He has become an eccentric and introverted recluse. I wager that we are the first adults he has spoken to in decades."

"Why on earth did you bring me here?" If she was going to allow this crime against nature to continue, I wanted no part of it.

"It is time that you meet more of our kind, and Anshar seemed like a good place to begin. You are so interested in my past, and he is a part of it."

She led me to a small cluttered room filled with books. I browsed through them, and discovered that most of them were hand-written journals containing detailed accounts of breeding experiments. Anshar had spent the past two hundred years refining and perfecting his own breed of dog. He called them Nachtjager (German for night hunter), as the base stock had been a pair of albino German Rottweilers with a variety of other breeds introduced later. The name didn't seem very original to me. I think I would have called them silent ghosts after seeing the way they attacked without barking. He gave them each a taste of his immortal blood as pups, which made them cunning and bloodthirsty, and instilled in them a taste for vampiric flesh. This explained their hatred for me for he bred them in part as some small measure of protection from other vampires. Yet it raised a new mystery. Why could Lilith control them at will?

Anshar entered the room as I was pondering this. He had changed into a more modern suit: late 19th Century brown woolen business suit complete with a ridiculous brown derby. It was probably the most modern suit he owned. Without

the wig I saw that his hair was brown and cropped close. As he stepped into the room Lilith spoke, as if our previous encounter had never happened.

“Anshar, my dear, I would like you to meet my new companion, Samael.”

“A pleasure, Samael,” Anshar said, shaking my hand, then he stretched up to kiss me on either cheek. This was his custom, not mine, so I endured it for politeness’ sake.

“Anshar,” Lilith said, “Samael is newly-born and full of questions. I would ask that you entertain him for I have urgent business to attend to.” She stepped close to me, placing a hand on my shoulder as she projected a private message into my mind. *I shall not leave you alone with him overlong, so promise me you will behave yourself and be the perfect gentleman and proper guest.*

I’ll try, I responded, making my first attempt at this type of mental projection. I found it simple enough to do, although focusing it for Lilith’s mind alone was much more difficult.

I know how you feel about his passions; just promise me you will overlook this and become acquainted with the other aspects of his personality. Pretend you never saw what we interrupted earlier.

I gave in, and Lilith left me alone with Anshar. We sat across from each other at his desk. He was fidgety and nervous, straightening and stacking in an effort to clear the clutter between us. I thought about Lilith. She was treating me less like a lover and more like a pet or an exceptionally stupid child. She came and went as she pleased, and when she bothered to give me an explanation, I could never be sure she was telling me the truth. But this was only a small example of the overall inequality in our relationship. I wondered where she was going, and when she would return. Thinking of Lilith gave me a way to break the ice with my host.

“I was admiring a painting of Lilith, and she told me that you were the artist.”

He seemed shocked that I had spoken, and somewhat embarrassed. He nearly blushed. Looking down at his lap he fidgeted with his clothing, fingers flying around wildly like trapped and frightened birds.

“Yes, indeed, I did paint that portrait of her so long ago, yes, did I not? And you...admired it, did you say?” He looked at me expectantly, brimming over with a need for praise.

“It was more than a perfect likeness, it was a true masterpiece,” I replied. I did not like him, but I had to respect such talent. “I am no art critic, but I think you must be a genius with a brush the way you captured the very essence of her personality in a single expressive smile.” Anshar giggled like a schoolgirl daintily placing his delicate, slender fingers over his lips. “Do you still paint?”

Anshar sighed heavily, and leaned toward me. “No. I found my nocturnal lifestyle ill-suited for such artistic expression, and soon became dissatisfied with each attempt to capture something on canvas. After I was reborn, the world seemed too complex to be rendered in simple pigments, no matter how subtly I mixed them. Instead I redirected my creativity into the breeding of dogs.”

These words struck a nerve in me, for I had recently experienced a similar dissatisfaction with my own choice of artistic self-expression: music. I vowed that I would not let this happen to me, to abandon my art as obsolete. It was a part of me, and if I let that part die, how long would it be until I degenerated into an abomination against humanity? I could not see myself becoming like Anshar, but I did not want to become callous like Lilith, either. I realized that Anshar was chatting about his dogs, but I already knew all I wanted to on this subject, so I pretended to listen until he said something that again caught my attention.

“The Ancient Egyptians were right to leave the heart in the mummy, for it is the core of man’s physical being, and a fitting symbol of our ties to the physical world. The heart controls man’s emotional responses to the material world and the physical needs of the body, while the mind exerts intellectual control, attempting to bind the needs of the heart to the rational world.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?” I interrupted. He had shifted gears abruptly, and I totally missed his point.

“My dear fellow, I am trying to explain my theories on insanity. I believe that insanity lurks just below the surface in everyone, easily awakened if heart controls motivation, for desire leads too easily to distraction from wisdom and

knowledge, causing one to abandon rational thought for emotional release. Such an imbalance between emotion and intellect leads to insanity.”

“I did not come here to be lectured on insanity by a madman,” I told him. Any amity I had felt towards him based on art was eradicated by this descent into psychobabble.

“Beg pardon. But it has been...a long time since I have attempted conversation with one of my peers. So why are you here?”

This straightforward question was the perfect opening I needed.

“Lilith wanted me to meet you for reasons of her own, but I am here to learn everything I can about Lilith. You have known her for centuries, and I want you to tell me everything you know about her.”

I realized that I had risen from my chair, and found that I had placed my hands on the desk in front of him while I loomed over him in what could be interpreted as a threatening manner. He was leaning away from me as far as his chair would allow. His eyes shifted from side to side, as if he were searching for an escape route. I settled back into my chair and stared at him while he calmed himself.

“Very well,” he said. “I shall tell you all I can. But where should I begin?”

“Pretend I know nothing about her and start at the beginning. Where she was born, and what was she like as a mere mortal.”

Anshar laughed. Once again it was an irritating, high-pitched effeminate giggle that he hid behind his fingertips. “If you can ask me what she was like as a ‘mere mortal’ then you truly do know nothing about her.”

“So enlighten me,” I snapped.

He cleared his throat and composed himself briefly. “Lilith was never truly mortal. She was born on the sixth of June in the year of their Lord sixteen-hundred and sixty-six in the French province of Bresse. Her mother was high priestess of a witches’ coven, and her father was a demon summoned from the pits of Hell. For all I know he was the very Devil himself.”

“She told you this?” I interrupted.

“Indeed.”

“And you believed her?”

“I had every reason to believe her. She was more than a ‘mere mortal’ even before Janos entered her life.”

“And Janos was...” I prompted.

“Janos was the one who created her.”

“You mean he was the vampire who turned her into a vampire?” I clarified, and he shot a disgusted look at me, as if I had just whipped out my dick and pissed on his floor. Apparently he disliked the word ‘vampire’ as much as Lilith did.

“I despise the negative connotations associated with that word,” Anshar informed me.

“Never mind,” I said. “Why did you believe she was more than mortal?”

“I knew Lilith from the time I was a small child. She was an acquaintance of my uncle Aldonce, and she went by the name of Marie-Constance Quesnet.” I grinned at mention of the name she had used when I first met her, causing Anshar to give me a puzzled look. “By the time I painted her portrait in 1732 I was thirty years of age, and by her admission she was sixty-six, yet her appearance had not changed in all those years. She looked younger than I, in fact. And she was stronger than any woman had a right to be, although she kept this fact hidden. She could perform amazing feats of mental manipulation. She enchanted and bewitched several wealthy men, whom she married and then murdered for their inheritances, to finance her extravagant lifestyle.”

This did not surprise me. “So? It does not require a demonic father to seduce a man, or to murder him for that matter.”

“But you were not there,” he replied. “If you had seen what I have seen, you would know. She was more than mortal before she became immortal, yet perversely she had no belief in God, even though her demonic father was proof that God did indeed exist. She was a true libertine in every sense of the word, and if libertines had a queen among them, Lilith would have been she.”

This was no great revelation, either. I knew about libertinage from reading de Sade, and Lilith was still at heart their queen, even though our relationship

was basically monogamous in the strictest sense.

“Okay,” I said. “I have never seen a demon, but before I met Lilith I had never met a vam-, an immortal, either,” I said, correcting myself. “I’ll have to believe what you say is true, that her father was a demon. Only it’s hard to believe in anything I haven’t seen, felt, touched, or tasted for myself. Have you ever seen a demon?”

He repressed a shudder. “I will not answer that question.”

“Very well. Forget I asked. Tell me more about Lilith.”

He was filled with fascinating stories about my lover. He told me of her early exploits in great detail, the men whom she seduced and murdered to obtain her position as a wealthy and titled aristocrat. Her crimes went undiscovered by the authorities, but attracted the attention of an immortal named Janos, who created her in 1745. She was 79 years old, yet appeared to be no more than thirty-five even before she was reborn. Her lifestyle was changed very little after her rebirth, but I could not ask him about her sex life, for Lilith had instructed me not to reveal this ability. It was the French Revolution that forced Lilith to become the nomadic predator she was when the aristocracy fell out of favor in France. I interrupted him at this point for something about his narrative nagged at the back of my mind.

“How is it you are so well-informed about her mortal and her immortal life? When did she fill you in on her secrets?” I asked him.

Anshar tilted his head back, staring at me beneath half-lowered eyelids, a lopsided grin plastered on his face. “Did she not tell you? When I was mortal, we were more than friends; for a time we were lovers. It was Lilith, in fact, who created me.”

The smug look on his face reminded me how badly I wanted to snap his neck. “Indeed she did,” I replied. “But she told me a different story. She said that you tried, but you couldn’t get it up.” I watched his smug look turn into outrage with the utmost satisfaction, but he regained the better part of his composure, managing to look merely sullen. “But she didn’t tell me that she created you.” A sudden inspiration struck me. “Is that why she is able to control your dogs?”

“Yes. It is an aspect of the sharing of the blood, which gives every immortal complete control over their offspring when they wish. Not only their creations, but their creations’ offspring to a lesser degree. Just as we are able to manipulate the minds of mortals, our creators can dominate us, in turn.”

I already knew this on some level, but having it spelled out for me so bluntly was unsettling. I wasn’t sure how often Lilith had used her abilities on me, and now I knew she could continue to do so at will.

“And Lilith created you?” I asked, trying to get my mind off the idea of being a helpless puppet.

“I knew her secret, and we entered into a pact. She needed my help in a certain matter, and in my ignorance I requested that she create me as payment,” he replied, lowering his head and resting his forehead in his hands.

“And you regret this decision?” I asked him softly. A sort of empathy came over me caused by the overwhelming sadness I felt emanating from him.

He tilted his face toward the rough-hewn stone ceiling above. “Ah, Death, where is thy sting?” he replied, tears of blood coursing down his cheeks. “Forgive me, my new-found friend, for I have always had the inclination to wax melancholy, even when I was mortal. I was dissatisfied with my lot in life, and I thought becoming immortal would change that. It has not. I find as many excuses as I ever did to bemoan my existence. The years can weigh heavily on a dissatisfied soul, most heavily when they drag into centuries, but I take what small pleasures I can from my existence.”

He produced a handkerchief from his breast pocket, wiping the blood from his cheeks. I remembered what sort of pleasures he took, and my sympathy shriveled under the heat of my outrage like a snowflake hitting a bonfire. Apparently I did not quite succeed in containing my disgust, for he looked up suddenly, as if I had projected it straight at him.

“I have offended you,” he said stiffly, thrusting his kerchief into his pocket and standing.

I was in an awkward position. I could acknowledge the fact that I believed a child molester deserved nothing less than a slow and painful death, a

statement I felt would have affronted his Old World mentality to the point that he must demand a duel to the death. Yet I had promised Lilith that I would overlook this blasphemy, which meant I owed him an apology. I found myself standing as well, staring down at this despicable monstrosity, uncertain of which course to take. I wanted to kill him every bit as much as I wanted to please Lilith, and so I was torn. The tension between us was strong enough to crank-start a space shuttle as we stared each other down. But the decision was taken from me when Lilith entered the room. I did not hear her, but I felt her presence and she paused in the doorway to absorb the confrontation.

“My most precious darlings, I have returned,” she said, louder than necessary, stepping up behind me and placing a hand upon my shoulder.

She slid her other hand across my waist, pressed her firm body against my back and sucked gently on my earlobe. My outrage and anger subsided to a manageable level and I grinned in spite of myself. I saw that Anshar was looking over my shoulder at Lilith to determine how he should behave. After a brief instant he lowered his eyes and bowed deeply.

“I hope you will forgive me, but I have neglected my responsibilities as overseer of a very complex ecosystem, and must attend to the well-being of my charges.” He stood to his full height to meet Lilith’s gaze. “Feel free to make yourselves at home in my humble domicile, but I must take my leave of you.” Anshar proffered us another deep bow, and then stepped around his desk and headed to the doorway.

“Alas, dear Anshar, I have pressing needs, which require that Samael and I leave at once,” Lilith replied, stopping Anshar in his tracks. “I thank you for your hospitality. And perhaps I will accept your offer at another time. But for now we must depart.”

Anshar strolled back to Lilith, taking her hand and kissing it. “My home is yours, as always, my Queen.” He glanced at me and gave me a stiff bow. “And yours as well, Samael. Farewell, and good fortune.”

He clicked his heels together in a military fashion and walked from the room. Lilith and I followed at a more leisurely pace. She slid her arm around my

waist and I returned the gesture, pulling her close to me. She laid her head on my shoulder and we strolled along sharing a moment of companionship. But I could not leave well enough alone.

“So where have you been?” I asked.

“I had to check up on a trivial matter, nothing to concern yourself with,” she replied, lifting her head from my shoulder. “So what did you think of Anshar?”

“Utterly revolting. He disgusts me on a profound level. I would have killed him if you hadn’t stopped me, but we had an interesting talk.”

“What did you talk about?”

“You,” I replied. Her face froze into a mask as I grinned at her.

“What about me?” she asked, much too casually.

“He told me some stories about your mortal life that I found hard to believe, and he told me about Janos.”

“What did he tell you about Janos?” she demanded, fiercely gripping both my arms with her great strength.

I tensed, muscles tightening, preventing her fingers from sinking into my flesh. “He was your creator, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, yes,” she replied, letting go of my arm to wave this fact aside. “I could have told you that, if you had bothered to ask.” She pouted; an expression I found every bit as false as her last evasive statement. “But what else did he tell you of Janos?”

There was something important here, I could tell. Anshar knew something she didn’t want me to know, and I was determined to find out what as soon as possible.

“Nothing,” I replied. “I was interested in you, not Janos.”

She studied me intently, but I had learned to shield my mind, for which I was grateful. If she had thought I was lying, I’m sure she could have forced her way past my guard with little effort.

“Very well, she said. “I believe you. But if you are lying I will find out and I most definitely will not be pleased.”

“What are you trying to hide?” I asked. “And why did you leave me alone

with him if you thought he might tell me something you don't want me to know?" We started walking again, and she got that thoughtful expression that I knew so well, trying to decide how big of a lie I would swallow.

"He swore he'd never speak of it, but I do not trust him explicitly. It is a trifling matter, yet something I take no pride in, and at any rate my past is my own, and we have the future together to think of, you and I."

"Oh, please," I said, impatiently. "Getting anything out of you is like pulling teeth. Anshar told me more about your past in one hour than you have since I met you. How am I supposed to spend eternity with someone I don't even know?"

Lilith jumped as if I had poked her in the ribs. And then she laughed. "So what did he tell you?" she asked, running her fingers across my chest and down my taut belly.

"Well, let's see," I said, recalling his every word. I imitated Anshar's effeminate lisp, and said, "Lilith was never truly mortal. She was born on the sixth of June, in the year of their Lord sixteen-hundred and sixty-six, in the French province of Bresse. Her mother was high priestess of a witches' coven and her father was a demon summoned from the pits of Hell. For all I know he was the very Devil himself." She laughed in sheer delight at my impersonation. "So, is it true?"

"Every word of it," she replied, still grinning.

"Your father was a demon," I stated, with skepticism in my tone and expression.

Lilith's face became utterly sincere as she looked into my eyes, the better to drive home her point. "My father is Asmodeus, and he is not merely a demon. He is indeed 'the very Devil himself', better known as Satan, although that is not the name he chooses for himself. I told you before that there is one who could explain all mysteries to you if he so desired, and it was my father of whom I spoke. You shall meet him soon, when I decide you are ready."

I did not know what to say, so I directed our conversation back to Anshar's revelations about her past. She verified everything he had told me, adding her

own details until I got to the subject of her 'creating' Anshar. By this point we were halfway back to the United States, Lilith's preferred hunting grounds, and communicating telepathically. My skill at this was improving.

She informed me that she had created Anshar as a favor for an old friend, not as payment for a favor (one of them was lying, and it was probably my lover, but I could not detect the lie even when inside her mind). She had gone so far as to give Anshar the same opportunity as me to be sexually active as an immortal, but he had failed to achieve orgasm during their final sharing of the blood. I was intimately aware of how intense she was as a lover, and I found it hard to believe that she could fail to arouse anyone, no matter what their sexual preference. I could not feel sorry for him, however, for even the passive molestation of those little boys was beyond endurance. And then Lilith dropped a bombshell on me. She assured me that he finds a way to physically molest them, for she had been skillful enough to give him an erection of sorts; she just hadn't been able to make him cum, and so he never would again.

The thought of Anshar raping his helpless slaves added a new level to my outrage, and I was forced to hide my thoughts from Lilith while I decided how I was going to kill him just as soon as I pried Lilith's secret from him. Lilith knew why I had closed my mind, and tried to mollify me by telling me that Anshar had a very small penis, and so it shouldn't hurt the boys very much. As if that mattered in the least. It was a good thing Anshar was not close at hand or I would have killed him right then, and damn Lilith's secret to the grave with him. But his hour of reckoning would come soon.

My outrage at Lilith was only slightly less than my hatred for Anshar because she allowed this to continue, and so I would not talk to her. She led us to another of her homes in upstate New York, and took me into the library. She walked without hesitation to a shelf and withdrew a set of two volumes. She placed them in my hands.

"You really need to read this." I looked at the title: *Justine, ou les Malheurs de la Vertu* (Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue). The author was not named, and I looked at her for some sort of explanation. "This is the original printing of

Justine, by the Marquis de Sade. It was published anonymously in 1791, the first to see print. You do need to read this if you wish to survive the immortality I have bestowed upon you.”

She was well aware of my foul mood, and so she stalked from the room like the predator she was and left me alone. This was the second time she had recommended something to me to read, and once again it was by the Marquis de Sade. I was intrigued in spite of my mood, and so I sat down and began to read.

I did not finish Justine until the next night for daybreak interrupted me. But I finished instead of joining Lilith in her nightly hunt. This book showed none of the outrageous sense of humor contained in *Philosophy in the Bedroom*. In this work violence and torture were not vehicles for skewed comedy, but rather punishment for Justine’s desire to do the right thing; the horrendous ‘misfortunes’ she was repeatedly subjected to in her vain attempt to retain her ‘virtue’. All Justine wanted was a chance for a normal life as a good person, and for this and every act of kindness she committed she was brutalized in increasingly diabolical ways until her ironic death. As soon as she found refuge from her torments she was struck by lightning, killed by a careless and uncaring act of the very God she so desperately wanted to please.

I could see why Lilith wanted me to read this. Her philosophy was very similar to de Sade’s. He not only believed in survival of the fittest, but that the strong had the right to prey on the weak, and to take whatever pleasures they desired from their victims without limit, and without regret. But unlike de Sade, Lilith was not inclined to give long-winded dissertations in an attempt to convert me to her manner of thinking, and I could only interpret this as a warning. I should either adapt, or I would perish just as surely as Justine.

Chapter VII

The Mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.
What matter where, if I still be the same,
And what I should be, all but less than he
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least
We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence.
Here we may reign secure, and in my choice
To reign is worth ambition though in hell.
Better to reign in hell, than serve in heav'n.
John Milton, Paradise Lost

At Parvati's command, the supreme goddess with the black throat slew the
Danava Daruka, who had been tormenting the overlords of the gods. Her
violence, however, knew no bounds, so the whole world became sick with the
fever of her rage.

The Sanskrit Puranas. The Tandava Dance of Siva

I serve an unholy master, yet it is unclear how much benefit he derives
from my actions. It is easy to see how Lilith and those like her spread evil by
doing evil, although they kill their victims. How does this benefit the Devil? Do the
souls they take end up in Hell with no chance for redemption? This may be the
very reason for the existence of my kind. Yet I do not kill my victims.

The thought that vampires could be real spreads a variety of negative
emotions. This is to his benefit, I am sure. The victims whose lives I touch and
then leave behind relatively unharmed are the ones that aid him the most, I think.
They are the ones who have experienced a forbidden ecstasy and are left with
unfulfilled desires. They are not content with mundane ideals, and this must
surely bring them into his fold. Sooner or later they become his just as surely as if

they were to die at my hands; only they have the added opportunity to corrupt others in their search for a primordial pleasure they have tasted and can no longer find.

After reading Justine I took Lilith's veiled threat to heart and tried to emulate her. We hunted together as before, and played games with our victims luring them with the promise of sex. But in the end the only satisfaction they achieved was the euphoria that perversely is forced upon them by our minds as we drain a portion of their essence. The ecstasy of the blood is a powerful sensation, and this ecstasy is projected back into the minds of our victims so automatically that I did not even notice it was happening for a long time. Yet, as hard as I tried I could not justify our behavior in my heart. I still believed in right and wrong, and even though I could tell myself that what I was doing led to no permanent harm, it still felt wrong. I knew that my victims would awaken the next day and go on with their lives, but what right did I have to steal even a little piece of them?

A full month had passed since I had met Anshar, and although I still intended to kill him I had done nothing but my best to please Lilith, living on a nightly basis with no thought of the future, just as she did. And then something happened that was to change everything, although I did not realize its significance at the time. Lilith and I awoke simultaneously, as we were prone to do, and I was struck with a great revelation.

For the first time since I had become a vampire I had dreamed. I dreamed of Angie, my sweet Angel, whom Lilith had skillfully stolen me from. The details of the dream were chaotic and fuzzy, but I was overwhelmed by a sense of loss. My relationship with Angie had been so blissful. She was my counterpart and my best friend, my true soul mate, and we shared our secrets equally, as lovers should. So different from my relationship with Lilith. My distress must have shown on my face.

"Is something wrong?" Lilith asked, sounding genuinely concerned as she laid a hand on my bare shoulder.

"Do you ever dream?" I asked her.

"Of course," she replied.

"I hadn't. Not since you created me. I thought I would never dream again."

"The mind needs a period of adjustment to cope with being reborn," she informed me. "So what did you dream of?" She ran her fingertips across my shoulder and down my arm, tracing my outline.

"I can't explain it," I lied. "It didn't make any sense. It just shocked me that I had any dream at all, so unexpectedly. So what do you dream about?"

She laughed. "I dream of orgies drenched in blood, where you and I fuck and suck the blood from frenzied victims who want to sacrifice themselves to us."

I felt my eyebrows creeping up as she told me this. The fact that it might actually be true disturbed me, but I decided to believe that she was teasing me. I shook my head and laughed.

"You're even crazier than me," I said, and kissed her before she could take offense at this statement.

She returned my kiss with a passion that was infectious, and soon we were making love like nothing else mattered in the world. My hands caressed her alabaster skin, as smooth as silk yet firm as marble. She returned my caresses with a rough impatience, raking her nails along my back, leaving scratches that healed before they had a chance to bleed. She gripped my shoulders and shoved me hard into the bed, flat on my back, and mounted me with animal aggression, thrusting her pelvis demandingly against mine while she pinned my wrists above my head and nipped at my shoulders and chest with her sharp teeth. She slid her right hand down between us and gripped my cock. But she did not caress me with the gentle reverence of a lover. Instead she tugged, testing its firmness. She found it suitably hard, and guided it inside her pussy, which as always was hotter and wetter than it had a right to be. As soon as she settled herself on my full length she leaned back, tilted her face toward the ceiling, and began throwing herself down on me as hard and as fast as she could. Our bodies slapped together, a staccato rhythm of flesh hitting flesh. I watched her blissfully intent on achieving her own orgasm sinking the nails of her left hand into my chest while she worked frantically at her clitoris with the other hand.

As I looked at her it struck me like a slap to the face that she was using me. Not only the fact that she was using me to achieve an orgasm, but she was in all ways and at all times using me to suit her own pleasures, and possibly to fulfill some hidden agenda I knew nothing about. I further realized that I no longer loved her, if I ever truly had. She had charmed and captivated me with her stunning beauty, but my recent dream reminded me that I found Angel more beautiful by far. On a superficial level they had a similar physical appearance, but I had worshipped every exquisite curve on my sweet Angel's body, was in love with her every individual freckle for its uniqueness, and jealous of her every mole because it was an inseparable part of her, cleaving forever, adding its small measure to the whole of her, with the tenacious and unwavering loyalty I could only hope to give. Lilith had mesmerized me with her mysterious past and cryptic nature, but I had seen below the surface of this charming beauty, and found insatiable arrogance and cruelty. I had seen her callous and whimsically vicious, and her self-centered nature made me realize that she didn't know how to care about anything but herself.

I had been in love before, I knew what love felt like, and what I felt for Lilith was akin to loathing. What I once had with Jennifer in Nashville could have been love, if she had let it, but what I felt for that bright and gentle soul was a love to end all loves. Lilith invoked in me nothing more than a physical attraction, which I could no longer justify. The space of two heartbeats was all it took for this epiphany to sink in, and I felt my erection fade. Thankfully, Lilith achieved her orgasm, so I faked one of my own to avoid an awkward scene.

Lilith wanted to snuggle, and so I held her close returning her tender kisses with a passion I could only feign by memory. Closing my eyes and pretending it was Angel was the only way I could do it, but memories of Angie brought me an emptiness that rivaled the bloodlust trying to overwhelm me. I could take no more. Angie was an anguish from my abandoned past, and it was too late for me to dwell on what I could no longer have. The Thirst was a need that could be readily satisfied, and so I abruptly broke off my embrace with Lilith, sitting up and pushing my hair back from my face.

“I need a drink,” I said, looking down into Lilith’s mischievous eyes. “Real bad.”

She laughed, tossing her head back and slapping my thigh. “And so at last you are growing into your new identity.” If she didn’t own the copyright for the wicked grin she should, for she had perfected it centuries before. “Yet you must wait for a while tonight for I have a surprise in store for you. This is a very special night, and a right of passage. I told you before that we are gods, with willing worshippers ready to sacrifice themselves to us. Tonight I will prove it to you, and you will become a god, indeed. Now go take your bath, and I shall have your clothes laid out for you.”

Lilith scoffed at my habit of bathing daily, for our immortal bodies maintain themselves. Supposedly, I would eventually abandon the practice, but lifelong habits are still hard to break, even after death. I do not need to shave, for my facial hair remains fixed in the perfectly groomed moustache I am so fond of, and my hair remains precisely the length I want it to be. Yet I felt it necessary to wash and comb it before I was ready to go out in public, even though this left it just as it was before. Everyone needs some sort of ritual to ground him to reality, and this was mine.

When I returned to the bedroom I found laid out for me a bizarre costume. Luckily, Lilith was there to help me, or I would have been at a total loss. She dressed me in a red silk outfit embroidered with gold, the clothing of an Aryan prince, a royal figure straight from Hindu mythology. She was dressed like a sexy version of a Wall Street power broker, wearing a charcoal-colored suit with padded shoulder, giving the impression of masculine authority to an otherwise subdued combination of knee-length somber grey skirt above nylons and black high heels. I looked totally out of place next to her.

“Where are you taking me, dressed like this?” I asked, as she decked me out in fine gold jewelry. I rather liked it. I just couldn’t imagine a place where we would fit in.

“We are going to India, my precious morsel, but by way of France. I must take care of a trifling matter in Paris, and then we shall visit a temple in the

Himalayas. I will change at the temple, but for the sake of convenience I have dressed you for the party ahead of us. A friend of mine will keep you company while I attend to business.”

She attended to a lot of business. She was obscenely wealthy, yet did not need the money for anything as far as I could tell. Underlings handled most of her business, yet there were times when she must meet with someone and did not want me involved. Period. At such times she left me alone with her books or my guitars, but now she was beginning to introduce me to her acquaintances.

“Another dear friend?” I asked her. “Is he anything like Anshar?”

“Are you asking me if he molests children?” she responded, hearing the scorn in my voice. “No, he does not. He prefers grown men, even though he cannot truly consummate his lust in the traditional way. Anshar created him as a companion in a moment of loneliness. His name is Fabian, and he was once Anshar’s favorite plaything. Anshar allowed him to live to a ripe old age for one of his boys, about seventeen, before creating him immortal, but then he regretted this impulsive act. Anshar could no longer bear the sight of Fabian, and would have destroyed him, but I protected him.”

“And why would you do such a thing? Surely it wasn’t inspired by your nurturing motherly instinct?”

She laughed. “I had my reasons. And now Fabian is forever indebted to me.”

“And you have Fabian to torment Anshar with,” I added, knowing her inclination to play mind games.

“Perhaps,” she replied, making a final adjustment to my headdress. “You may not like Fabian,” she said, looking me over, “but he will most definitely like you, my adorable prince.”

“Homosexuality doesn’t really offend me any more,” I replied, for I had grown out of the prejudices of my past life, “but it does not appeal to me, either.”

She kissed me, and said, “I know the boundaries of your tastes and desires, and it is all things feminine which excite you. Such a gentle and poetic soul. But I will awaken the predator in you yet.”

She took me to a chateau outside of Paris, a pleasure palace from the Sixteenth Century modernized with electronic surveillance. I detected the presence of four vampiric guards posted on the grounds, and they sensed our approach as well. But I was with Lilith and they did not challenge us. We landed in front of the main entrance and I directed my senses to the interior of the palace. I detected several human servants and one who was like us, and it was to him that she led me.

I'm not sure what I expected; perhaps a clone of Anshar. But what I found was relatively mundane. Fabian was seated comfortably in a well-padded chair by the fireplace, dressed entirely in black: sweater, jeans, a bit of sock showing above leather shoes. He uncrossed his legs as we entered, placing his book on an end table before he stood and bowed.

"My Queen," he said, with loving reverence, kissing Lilith's hand.

It was easy to see why he had once been Anshar's favorite. He radiated a sensuality that I could readily detect, and I am not attracted to men. He possessed none of the limp-wristed, effeminate swishiness I associated with homosexuality, but he was very pretty with delicate features surrounding large blue eyes. His fine blonde hair was pulled back in a tail that hung straight down his back to his waist. He was more than clean-shaven; his smooth cheeks looked as if they had never felt a razor. He was slender, yet solidly built, and if he had taken off his shirt he would have looked like the cover of a romance novel.

"Fabian, I would like you to meet my new companion, Samael," Lilith said.

I extended my hand to him and he gave it a brief, friendly shake. "Pleased to meet you," I said. I half-expected him to kiss my cheeks as Anshar had, but his sensuous red lips parted in a smile that could warm a heart of a stone.

"The pleasure is mine." He pried his eyes away from me and looked at Lilith. "Your companion is gorgeous, Lilith." He looked back at me. "A pity he's not gay."

I didn't know how to respond to that, but if I had still been mortal I think I might have blushed.

"Fabian, please keep Samael company. I must meet with a few of my

lawyers before the feast,” Lilith said, turning to leave after giving me a quick kiss.

“Delighted to,” he replied.

We sat down and talked about trivialities, but I soon opened up to him. For some reason I found him easy to talk to, and there had been no one I could talk to other than Lilith for a while. Before I knew it I had shared my life story with him. Most of it was given telepathically, emotions and memories I projected onto his brain as we gained each other’s trust. In the same manner he shared with me every excruciating moment of his life. Anshar had abducted him (his earliest memory) and molested him, and I shed tears of blood for the sheer weight of injustice, which Fabian no longer felt; instead he buried it under a heavy layer of indifference. His childhood to him did not seem abnormal, for it was the only childhood he knew. I felt his love for Anshar, the only father he had ever known, despite the endless perversities Fabian and his ‘brothers’ had been subjected to.

A wave of empathy engulfed me, and I jumped from my chair to comfort Fabian, crushing him to my breast. Tears of blood flowed down both our cheeks, yet his tears were in response to my sorrow. He had learned to live with what had been done to him in a way that I could not understand. I wished for a way to end the misery he denied existed, yet I could not change the past. All I could do was put an end to the monster, the abomination that had created him.

I kept these thoughts private. Fabian would not thank me for destroying his hated, beloved Anshar for Anshar had truly created him beyond his rebirth. Anshar had always been his father and his god. Fabian grew up in a harem that even Caligula would have found offensive. Young boys who knew nothing of birthdays or other holidays; as for sunshine and summer days, only a few were lucky (or cursed) enough to remember that such things existed. The only celebration they knew was when one of them grew old enough that Anshar no longer found him attractive. After Anshar had bled the unfortunate boy dry, he would order a feast and watch as the younger boys cooked and ate their ‘brother’. Fabian was spared this fate when Anshar impulsively decided that he wanted a companion. Fabian insisted on seeing the outside world. Anshar took him out to hunt, and at first was amused by Fabian’s sense of wonder at

civilization. But when the lure of humanity threatened to seduce his pet away from him, Anshar forbid him to leave their sanctuary, keeping him prisoner by sheer force of will. If not for Lilith's intervention, this conflict would have ended with Anshar destroying Fabian.

I wondered how Fabian would have turned out if he had never been stolen from his parents. Would he still be gay? I doubted it, but then again the question was irrelevant, for he was who he was, and he would have been long-since dead, for he had been immortal since 1822. I was down on one knee in front of Fabian's chair, my arms around him and his head cradled on my shoulder when Lilith returned. She was suddenly behind me, utterly silent even in high heels as she patted my shoulder.

"You cannot have him, Fabian. He is mine," she said, with an audible smile.

This was the perfect statement to shatter our melancholy, and Fabian laughed, smearing the blood on his face with the heels of his hands. "I can dream, can't I?"

"Sorry, Fabian," I said, standing and putting my arm around Lilith, "but you're way too butch for me." It seemed that Lilith had just left, yet my flawless sense of time told me that she had been gone for two hours.

"Just my luck," Fabian said, standing as well. He gripped my free hand in both of his. "Please tell me you have an identical twin. A gay identical twin."

I laughed. "You know I don't."

"Well, I hate to disrupt your bonding," Lilith interjected, "but it is time for us to go. A great feast is in store and you, dear Fabian, are not even dressed for it."

Fabian left us to get ready, and I checked my face to find that my tears had been re-absorbed into my skin. When Fabian returned he was wearing a purple costume similar to mine, with his long blonde hair wrapped up inside a turban. Lilith put an arm around each of us and led us out under the night sky, and we flew together to an ancient temple in a remote region of the Himalayas.

We flew with Lilith's enviable speed, yet I felt that I could come close to matching it with more practice. I did not know where we were going, but I knew

when we were close for there was a swirling column of prayer rising like smoke from a bonfire, emanating from devoted and desperate worshippers, begging for Kali to put an end to their suffering. So much energy was being projected that I should have felt it all the way in France, had I not accustomed myself to shutting out the thoughts of the mortals around me.

We landed in front of the temple and I picked out a single thread from the mass of prayer and examined its source. A young man who had accidentally killed his wife could not endure the overwhelming guilt and sorrow. He begged Kali to free him from this incarnation, believing that by sacrificing himself to the goddess he would redeem a measure of sin from his soul, thereby gaining a better incarnation in the next life. Before I could analyze him further Lilith demanded my attention by speaking my name.

“Samael,” she said, “you can study them later, but now we must enter and await the rest of our coven.”

With that she assumed ethereal form, transforming into a fine mist, and I followed her example, as did Fabian. Together we slipped through locked doors and crept past over 100 desperate worshippers who were intent on their pleas for release from a life too horrible to bear. We seeped into an inner room where we regained our material forms.

Should I explain how I transform into mist? I simply will myself to disincorporate. It is an ability I have as simple as walking, yet how do you describe walking to someone without legs? Walking is a highly complicated action. You tell yourself to do it and it is done. Ethereal form is assumed in the same way. My clothing is attached to me, and encased in my aura or my personal electromagnetic field, if you prefer. A function of the soul that animates each of us, even those such as I. Yet I cannot carry an object with me, not even something as simple as a book; I have tried it. Lilith can, I just haven't figured out how yet. It must be some sort of mental block I have yet to overcome. My rational mind sees it as impossible, therefore I can't do it.

The room we were in was a bedchamber. The ceiling was very high, as were all ceilings in this temple, and the walls were decorated with ancient

weapons: spears and shields, maces and clubs, staves, bows, lances, javelins, daggers and swords; enough weaponry to equip an army of ancient Aryan warriors.

Lilith stripped off her outfit to stand before Fabian and me naked as a needle. As familiar as the sight of her nude form was to me, it still amazed me that she could be so perfectly sensual with such effortless grace. Yet I could not keep my mind from turning to thoughts of my Angel, and how I would gladly trade all this to be back with her again. If the sight of Lilith naked was going to inspire comparison to Angie I could be in serious trouble. Such thoughts were dangerous, as well as pointless, so I studied Fabian's reaction to Lilith as she dressed herself in a tiger skin loincloth, bracelets, bangles, anklets and a ruby-and-diamond studded tiara. Fabian had seen her don this costume many times, and he admired the beauty of her feminine form in a detached sort of way devoid of sexual attraction, the way I might admire the sleek lines of a sports car or the majestic beauty of a waterfall.

Once Lilith was dressed she and Fabian told me the history of the ritual that was about to take place. Lilith had discovered the worship of Kali early in her wandering of the world; an orgiastic revelry of drunken debauchery perfectly in tune with her libertine nature. She invaded the minds of priests, visiting them as they slept and influencing their dreams, so that when she appeared to them in person they readily accepted her as a physical manifestation of the goddess. She demanded a ritual sacrifice to be held each year on the night of December 24th, and lasting until sunrise on the 25th. It suited her sense of humor to celebrate Christmas in such a bloody way. In the past, the victims were gathered by whatever means necessary; some were even kidnapped off the streets. But worship of Kali was now illegal in India, and her victims had to be chosen by her priests, who spent the entire year between feasts going covertly among the people and finding those who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the promise of a better incarnation.

Lilith's coven consisted of 13 members: 12 immortals and her father Asmodeus, the symbolic thirteenth member, who was present in spirit at these

annual sacrifices. It did not take long before the other members of her coven arrived. It was nearly midnight (the witching hour), and they came singly and in groups, immortal blood-drinkers all. First to arrive was a very voluptuous woman with a majestic and sensual sway of her broad hips that reminded me of Jayne Mansfield; a slim-waisted exaggeration of female beauty that seemed larger than life. Although I was willing to bet she could fit perfectly into one of Jayne Mansfield's dresses, curves were all they had in common.

She was of Mediterranean stock with olive skin, wavy dark hair, and large brown eyes that seemed to suck me in like twin black holes. Lilith introduced her as Diana, and she seemed the very embodiment of her namesake: the Roman goddess of hunting and fertility. She embraced me and gave me a lingering kiss, and I was surprised and flattered. I felt her mind touch mine tentatively, so I opened myself to her so she could get a feel for who I was without gaining access to my deepest secrets. She sent me a private message.

"Samael, you darling man, I am called Diana, but just between us you can call me Raquel."

She smiled at me with her wide, generous mouth and I liked her at once. Something about her reminded me of my mother, invoking an instinctive feeling of peace and security, even though I had no idea how much trust she had placed in me by giving me her true name. It was a secret very few knew, not even Lilith. And it carried with it a great deal of power for the true name is a talisman that can be used for good or evil. I did not know it yet, but I had the power to summon her to me at will. Knowledge of an immortal's name can force subjugation on one whose willpower would otherwise be your equal or superior. But this is something I would not find out about until much later. Lilith had trained me to call myself Samael, concealing my birth-name, but she had not told me why.

Next to arrive was Nigel, a British immortal with an aristocratic air of sophistication. He shook my hand, even though I am sure he viewed me as an uncouth and provincial American. Then came Ishtar and Gilgamesh. These two were ancient, far older than Diana, who was nearly three times Lilith's age. Ishtar was tall and slender, but Gilgamesh was huge. He stood six-foot eleven, with the

broad shoulders of an Atlas, massive arms, and legs like tree trunks. His curly beard was cut square across his huge chest, while his dark hair tumbled past his shoulders in oiled ringlets, held away from his face by a gold diadem that encircled a broad forehead. His eyes smoldered beneath shaggy brows, ready to burst into flames of fury as the least provocation. I had never met a more intimidating figure of sheer manhood and unadulterated ferocity held at the point of imminent release. He seemed the ultimate warrior, a man capable of conquering nations single-handedly. Yet, despite his great age and power, he bowed to Lilith as his queen.

Then there was Danatalian, Sabrina, and Jasmine. These three were an inseparable trio. Danatalian was Jamaican, very laid back and quite friendly. Sabrina and Jasmine both worshipped him, and loved each other like sisters. Next was Passion, a beautiful redhead, then Vassago whom Lilith had appointed her Master of Ceremonies. Lilith instructed Vassago to sound the gong outside the doorway signaling that it was time for the ceremony to commence.

Vassago bowed, and said, "As you wish, my Queen, but what about Penatiel?"

"Alas," Lilith said. "Penatiel is late for his own funeral."

Once the gong had sounded, Lilith arranged her coven to stand in a circle and pray to Asmodeus, giving thanks to our Lord and Master for the feast we were about to receive. She placed us like numbers on a clock face; six male, six female, alternating. Lilith stood at the head of the circle, and I stood in the place of honor on her left side. Next to me were Ishtar, then Gilgamesh, Diana, Nigel and Passion (who stood opposite Lilith), then Fabian, Sabrina, Danatalian, Jasmine, and finally Vassago, who stood at Lilith's right side. Lilith spoke the ritualistic words of prayer to Asmodeus and we repeated them. I followed along, not believing that I was praying to anything other than an abstract concept. Lilith claimed Asmodeus to be her literal father, but I could not believe that, or for that matter believe in his existence at all.

When the prayer was done the coven went to the weapons adorning the walls and selected their personal preferences, all but Lilith, Gilgamesh, and me. I

did not select a weapon because I did not want one; Gilgamesh did not because his favorite weapon was himself. None of them needed weapons, for they each had the strength to rend a mortal man limb from limb with their bare hands. Even petite Sabrina, who looked so fragile, could snap a grown man's neck with little effort, and Gilgamesh could squeeze a human head into a mushy pulp with one hand as if it were an over-ripe cantaloupe. Yet the weapons were an expected part of the ritual.

We waited then, allowing the orgy to reach its peak. The orgy itself was the ultimate payment the priests received for organizing it, and they were allowed plenty of time to indulge themselves as the caste system and its rules about statuses did not apply within these walls. Here all were equal. Once Lilith and her coven descended upon the scene, the priests would have to depart in order to avoid becoming victims along with the rest. While we were waiting Penatiel arrived. He apologized to Lilith, claiming that he had been delayed by circumstances beyond his control.

"It is of no consequence," Lilith said, "for as you can see, you have been replaced." She waved her hand in my direction.

"What do you mean?" Penatiel asked, backing away from Lilith.

"Do you remember San Francisco?" Lilith asked him, finally selecting a weapon from the wall.

It was a massive curved sword, a shamshir, and she tested its sharpness with her thumb. She stared down Penatiel from across the room, the embodiment of the huntress intent on her prey.

"San Francisco?" Penatiel echoed, confusion blooming on his face. Then I saw him stiffen. "Do you mean that little incident with Abacta?" He took a tentative step forward, followed by three angry strides as confusion gave way to outrage. "That was over 50 years ago! And I long since apologized for that slip of the tongue!"

Penatiel stood his ground as Lilith approached him. The rest of us gave them ample room to act out this scenario, which Lilith had no doubt orchestrated.

"Indeed you did apologize," Lilith said, stopping in front of Penatiel, "which

earned you a stay of execution. But you have transgressed again tonight, and for that you must pay the ultimate price." Lilith captured Penatiel with her gaze. I could see that he wanted to run, to fly, to disincorporate, anything to get away, but he was held immobile as Lilith passed judgement upon him. "I hereby sentence you to the True Death."

With the utterance of her last syllable her arm moved with a speed impossible to follow. Her shamshir streaked like lightning, striking Penatiel's head from his body in a single blow. His head bounced twice before rolling in my general direction, and I looked down at it as his body collapsed, gushing fountains of dark immortal blood all over the room. His eyes were open wide in a look of astonishment, ticking back and forth in their sockets as if he were trying to turn his head with the force of his eye movement. His bloody mouth moved trying to speak. And then Lilith took a wooden staff from the wall with a pointed silver tip at one end and a human skull at the other.

"Never betray a sacred trust, and never, ever reveal my secrets!"

She was speaking to Penatiel's body, but it was clearly a warning to us all. She pinned his body to the floor, driving the wooden staff through his heart and embedding it several inches into the stone floor with a single blow. Impossible as it seemed, I saw Penatiel's severed head react to this blow to his body. His face contorted in a grimace of anguish before holding the last expression he would ever make.

Everyone in the room was similarly frozen, and even though every mind was sealed away, I knew what they were thinking. It could easily have been any one of them pinned to the floor, and they wondered if Penatiel had been destined to meet this fate, or if he had been chosen arbitrarily because he was the last to arrive. Ishtar was coldly detached, and Gilgamesh seemed slightly amused, but horror and revulsion were reflected in most of their faces, even though they were blood-drinkers who had killed countless times. The death of one of their own reminded them that their immortality was illusory. They were neither omnipotent nor invulnerable. More than human, surely; but not immune to death no matter how many centuries they had endured without aging, growing stronger all the

while.

Lilith commanded Gilgamesh to take the body and severed head outside and burn them, sealing Penatiel's fate with irrevocable finality. Gilgamesh obeyed without question, still looking amused. The rest of us could now join the orgy already in progress.

The worshippers knew their goddess was present, even though she had yet to appear. Lilith waved us ahead, and I followed her coven out into the temple where I was mesmerized by the sheer abandonment. Everywhere I looked there were bodies intertwined in every possible act of fornication conceived by man, a living re-enactment of the decorations carved on the outside walls of the temple. The temple floor was carpeted with mostly-naked human bodies, locked together in acrobatic acts of sex that were hard to believe. Some of the positions were familiar to me, but some were contortionist stunts that I had never attempted in all my years of experimentation. Everyone was in a frenzy of ecstasy fueled by aphrodisiacs, drugs, and alcohol; but it was the presence of their goddess Kali that truly drove them, as her spirit emanated throughout the temple like a single sustained note of music.

And then Lilith made her grand entrance. She had transformed herself into the very image of the Goddess of Destruction. Her transmutation was complete. She stood twelve feet tall, with four arms, and skin as black as kohl, her massive shamshir in one hand, a noose in another, and a skull-topped staff in yet another hand. A necklace of human skulls hung around her neck, completing the image down to the tiger skin loincloth she had donned. Her eyes were blue, yet they were still Lilith's eyes, and it was Lilith's face with terrible fangs protruding. She truly was Kali, just as I had seen her depicted, yet this four-armed, black-skinned goddess wore Lilith's face unchanged in essence, yet transformed into something horrible and bloodthirsty. Perhaps it wasn't such a change after all.

Her worshippers were suitably awed, but they did not pause to acknowledge her with prayers. The orgy was the only act of worship required of them, except for the ultimate sacrifice they would soon make to her in hope of a better incarnation. Lilith unleashed a bloodcurdling scream, a cue for the

slaughter to begin. I stood back and watched as Lilith and her coven singled out victims and sucked the last drop of life from them, and then Lilith glanced at me and issued a stern mental command.

“Kill them! Kill them all!”

I found that I could not resist this command. I stepped picked my first victim at random. Directly in front of me stood a young man with his back against a stone column and a young girl astride him. He gripped her ass with fierce passion as she held his shoulders and thrust herself against him in pure physical abandon. I had closed my mind to the thoughts of these mortals, yet the arousal of so many people was a tangible force I swam through toward my selected victim, and it encouraged my own arousal. The thud of beating hearts pounded on my ears like hail on a tin roof, and a chorus of voices cried out in sexual release as I stepped up to the couple against the column.

I lifted her long hair to kiss her neck. I tasted a poignant blend of sweat, smoke, and tragic mortality, and she removed one hand from her lover's shoulder to grope blindly at my crotch, needing me to unleash my manhood. I felt myself becoming aroused, and began to shed my costume as I continued to lick her neck, nibbling playfully at her ear while she groped my ever-expanding cock. Her lover was still inside her, and I ran my fingers down between them, gathering the nectar of her juices and using it to lubricate her asshole, which was presented to me like an open invitation. Again I ran my fingers through the flow of her juices, rubbing her wetness on the head of my rock-hard cock. I placed one hand on the small of her back and slowly guided the head of my cock into her asshole. She held still as I did, then leaned against me as I gripped her thighs and held her in place, which freed her lover's hands to roam across her body. She ground her body against us both in a circular motion and I could feel her lover moving inside her, only a few fragile layers of mortal flesh between us. It was stimulating, but Lilith's command and the overwhelming power of the Thirst took control of me, and I sank my fangs into her neck. The ecstasy of the blood washed over me and was projected back into her mind. She came with a shudder, so intense that it inspired her lover to come as well. A timeless moment passed and I was left

holding an empty shell, for I had sucked all life out of her.

The realization that she was dead killed my erection, and I cradled her in my arms and laid her warm body on the cold stone floor. I clumsily dressed while the young man watched my every move as if I were an alien creature...or perhaps a god. He stared at me with fascination, and he did not resist as I stepped toward him. I cradled the back of his head in one hand and bit him without hesitation. His body tensed at the moment my fangs broke his skin, and then he relaxed against me. Soon he was limp and as dead as the girl. I laid him beside her and looked down on two empty vessels I had made of living beings. I had not even known their names. Perhaps this should have made it easier to detach myself from them, but it added to the tragedy of it. I was abhorred by what I had done, and I turned around to see the slaughter.

Kali waded through her worshippers like a machine built for the sole purpose of destruction. Her staff and shamshir flashed, killing and maiming everyone in range, and she occasionally paused long enough to taste the blood of one of her victims before slaughtering them. Gilgamesh had returned and I watched his manner of feeding. He was not content to suck the blood from his victim. Instead he snatched him up and ripped open his throat with his powerful fingers, catching the blood from mid-air as it fountained from the gaping wound. When he was done he squeezed the lifeless head into a pulp and ripped the arms from his victim, using them to beat to death two more mortals whom he then stomped on, grinding bone and flesh and blood into a gory mess.

I cannot describe any more of that gruesome scene, for I was overwhelmed by the horror of it all and I vomited, spewing blood everywhere. I had taken too much, draining two people completely, and my revulsion was more than I could endure. Fabian saved me, pulling me into another room and unwinding his turban, using it to clean the blood from my face. Once I had gained some control over myself Fabian sat back and gave me an accusing look.

"I saw what you did," he said, radiating envy like a star jealous of the sun. In my lust I had forgotten Lilith's warning to keep my sexual abilities a secret. "Don't worry," Fabian continued in a sulky tone of voice. "I'll keep your secret. But

it's lucky that you were hidden behind that column, so I don't think any of the others saw you. If Gilgamesh had seen you, he'd have killed you instantly, and I don't think even Lilith could have stopped him."

"But what about Anshar? Didn't he..."

"Not like that," he interrupted me. "I can still remember what it was like to get a real erection, and Anshar never could. The best he could hope for was to become half-erect, and that took a lot of work. None of the others can do more than remember what it used to be like, including me."

"But I don't understand. Surely the women among us can still have sex?"

"Oh, they can get fucked, the same as me, but they get no pleasure from it. From what I understand they have become dead in that area, and orgasms are no longer possible for them. But Lilith made you, and Anshar before. Does that mean..."

"Yes. We have sex. Real sex," I added, anticipating his question as he had anticipated mine a moment before.

"You mean..." He prompted me to tell him what he was afraid to hear.

"Yes. Lilith enjoys it. Thoroughly. With frequent and multiple orgasms."

"Are you sure she's not faking it? I hear that women are supposed to be good at that."

"Oh, yes, I'm absolutely sure. I have had lovers where I could never be totally sure, but Lilith isn't one of them. Her orgasms are very intense and very real." I looked back at his wondrous eyes. "And so are mine," I whispered.

"Damn you!" Fabian spat, through gritted fangs, and for a moment I thought he was going to attack me. But he buried his face in his hands. "Why, damn you, why? It isn't fair."

"I don't know, and Lilith claims she doesn't know, either," I told him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "But she says her father knows." I squeezed his shoulder gently. "Tell me, Fabian. Is he real? Does the Devil really exist?"

He looked up at me, a measure of amusement smothering part of his melancholy. "Oh, yes, the Devil is very real. I've met him. And I have a feeling that you'll meet him soon, as well."

“Well, when I do, I’ll ask him why sex is a gift his daughter and I possess with the exclusion of all others. Maybe it is a simple secret I could share with you,” I offered, attempting to placate the only friend I had. And then I realized that my statement could be interpreted as a come-on. “That is to say, maybe I can tell you, not show you.”

Fabian smiled in a bittersweet gesture of understanding at my awkwardness, yet touched by my offer. “Thanks. But we need to get back to the others. We’ve been gone far too long already.”

When we returned it was nearly over. I found a man who was horribly mangled, yet somehow still clinging to life when death would be a release from unspeakable torment. I granted him mercy, draining away his pain with the last of his blood, replacing the pain with the ecstasy I stole from him. When I was done, I surveyed the brutal carnage around me. Dismembered corpses awash in a lake of blood. The blood was everywhere, splattering the walls and the high ceiling.

When the coven had drunk their fill, they savagely butchered whoever was left. The beginning was more than I could bear, and the aftermath was a truly horrendous blasphemy against humanity. Never mind the fact that these people had chosen this fate for themselves. Such brutality was barbaric, grotesque. I could barely justify such a violent end for monsters like Anshar.

I have always believed that violent rape and murder deserves harsh punishment, but these people wanted to die for lesser sins and for the simple reason that life was too hard to endure. But now I had to examine my own beliefs. I myself belonged on this floor, along with the rest of Lilith’s coven and most especially Lilith, much more than the victims who had sacrificed themselves this night. Who was I to judge Anshar, when what I did to my victims skirted dangerously close to rape? I stole a part of them to keep my wretched self alive, never mind the fact that I manipulated their minds, sparing them the trauma of remembrance. Now I was a murderer, as well. Since my first night as a vampire, when I had possibly killed an unsuspecting girl named Carol, I had been careful not to drain more than my victims could bear. But tonight Lilith commanded me to kill, and I had joined into this orgy of death.

I was so overwhelmed with revulsion and self-loathing that Lilith felt it necessary to slap me to get my attention. Although she could have accomplished the same thing by overriding my mental blocks, it was more satisfying to her to strike me. I had been ignoring her; an unforgivable sin in her eyes.

“What is wrong, my love?” she asked.

She had resumed the form I knew her by. If it were a reflection of her soul it would be far more repulsive than the woman who stood before me, but then again I had glimpsed her soul, and it detracted from her beauty to the point that I could not see her as beautiful at this moment.

“How did you do that?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” she asked me.

I wanted to know how she could possibly justify mass murder, how she could manipulate these immortals so that they watched as she destroyed one of their own, how she convinced these mortals to die in such a gruesome way when she had no afterlife to offer them. But I settled on a question she might be willing to answer.

“How did you become Kali, assume a physical form that was not your own?”

“It was wickedly simple,” she replied. “They believed in me so much that assuming the form of their goddess practically forced upon me by the power of their belief. If you survive long enough, you will find that you can alter your physical form, as well, although such a drastic change requires great experience and a powerful infusion of demonic essence, something I have in abundance, but which you are lacking.”

As usual I didn’t understand her, but I didn’t care, for my attention was captured by the corpses that were scattered around us like empty plastic cups after a keg party, without the concern over who would clean up the mess.

“This is too much,” I said. “This is obscene and unconscionable. Did you expect me to be a part of this without remorse or guilt?”

“Yes,” she replied, instantly. “That is precisely what I wanted from you, although I should have known better than to expect it from you. Did you learn

nothing from reading Justine?”

“Yes, I learned how you justify such atrocities, but I have not been convinced that we have the right to do whatever we please at the expense of others. There must be a limit, and we have crossed it so far that I don’t see how I can live with myself after this.”

“Yes, I did,” I replied. “I learned how you can justify such atrocities, but I have not been convinced that we have the right to do whatever we please at the expense of others. There must be a limit, and we have crossed it so far that I don’t see how I can live with myself after this.”

The rest of Lilith’s coven was frozen in place, watching this drama unfold just the way they had watched Penatiel’s futile attempt to stand up to her. They even had the same expressions on their goddamned faces, except for Fabian and Diana, where I detected some measure of sympathy, although it could have been wishful thinking. Gilgamesh, however, was grinning at me with a look that told me he was just waiting for an excuse to throw me onto a bonfire.

Lilith tossed her sword across the room, narrowly missing Danatalian, who jumped out of the way faster than a mortal could have. To my surprise Lilith came to me and opened her arms, a passive demand for a hug, which I gave to her after a hesitation so brief that I hoped she wouldn’t notice it. She held me for a moment, nuzzling her cheek against mine, before she kissed me, a kiss that was too tender and gentle by far.

“It is time for you to meet my father, Samael, who is indeed the father of us all. Asmodeus.” She gave me a sad smile, so different from her typical grin that I began to grow afraid for the first time since this confrontation had begun. “If he cannot adjust your manner of thinking then you are truly doomed, and may as well share Penatiel’s fate.” This was a threat she did not even bother to veil, although she did sugar-coat it. “But I would hate to see that happen to you, my love, for I truly enjoy your company.” She ran her bloody fingers through my hair while I stared at her. Then she gripped my elbow. “Come,” a single word of command that was not only directed at me, but the rest of her coven for they followed in silent obedience as we left the temple and flew back to her palace in

France.

The group traveled together to the very same chateau where I had been introduced to Fabian. We gathered in the lowermost basement and stripped off our blood-drenched clothes. The blood had been cleaned from our immortal bodies, absorbed like the bloodthirsty sponges we were, and we gathered naked around a huge pentagram engraved in the floor. We assumed the same formation we had used earlier, and spoke a similar prayer, only this time our prayer made a discernable difference in the real world. The pentagram began to glow with a ruddy light, and my immortal senses told me that it had become a portal to another place. Lilith took my hand in hers, and we stepped through together.

I saw a flash followed by a flicker of absolute darkness, and then I was transported to another realm of existence. I did not feel any actual motion. But my supernatural senses told me that the entire world as I knew it was located somewhere else, a direction and distance that could be described as 'vastly upward'. I was not inside planet Earth; I was below it. I was on another plane of reality altogether, one that intersects our universe in such a way that it was still its own place with its own rules. I was disoriented and confused. My senses told me where I was, yet surely I was deluded. I could never trust what I could not 'see' for myself, but anyone can be made to see what is not there by manipulation of the mind.

I took in my surroundings, still unsure if what surrounded me was real. We were standing on a pentagram identical to the one in Lilith's basement. I was not in a pit of flames as religion had led me to expect; it was a cavernous room built on a titanic scale, as if by giants. The ceiling was 80 feet overhead, supported by thick stone columns that marched away in every direction, with walls too distant to be seen from where I stood.

Lilith stepped forward holding my hand, and led me toward a distant source of light. We walked naked down a wide corridor between columns until the far wall came into view. My attention was drawn to the painting that covered the wall. It showed a great war in heaven, angels doing battle with other angels in

a giant panorama. Then I noticed the throne beneath it, and the shining figure seated there, the source of light toward which we walked. I was increasingly overwhelmed as we approached, until we stopped in front of my Lord and Master; the very Devil himself.

Asmodeus' beauty was immaculate, and stunning. I fell to my knees and wept tears of blood at the sight of such flawless beauty. How much more beautiful could he have been before he was cast from heaven when he had been glorified as the brightest of all the angels? To look upon him scorched my soul; to have seen him before the fall must have been enough to die instantly, if from nothing more than shame at my own unworthiness. He was the embodiment of pleasure and self-indulgence, and so much more. The personification of passion in all its myriad forms, and the Lord of Lust. I could not help but worship him. He stepped down from his throne in all his radiant glory and approached us dressed in the robes of an emperor.

"Well, Lilith, it's about time you brought your new consort to meet me."

He pulled her close in a hug and then he kissed her. But not the way a father should kiss a daughter. There was tongue involved, and he squeezed her bare ass before he let her go. And then he turned to me.

"Father, this is Samael," Lilith said.

"I know." Asmodeus smiled at me, but I could only stare up at him in awe, still on my knees. "Arise, my son," he said to me, breaking my trance.

I stood before him unashamed by my nudity for I would have felt naked in his presence if I were clothed. "My Lord," I began.

"There is no need of formality between us, Samael. Call me Asmodeus."

He snapped his fingers and suddenly I was fully clothed. I recognized my Nike shoes, Levi's jeans, and a Black Sabbath t-shirt. I had not seen them in some time, but they were the very clothing I was wearing the night Lilith stole me away from Angie, my beloved Angel, down to the scuff marks on the shoes and the rip above the right pocket of the jeans.

"I want you to feel comfortable around me," he said, "for we have much to discuss." He put his arm around my shoulder. "Lilith, can you wait for us in my

chambers? Samael and I need to have a talk.”

Asmodeus gave me a private tour of Hell, and I saw that the lake of fire did exist, although he informed me that such punishment was reserved for those who expected it. Other sinners were punished in other ways; something I would rather not dwell on. If you want to know what Hell is like read Dante’s ‘Inferno’. He got some of it exactly right, and the rest doesn’t really matter. Asmodeus and I had a lengthy discussion that focused on philosophy and religion, and I will try to relate the gist of it without getting side-tracked by irrelevancies.

“I am not what you expected, am I?” Asmodeus asked me.

I looked at him, truly looked at him, who he seemed to be behind the radiant glory. He was clean-shaven, with perfect shoulder-length hair. I had expected a goatee at the very least. Not to mention cloven hooves, horns, and a tail.

“Not at all what I expected,” I replied, “but there are centuries’ worth of propaganda against you. I try to form my own opinions based on the evidence of my own perceptions.”

“Well put,” Asmodeus replied. “I am what you see, for this is the essence of the real me. Yet it is still only a facet of my being. When I am angry I become a terrible and raging monster, a sight as horrible as any other demon on this plane of existence. I have many faces, and have been worshipped as a god under countless names throughout history, by every culture that ever existed. I am God, as you perceive Him with your Christian upbringing, as much as I am Satan, for he and I are two sides of the same coin. But you don’t really believe in God, do you?”

“I’m not sure what I believe anymore. I never believed in you until I saw you myself. But if you are real, then I guess that means God must also be real. It just may take a while for the reality of all this to sink in.”

“Maybe I can help you with that.” We were in his private garden, and he seated me under a fig tree. “Let me tell you the story of creation, and of my fall from grace.”

And so he did.

“In the beginning there was nothingness, without form and void, and then there was a great explosion of chaos. God and I were born from this, along with the entire heavenly host. Gradually God and I gained self-awareness, and We looked upon a chaotic and unformed universe with wonder. But who created us? Even then it seemed that We had done this before, and would do so again when this universe died. God awakened the angels, giving them the same sentient self-awareness that He and I had. And then I began to help Him; I and the first-born of the angels, until there was a heavenly host to worship God. To show our love for God we built heaven for Him, and He was pleased by our praise. But He hungered for more. God created the concept of linear time, the tool he used to fashion an orderly universe from a chaotic maelstrom. This was quite an accomplishment, and it increased the measure of praise the angels gave Him, for in the era before time, nothing was permanent. Heaven was a place of beauty and glory, but not permanency. If I were to meet an angel on the street and decide I did not want to see him, I could simply move in time to a place before and the event would never occur. God took time, which was like a lake, and turned it into a river, imposing law and order on a chaotic universe.

“And then God did something really impressive. He sowed the seeds of life in the universe, and commanded the angels to create myriad lifeforms to populate the multitudinous planets. But God saved His creation for last, and He did something that none of us had dared to do. He created a material creature in Our likeness and called it Man. Many angels were appalled by this, yet none dared question His judgment. None but me, for I felt myself to be His equal in every respect but for His overwhelming sense of superiority. He liked to believe that He had created Himself and all the rest of us, but this was not the case. We had been created by a force we could not comprehend and for a purpose we did not know. This facsimile of us, this mockery of angelic form, might offend whatever force was responsible for our creation upsetting whatever plans were in store for us. For unlike angels, who were beings of pure spirit, these creatures that resembled us were animalistic by nature, with the means of procreation, which we had never thought to possess.

“And so I challenged God’s judgment, and He became wrath. He claimed that Man was His greatest accomplishment, and out of respect for His genius I should pay homage to His masterpiece. This I refused to do, so God banished me from His sight. I was not thrown out of heaven, but God would not talk to me, so I took myself to Earth to study this creation, to see what it would do. It prayed to God, increasing His worship, and I decided this was its sole purpose. God could never get enough worship, and this creature would multiply on the face of the Earth, and by doing so would continually increase the worship of God.

“I became fascinated with the feminine form of the species, for they were unlike men. Men wore the masculine form of the angelic, but they were brutal and animalistic, whereas women possessed angelic grace enclosed in a fragile mortal shell. They were beautiful in their fragile and finite way, and their method of procreation fascinated me. I decided to find out what it was like to lay with one of them. Thus I discovered the pleasures of the flesh. I found it to be a near-heavenly expression of the material form, and so I took many wives. I was not alone in this, but I was the first, and soon there were many beings on the face of the Earth called Nephilim, who were half-divine. Born of mortal women with angelic fathers. This enraged God for they upset his plan. They were mortal, yet superior to mortals. Some of them were monstrous, but most of them were taller, smarter, stronger, and more beautiful than mere mortals, with life spans ten times greater, and they dominated the planet, becoming kings and queens, and receiving worship in their own right. He could not tolerate this at all.

“He was so angry that He was going to destroy the whole planet, but then He decided he could get rid of the Nephilim and still save a seed of mortals loyal to Him. And so He told a man you know as Noah to build an ark and God had a big flood to get rid of all the angelic offspring. Yet He needed all the angels to vow never again to mate with mortal women. I refused, and led a revolt against His self-righteous arrogance. But too many angels were in awe of Him, and my revolution failed. I was cast out of Heaven, and a third of the heavenly host with me, to inhabit this dismal plane where my spirit is greatly decreased. I never took God’s vow, yet the children I father now possess only a fraction of their former

greatness.”

At last Asmodeus fell silent, and I stared at him overwhelmed. “You gave up Heaven for the sake of sex?”

“No. Your mortal mind has missed the point, as usual. It was denied to me by a God who is so jealous and greedy that He cannot stand to have anyone receive any measure of worship, but Him. It infuriates Him that I have been worshipped so often as a god since my fall, but He is incapable of destroying me and I take my revenge on Him by stealing His worshippers. It amuses me to do so, but one day there will come a reckoning and I shall have to battle Him again. I do not plan to lose next time.”

“But if you had only done as God wished, none of this would have happened,” I said. “You would still be in Heaven, and there would be no sin upon the earth.”

Asmodeus’ eyes gleamed with an inner fire, and I thought he would destroy me for my audacity. Instead he smiled a wistful smile touched with sorrow and regret. “I, too, have my pride, although it pales in comparison to God’s. I could not abase myself by bowing to His creation. As for sin, it was not I who invented it, but humankind. I am divine and can do no sin except in the eyes of God, who is not my superior but my brother. The first woman committed the first sin, but it was God who planted the seed of it in the form of temptation.”

I realized he was talking about Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit. “But wasn’t it you who tempted Eve?”

“It was her own nature, her instinctive curiosity that caused her to take of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge when it was the only thing in the world forbidden of her and the man Adam. I did not tempt her. It was God’s commandment that sparked her curiosity; she needed no help from me. I did not come into the picture until later. Eve needed someone to blame, and Adam needed a scapegoat so that he could forgive her. They knew that I was out of God’s favor, and so they blamed me. It was woman who introduced sin into the world, as well as the concepts of betrayal, deceit, and shame. A perfect woman, under perfect circumstances, would complete a man. Making out of two

individuals one inseparable unit that in their joining could be most like the angels they resemble. But men and women are flawed creatures, and seldom join in perfect union. Yet such a perfect union is indeed possible, and I would wish for such between you and my daughter.” He gave me a penetrating stare. “So how are things between you and my daughter?”

I felt he already knew the answer; I was being judged on how I answered, not the answer itself. “Far from perfect, My Lord,” I replied.

Then I told him how Lilith’s casual disregard for human life appalled me, and how her uncaring attitude for the welfare of others seemed to me to be the pinnacle of arrogance, the same sort of arrogance he accused God of displaying. I admitted that I found her behavior evil and inexcusable, and I regretted letting her turn me into what I have become. After the slaughter in the temple I was ashamed of myself and the company I keep. I would sooner die than go on as I had.

“Do you realize what would happen to you if you died right now?” he asked, quietly. “Your immortal soul would join the ranks of countless other sinners being punished by the most diabolical means devised by mortal mind. I have no idea what your particular punishment would be; your own subconscious mind would create it for you. But this will not be your fate. You have a greater destiny in store for you, if you can learn to take everything in proper perspective. I’ll tell you a secret. If you feel remorse for your sins then you will be damned. But if you can take pride in your sins and derive pleasure from them you are truly one of my own. You will become an officer in my army against holy injustice, joining the ranks of fallen angels instead of becoming another tormented soul. This is the secret to success in Hell. Sin is something you should never do half-way; all the saints I ever met were sinners with an exceptional talent for kissing His holy ass, and most of them are burning in the lake of fire as we speak.”

“But what about Job?” I asked him.

“Ha. Never met the man, if he existed at all,” Asmodeus replied. “That was sheer propaganda. Lilith knows the truth of this, and that is why she behaves as she does. If you are a sinner you should feel no guilt. Regret and guilt will lead

those not saved to damnation, particularly those who believe they are saved when in fact they are not. If you can live without regret you may earn a place for yourself as a lieutenant in my army. But you can never achieve salvation from God. The only salvation you can hope for is from me. I do not want to see you damned; I would rather have you willingly on my side. For God is every bit as intolerant and stiff-necked as the militant Muslim zealots who call Him Allah, and you have cut yourself off from Him without chance of redemption. God is not only arrogant, he is extremely vengeful. He is not the merciful being Christians would have you believe, for there is little mercy in him. His laws are sacrosanct, inviolable. To disobey His will just once is to be punished for all eternity. He broke his own law when he created the son you know as Jesus Christ, but it was a desperation tactic to regain some measure of the worship he had lost in a chaotic world. Peace, love, and forgiveness are truly not his strong points.

“Lilith made you what you are and there is no turning back, but you need not emulate her. Lilith and her kind are necessary in my war with God, but so are souls like you. I would rather see you stand true to your beliefs than let your personality be suppressed by hers. Here is what you must do if you wish to survive. First, you must bow to Lilith’s commands without question, the way I could not bow to God’s. Do what is expected of you when necessary and follow your heart when possible, but do not feel guilty when your position requires you to do something distasteful. Anything you do in Lilith’s name rests squarely on her shoulders.”

This sounded like the same philosophy used to justify many of the atrocities committed in the world: I was just following orders. If you never question an order, you can disassociate yourself from it, a method that has been used by armies to compel soldiers to kill their fellow human beings, a method that has been in use since war was created. But I had little choice. I had seen the infinite variety of gruesome punishments that awaited everyone who did not achieve perfection in God’s view, and I had no desire to become one of them. When in Hell, it is better to be a devil than a damned soul, and I was committed to Hell without possibility of redemption by a God who must be callous to allow

such a place to exist.

“Very well, My Lord, I shall strive to obey Lilith from now on, but what of my conscience? It eats at me like a cancer of the soul, and who knows what atrocities I will have to perform in her name in the future?”

“It is your conscience that defines you, and I would have you obey it whenever possible. But do not let it give Lilith a reason to destroy you, for I could not help you. Obey Lilith when necessary, obey your own conscience when possible, and do not let them come into conflict. Suppress your conscience when you must, and know the guilt is not yours, but Lilith’s. Do not take on a burden of guilt to your soul over things you could not control. If you can do this, you will prosper. Just remember that nothing in the world is permanent, and everything must die, even the universe itself. I can offer you no better counsel.”

With that he led me to his private chambers where Lilith awaited us. Asmodeus’ private chambers did not have a bed, for the Devil never sleeps. Instead there was a huge pile of furs and silks like a nest. Lilith was seated there naked, kissing another naked woman who could be described as a succubus. She appeared nearly mortal, yet she was not. She had a narrow whip of a tail with a barbed end. And she had little black horns jutting from her forehead. Her skin was a dusky shade of red like nothing I had ever seen on Earth. Yet all these things added to her beauty. Her body was soft with the impossibly perfect curves found only in comic books. She was a living fantasy, created for the sole purpose of sex. Lilith broke off their kiss with reluctance, gazing longingly into the succubus’ eyes before turning to me.

“Samael, this is Kitarah,” Lilith said, rising and leading Kitarah to me, “and she has offered herself as a present to you.”

“Hello, Kitarah,” I said, but she did not answer me.

She greeted me with a kiss, pressing her soft warm body against me with unmistakable longing and desire. Our tongues intertwined while her hands roamed all over my body, stopping to unfasten my pants. I helped her remove my clothing, and we fell onto the pile of furs in a passionate knot, her passion fueling my desire for her. We caressed and kissed each other with such intensity that I

was driven to a maddening state of arousal. I needed to be inside her, and I slid my hand down her sweetly curved belly to find her hot, wet, and ready for me.

She lay back and spread her legs, gripping my hair and looking me in the eyes with an expression that said, Please, fuck me! Fuck me now! I slid my cock inside her, a sensation more blissful than any other. Nothing else in Heaven or on Earth can compare to the sweet satisfaction of the moment of entry, with its promise of orgasmic release. To cum is a bliss all its own, but it is an end, a little death, a satisfaction of a different sort. Kitarah's nature was desire, nymphomania being an inadequate word to describe such a perpetual state of arousal, and it compelled me to thrust myself inside her as hard and as fast as I possibly could. I heard Asmodeus speak to Lilith and I glanced over at them. I had completely forgotten that we were not alone.

"By eternal damnation, what vigor! He is giving her a solid fucking!" Asmodeus was naked and his skin blushed a fierce red like Kitarah's. He had also grown horns and his tail was wrapped around Lilith's waist while he fondled her breasts with one hand. "Tell me, daughter. Does he fuck you with such exuberance, such enthusiasm?"

"Oh, yes indeed, father! And with such delightful endurance and frequency."

I was too turned on by Kitarah to pay any real attention to them, but their words penetrated my subconscious, a background to Kitarah's moans and squeals of delight.

"Well, I have watched long enough," Asmodeus said. "It is time we joined in this debauchery!"

Lilith came over and sat down on Kitarah's face, leaning forward to kiss me while Kitarah ate her pussy. Then Lilith grabbed Kitarah's ankles, lifting her legs high into the air above her shoulders so that I was forced to pull out of her for a moment. Kitarah's ass was raised up.

Lilith said, "Stick your cock in her ass, lover."

I approached Kitarah on my knees and rubbed the head of my dick against her wet pussy, then slid it into her tight asshole. Asmodeus was standing

next to me, and I saw that he was fully aroused. His cock was not only huge; it swayed and moved like a serpent, completely under his control. He stepped in front of me, forcing me to lean back as he slid his elephantine cock like a juggernaut into her pussy. His buttocks slapped against my stomach as we fucked her together, establishing an alternating rhythm. His tail wrapped around my waist, and the tip of his tail invaded my sphincter teasingly. From any other being this would be an outrage, yet from him it was a sort of flattery. I was on the verge of orgasm, and I clamped down savagely on his neck with my fangs, drinking his blood.

I was surprised that I was able to drink blood from Asmodeus. I would have found the very idea absurd if I had stopped to consider it. It was my instinct that caused me to do it, but he did not resist. His blood was liquid fire as it flowed into me, and a small sip was all I could stand. I felt a portion of his immeasurable power course through me, an overwhelming strength that made me feel that I was a god. I pulled out of Kitarah and stepped around to Lilith. She grabbed my cock greedily, stuffing it into her wet mouth and sucking hard, as Kitarah's skilled tongue had her on the verge of explosive orgasm. Lilith was moaning and then she stopped long enough to squeal.

"Oh, shit, lover, cum! Cum for me! I am dying!"

She clamped her lips around me as her orgasm swept through her. I came as well, and she drank every drop as I held her head and pumped my cock into her mouth. Then Lilith stood, holding my cock in one hand, and laid down beside Kitarah.

"Now, lover, I need you inside me."

I was still rock hard and fully aroused, and so I obliged. I was still riding the high of Asmodeus' potent blood and we went through half-a-dozen positions while Asmodeus enjoyed Kitarah in a similar fashion. As I came close to orgasm for the second time Lilith spoke to me.

"And now it is time to receive your present."

She was lying on her back, and while I was thrusting inside her Kitarah came over and sat down on Lilith's face, so that my lover could return the

pleasure she had received while Kitarah sucked Asmodeus' massive cock. Kitarah's neck was exposed to me and I bit her, receiving my present in the fashion Lilith had intended. Kitarah's essence was liquid fire like Asmodeus, yet not quite so potent and much less complex. I felt her throat contract as she swallowed for Asmodeus had come in her mouth. He stepped aside as I continued to drain her essence, sucking in every last drop of her molten passion, undiluted by any other emotion. And then she turned into a tiny puff of smoke in my mouth. I inhaled, taking in the very last of her, and I soared on a wave of ecstasy that topped everything I had ever felt. And then I came, shooting my orgasm deep inside Lilith.

We stayed in Hell for a day and Asmodeus gave me another present. He took a large ring from his hand and placed it on my finger. It was an obscenely huge ruby set in intricately worked gold, and it was a perfect fit. I saw that beneath the ruby worked into the gold was a miniscule perfect likeness of Asmodeus himself with a crown upon his head. Lilith watched this with a cunning look on her face. I could not tell what was on her mind as Asmodeus spoke.

"With this token and the essence of me you have tasted we are now joined. Should you have need of me all you have to do is call out to me and I shall hear you, no matter where I happen to be in all the planes of existence. I shall hear you, and if your need is great enough, I shall come."

"This is quite an honor, My Lord. I don't know how I could deserve it," I said, and that's when I caught a whiff of jealousy from Lilith before she could subdue it. She had no such ready access to her own father and resented my gift.

"Believe me, the day will come when you shall be glad of it for I have a good idea of what your future holds in store for you."

I didn't want to know what he meant, so I merely said, "Thank you, My Lord."

I could not bring myself to call him Asmodeus for I was too much in awe of him. When we returned to Earth it was nearly dawn, and time for us to Rest. But it was no longer December. It was the end of March. Three months had passed on Earth in the space of 24 hours spent in Hell. I did not try to understand what I

could not explain; I merely lay down with Lilith and let the Rest overcome me.

When I awoke I thought about all that had happened in such a short period of time. I still felt remorse for the two innocent victims I had killed at the temple orgy, yet I took Asmodeus' advice and laid the blame at Lilith's feet. Yet it reminded me of Carol, my very first victim, and I realized that I must know whether or not I had killed her. I returned to the same small town and searched for her.

It did not take me long to locate her. I knew her essence and was able to track her by her spirit. She seemed none the worse for her experience. Not only was she still alive, she was married to the very same Billy Joe that Lilith and I had left her with. I thought back on that night how Lilith had intertwined their naked bodies before we left, and it amused me to no end that we had brought this couple together in such a way. I left her relieved that I did not have the burden of her death on my soul. I wished her the best, and thought of her no more.

For the next three months I followed Asmodeus' advice and obeyed Lilith without question, which kept her perfectly content and she made no demands of me that I could not live up to. If it weren't for my secret longing for Angie I think I could have been at least content with Lilith. But then everything changed.

Lilith and I were in France at the chateau she had given to Fabian, although in reality it was still hers. We had begun to spend quite a bit of time here. We would leave for a few days and then return, although we hunted all over Europe. Fabian never hunted with us, but otherwise the three of us spent a lot of time together. I had asked Asmodeus why Lilith and I were the only two of our kind capable of having sex, and he had given me a very simple answer. Lilith was able to give me this ability because she had so much demonic essence in her. Not only had she been born from a demonic father; she had devoured the essence of a succubus centuries before, just as I had done with Kitarah. I explained this to Fabian one night when Lilith had left us alone and he was grateful for the information, although it was of no use to him. But I am getting away from the point, perhaps because I dread to relate this little episode. I

suppose I should get it over with. On this particular night Lilith and I had hunted and then returned home to make love. Hunting made her horny, and I was always horny, period. We were lying in bed together and she took my hand and placed it between her breasts.

"There is something I have to tell you," she said, "because I will not be able to keep it a secret much longer." More secrets. She slid my hand down to her belly. "I am pregnant with your child."

I stared at her in astonishment. "What? How can that be?"

"Remember the night we spent in Hell?"

"How could I possibly forget it? What does that have to do with anything?"

"The true gift Kitarah gave you was the ability to impregnate me," she said.

I was stunned. "But what kind of child could the two of us have? Surely it won't be human?"

"We are gods, and our son will be a god," she replied.

I found the idea distasteful. "But you don't even like children," I said, pulling away from her. "How could you even consider having a child?"

"But this will be no mere mortal child," she replied, gripping my hands in her excitement. "I know my father told you of the Nephilim, who were like gods upon the face of the Earth at the beginning. Well, our son will be one of them, or as close as has ever been born since my father was cast from Heaven. He will be smarter, stronger, and better than human in every way."

"Yet he will also be like us, won't he?" I said, standing up. The thought of fathering little bloodsuckers was revolting. "You can't do this. You can't have a baby!"

"But I am," she said, smugly. "A symbol of our love."

This was more than I could stand and I unleashed the pent up resentment that I had been suppressing for so long. "You don't love me, you never have! Even if you think you love me you are deceiving yourself. You made me what I am, but I was born a mortal. I know what it is to love, and to be loved in return. But You! You were born half-demon. You have never truly felt human emotions. You have never experienced true love. You are just living out your own

delusional fantasies. And I refuse to stand by and let you give birth to a monster.”

“By God’s own bastard son! Damn you, you ungrateful fucking cur!” She rose from the bed and loomed over me. “Be careful what you say to me, Samael, for you have already done your part. I no longer have a need for you, and if you anger me I can destroy you without remorse.”

“And so you prove to me just how much you love me,” I replied. “By threatening to kill me without remorse.”

She slapped me so hard my ears rang, knocking me to my knees on the floor. “Do not tempt me, Samael. You are pushing your luck,” she said, looking down at me.

I stood, and screamed, “Fuck you, you evil fucking bitch! I don’t know how I ever could have thought I loved you!”

I would have said more, but she seized control of my mind and I froze. She flung me against the far wall and yelled back at me, her words projected painfully into my mind, as well as my ears.

“We have been through this before, you goddamned ingrate. I offer to share my life with you, to have your child, and this is how you react. I told you before and I tell you now that I am Lilith, the Queen of Darkness; I am Kali, Goddess of Destruction! I am Death personified and you are a fool to invoke my wrath!” She pinned me to the wall by the throat. “I made you, and I can unmake you.”

She bit me on the throat and sucked at me and I was utterly helpless as she drained me until I knew no more. When I awoke I was very weak. She had taken nearly all of me, leaving just enough to keep me alive. I was locked in an airtight stone vault behind a steel door. Even if I had the strength to assume ethereal form, it is doubtful that I could have found a way out. I was so disoriented that it took me a moment to figure out how long I had been here: four days. I was in serious trouble, but I was still alive. I couldn’t guess why she had let me live, but I was sure it wasn’t out of love. I needed to get away, but I couldn’t see how, and then I remembered the ring Asmodeus had given me. I looked at my finger and saw that it was gone. So much for that idea. And then

the door opened and Lilith stepped through.

“Looking for something?” she asked. “I took it from you. I had to cut your finger off to get it, for all the good it did me. It does not work for me. And your finger grew back while you were Resting.” She had been in constant contact with my mind, waiting for me to awaken, and had read my every thought since. “You can give up any thought of escaping,” she told me, moving to stand over me as I sat with my naked back against the cold stone wall.

“So what do you want from me?” I was not ready to grovel at her feet, but for an instant I was tempted. I knew it would be useless, however, and I would sooner die than to give her the satisfaction of seeing me beg.

“I have decided to let you live, at least for a while. I shall keep you alive until our son is born, and then you shall become his first meal. He will drink your essence, and then I shall take the shell that is left and burn it, subjecting you to the True Death.”

“But why?” I asked. “Why is this so important to you?”

She laughed at me. “You were so upset when I told you that you did not give me time to finish. Our son will have all of our abilities and none of our weaknesses, for he will be Nephilim, and pass himself off as human in the full light of day. And more than that, the Thirst will not rule him, even though I intend to feed you to him. He will be mortal, yet more, and after he has devoured you he will be given to a foster family and raised as human, for he has a grand destiny in store. He will be the vessel into which my father will be born onto the Earth, just as Jesus was the vessel for God.”

“You’re talking about the fucking Antichrist!” I yelled at her. “Are you insane? The end of the world, is that what you want?”

“When my father takes heaven away from God, he will give what is left of the Earth to me to rule. Humankind will have served their purpose, but I will keep a few thousand as breeding stock to feed me and those loyal to me, unlike you,” she said.

“You really are insane.” I shook my head in disgust.

She held out her wrist to me, and I gripped it like a lifeline. Eagerly I sank

my fangs into her flesh for I was ravenous having been drained nearly to the point of death. But I had taken only a brief sip when she pulled away.

“Enough,” she commanded. “I will not let you go mad from the Thirst. I want you to be fully aware of your fate. Yet I will keep you weak until our son is born, and then you will sacrifice yourself to him and your usefulness will at last be at an end.”

She slapped me hard out of sheer spite and then she left me alone with my thoughts, sealing me undead in what was destined to be my tomb. I nearly went mad over the next few days. I probably was insane, even more so than before for I must have been insane to ever put myself in this situation. I was so wrapped up in my own self-destructive regrets that I did not even sense the approach of another until the door of my tomb swung open. To my surprise it was Fabian, and he was afraid for his life.

“Fabian,” I whispered. “I’ve never been so glad to see anybody in my life.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” he said, with a smile, trying to hide his nervousness. “Here.” He pressed something into my hand. I looked down to see that it was my ring; the one Asmodeus had given me. “You need to hurry for we don’t have much time. Lilith is distracted right now. Diana has brought her a little ‘present’ to keep her occupied, but she keeps close tabs on you and it won’t be long before she decides to check on you again.”

Fabian and Diana had put their lives at stake to set me free. I had no doubt that Lilith would destroy us all for this if we were caught.

“I don’t know how to thank you.” I was so overwhelmed with gratitude that I kissed him full on the mouth. But when I felt his lips part and his tongue coming out I pulled away. “You flatter me, Fabian, but you’re really not my type,” I said with a smile.

“Tease,” he accused, and then sighed, running his hand over his head. “I know, I know. I’m way too butch for you. But you really are irresistibly gorgeous. Now go, while you still can.”

“But what about you and Diana?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about us,” he said. “I plan on being long gone when Lilith

misses you, and Diana is old enough to take care of herself. Now go!”

There was nothing else to say. I was pitifully weak, and it took all of my strength to fly back to North America. Even as weak as I was from Thirst I could not stop to hunt. I couldn't take the chance that Lilith might track me down if I didn't hide myself away.

I picked a region we had never visited together and went underground in the northern Canadian wilderness. I knew she could track me, but I hoped that if I kept my mind shielded she could not find me without being in my vicinity. And besides, I had burned up so much of my strength that Rest more necessary than blood. I could go no further, and I buried myself and let The Rest overcome me. My last thought was of Angie, my beloved Angel, and I wondered what madness could have possessed me to let myself be taken away from her.

Interlude II

And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand? Matthew 12:26

Ye shall eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the Princes of the earth.

Ezekiel 39:18

And so my story has come full circle to where it began. I have feasted well over the past few weeks, and my strength is returned to me in its fullest. I have gotten into the habit of keeping a sword and sharpened stakes with me everywhere I go for although I have not run into Lilith, against whom such things would do me no good whatsoever, I have had to destroy several of her followers. I knew none of them, but I assume that they were acting under their own initiative. If Lilith wanted me dead I am sure she would have tracked me down. It does not suit her purposes to have me die just yet. I must die just right, a meal for our unholy offspring, and she still has plenty of time for that. I must destroy her. I must put an end to her madness, for I cannot allow the child to be born. I would be the father of the Antichrist, and there is already a burden of guilt on my soul greater than I can endure.

My thoughts were divided between Angie, whom I loved, and Lilith, whom I hated for taking me away from her. I had many other reasons to hate Lilith, but this one was the first on the list and foremost in my thoughts as I spent time pouring my soul out onto paper in the vain hope that if I could only get my thoughts together I could somehow come up with a way to get sweet Angie back. It was a desperate wish, but if I could explain everything to her maybe the thinnest thread of hope existed that she would understand and accept me even after all that has happened. A very thin thread, but it was my only lifeline, and a drowning man will grasp at straws without a thought of how absurd his actions are.

Now that I have gotten into the habit of writing I find it impossible to stop. It helps to pass the lonely dark hours. Besides, I have something else to write about. I have taken my weighty explanation to my beloved Angel, and I must record her reaction to seeing me again.

Chapter VIII

Gaze. I manifest for thee
Those hundred thousand thousand shapes that clothe my Mystery.
I show thee all my semblances, infinite, rich, divine,
My changeful hues, my countless forms. See! in this face of mine...
Wonders unnumbered, Indian Prince!
Behold! This is the universe!
Krishna speaks to Arjuna, the Bhagavad Gita

The sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose...when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. Genesis 6:2-4

When I recovered my strength and pumped up my courage I took what I had written and went in search of my beloved Angel. Finding her was devilishly easy. Even though I had never drank from her we had blood in common, and that helped. But I would have found her anyway, for her soul called out to me like a heavenly song.

She was still dancing, which surprised me, for when I had left her she was on the verge of quitting. Indeed, she had quit working at The Nugget, but she was still dancing. She had just moved upstate to greener pastures. I remembered some of our past conversations when I had told her she should take her talent to where the money was. Apparently she decided I was right. She was working at a strip club called 'Cat Dancers' in Charleston, West Virginia, although I had been hinting at greater places, like Las Vegas.

The sign covering the outside front wall of the club was a pretty good work of art in the style of erotic comic books if you like that sort of thing, which I do. It was a hand painted picture of a woman with tiger-striped skin wearing nothing but a g-string, her arms crossed to cover her naked breasts. Her pouty, sensual

expression was classic, and I wondered who had done it. But I could feel my beloved Angel on the other side of that wall so I mustered my courage and stepped through the door. I convinced the doorman that I had paid the cover charge with a glance, the same way I convinced all who looked at me that I was not wearing a sword at all. Mental manipulation is a useful tool. I was disappointed that there was no register book to sign. One of my favorite things to do as a mortal had been to sign my name as Juker P. Funkenstein, and I missed that cheap thrill.

I stepped through the inner door and saw the stage directly in front of me. It jutted out of the right wall, with an access door in the back wall at the far right corner of the room. The stage was raised three feet off the floor, surrounded by the mandatory poles, with a wooden fringe that served as a table. Chairs lined both sides of the stage and round tables radiated out from it in tight clusters. The bar was against the front wall and a partition to the far left of it divided the club into two sections. Through the opening I could see a couple of pool tables with bathrooms in the wall beyond. I will never understand why people actually come into a place like this to play pool, but the bizarre fact is that they do. Plus it gives the dancers something to do when business is slow. My Angel was on the other side of that wall, but I decided to step up to the bar and wait for her to come out. I set my travel bag containing sharpened wooden stakes and my journal down at my feet, ordered a beer, and pretended to drink it.

I did not have to wait long. I watched her out of the corner of my eye as she stepped through the doorway wearing a skin-tight, low-cut green satin dress that fell to barely below her crotch. Outrageous red leather thigh-high boots with stiletto heels completed her outfit, and again I was amazed that she could move with such elegant grace on stilts like that. She had dyed her hair red and it was shorter, falling an inch below her shoulder blades, but other than that she had not changed at all. I would have recognized her even if I could not sense her presence.

I felt my pulse quicken, more afraid of what I was about to do than when I had faced Lilith's wrath. Angie's opinion of me mattered much more than Lilith's

ever had, and the fear of rejection was more frightening than an eternity of hellfire. But I had come here for a purpose, and it was time to face my fears.

I was leaning over my drink, so I stood up as she walked by. This was enough to draw her eyes toward me and they drifted back to the D.J.-slash-doorman, but then she did a double-take as if she had seen a ghost. I remembered Lilith's warning not to show myself to those who had been close to me as a mortal and I feared that this was going to end badly. Yet if I could not be with my beloved Angel then I may as well kill myself and save Lilith the trouble.

I watched her stare at me for a moment, saw her face turn pale under wide eyes, and then her drink slipped from numb fingers and the glass shattered at her feet. This made her jump, and her hands flew to her face as she nearly screamed. My instinct was to reach out and calm her mind, but I refused to violate her mind the way Lilith had violated mine. But she did not scream.

"Oh, my God! Mike! Is that really you?" she babbled, as she extended a hand to me, shaking like a tree in an earthquake.

"Easy, Angie. It's me."

I took her outstretched hand and gently pulled her closer. I wondered what she saw in me as I put my other hand on her hip, wanting to squeeze her tight, yet afraid to do so. Did she see a bloodthirsty, undying thing as Lilith had warned? The tears were starting to flow from her eyes as she threw herself into my arms, hugging me with a passion that humbled me to the point of my own tears, which I managed to suppress. Maybe she saw me after all.

"But no, Mike, God, this is too crazy!" she said, between sobs. "How can it be you?" She stared at me, drinking in my features, holding my hands in hers, squeezing with all her delicate mortal strength, reassuring herself that I was not an apparition. "You're supposed to be dead!" she cried, balling her sweet hands into fists and pounding on my chest. "I went to your goddamned funeral! How can you be alive?"

She was causing a scene, and I had to exert a bit of mental manipulation to make everyone ignore us. I needed to get her alone so that I could talk to her without having to force the minds of everyone around us into believing that we

were having a casual conversation.

“Is there somewhere we can talk?” I asked.

“Why are you wearing a sword?” she asked, looking at the saber hanging from my hip.

“It’s a long story, which is why we need to talk,” I said. “I’ve gotten myself into some trouble since the last time I saw you.”

She led me to a room for private dances. I followed her, never letting go of her hand, as it was dearer to me than my own life. By the time we were alone she had gained control of herself and was able to look at me as if I were merely the long-lost lover I wanted her to see in me.

“How dare you do this to me?” she said, her astonishment at seeing me turning to outrage in the space of a few heartbeats.

And so it comes; the moment of truth when I must tell her what has happened to me. But I had already put it on paper, and a summary would seem insufficient. Besides, how could she ever possibly believe? I still did not know what she saw when she looked at me, as I refused to study her mind. But I had to tell her something.

“Angie, it was all I could do to stay away, but I had to. Some really crazy shit has happened, but I want you to know that if I had it to do all over again I would have told you from the beginning that I was in love with you, how you meant more to me than life itself, how I wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with you. But I was afraid of what you would say. I loved you so much I let myself be pulled into some nightmare that I could not escape. I have been trapped in a situation too crazy to believe, but all I ever wanted was you at my side, and even though I haven’t escaped I have broken free, and I had to see you again. I love you more than life itself!”

My talent for saying too much showed itself and she was crying again. I took her into my arms and comforted her. I made reassuring sounds as I rocked her gently back and forth, and soon she decided to speak again.

“Oh, Mike,” she said, looking into my eyes.

It was the sweetest sound I’d ever heard. My real name, which I had

practically forgotten, was music when spoken by those perfect lips so dear to me, and in that flawless voice. The best gift I could ever receive was to hear her say my name with that fondness, to have her speak my name with love on her lips was a treasure more precious to me than heaven itself.

She looked at me in wonder, and continued, "When they told me you were dead I nearly went out of my mind. You were my best friend, and the only family I ever had who never abused me or lied to me, and then you were gone. I wanted to die! And now you come back to me, and how am I supposed to react? I don't even know what I'm feeling right now." She stepped away to look over my charcoal grey tailored suit under a black leather trench coat with matching Italian leather shoes. Lilith's tastes had influenced me. I had become accustomed to dressing myself well. "But you've definitely changed."

"Yes, I have," I replied, perhaps the biggest understatement ever uttered. "In more ways than you know. What do you see when you look at me?"

"You're gorgeous," she said, with the openness I loved in her. "You were handsome before, but now you look like a movie star." It occurred to me that famous people had become the gods of modern culture, and that she was in reality telling me that I looked like a god. "You look taller, somehow. Like, larger-than-life. What happened to you? Where have you been?"

"I have been to hell and back," I said, with perfect candor. "But you wouldn't believe all the things I've seen and done. But I never knew you thought I was dead. If I had, I would have come back to you in a minute." I knew Lilith was somehow responsible for this. "You said you went to my funeral?" I resisted the impulse of asking her if there had been a big turnout. "That means somebody faked my death," I said. I still did not believe that I ever truly died as Lilith said I did. I had learned not to believe anything she told me, and I never felt dead, and still do not feel dead. "Why don't you tell me about it?"

We sat down for a very strange conversation, which enabled me to re-create what had happened. Lilith had indeed faked my death. I don't know why she bothered, unless she did it to cut me off from returning to my past life. The clothing and wallet she had taken from me so long ago had been placed on

someone else, and this victim was put into my car and driven off the top of a mountain. The burned remains they recovered were unidentifiable. A closed coffin funeral, of course, and I was presumed dead by everyone who had ever known me.

I had no idea Lilith had done such a thing, but I should not have been surprised. It disturbed Angie to talk about the gruesome manner of my supposed death, and she was even more horrified to think that someone had been killed to make the world believe that I was dead. I could not help but wonder who was buried in my grave. Maybe I could find out before I destroyed Lilith and the monstrosity growing inside her, but I needed a plan. Angie wanted to know what sort of madness I had become involved in, and I could smell both her fear and her worry for me without needing to read her mind.

“Angie,” I said, “I brought something with me. It is a very convoluted explanation, but it is the best one I can offer you. I put it all on paper, and I came to you in the hope that you still have some feelings for me, for I would rather die in truth than to live without you.” I opened my bag and placed my journal into her hands. “I love you more than life itself,” I said, “and I hope that you can love me. But I need you to read this first, to understand what I have become. I am not the man you used to know, and it scares me that you may never want to see me again after you read this, but you need to know the truth. I realize that leaving you was the biggest mistake I ever made. I hope that you will let me see you again, and I will answer any questions you have. I will come back here three days from now, and if you don’t want to see me, all you have to do is leave me a sign, say... oh, I don’t know; you could draw a little cross in the cleavage of the tiger lady out front.”

“What are you saying? Are you leaving me again?” She ran her fingers through my hair, gripping me by the back of my neck. “You come back from the dead, and now you’re leaving again? How can you sit there and tell me you love me when you treat me this way?”

I could feel her pain, and would not be surprised if she had slapped the shit out of me. I thought I was doing what was best for her, but I will never

understand women if I live to be a thousand years old.

“Angie, I do love you,” I said, holding her hands, forcing her to look at the sincerity on my face. “I love you so much that I can’t stand the thought of being apart from you, not even for a moment, but I have to, because you do not know what I have become. And I am afraid of what you will think of me when you find out.” I turned away, closing my eyes and letting go of her hands.

She placed her fingers on my chin, forcing me to look at her. “I thought you were lost to me forever, but now that you’ve come back I don’t want you to leave me again.”

And then I began to cry, so I covered my face before she could see my bloody tears. “But I have to go, because I am involved in some really serious shit, and I have some things I gotta take care of.” I wiped the blood from my face before I looked at her. “But I swear on my soul that I’ll come back in three days, after you have had time to think about what I said in that letter I wrote you.”

She picked the journal up with a perfect smile on that perfect face. “This isn’t a letter. This is a book.” She flipped through the pages.

“Please,” I begged, closing her hands around it. “Read it from the beginning. And three days from now I will come back, and if you are still willing to speak to me I will be the happiest man on Earth. But if you don’t want to see me any more all you have to do is draw a cross in the cleavage of the tiger lady out front and I will bother you no more. I won’t blame you if you never want to see me again.”

I stood up and tossed my bag of wooden stakes over my shoulder. It was time for me to go, but Angie laughed and grabbed my arm before I had a chance to run away from her. I didn’t want to leave her even though I knew I should, so I took this excuse to stay a little longer.

“Jesus, Mike, you’re acting really weird,” she said. “You always were emotional, but that was one of the things I loved about you. Are you really in so much trouble that you have to leave? Why don’t you stay and have a drink with me?”

She had no clue that I no longer drank alcohol. The very thought of tasting

her essence was so much like the thought of rape that I was overcome with revulsion at what I had become. I shuddered and stepped away from her.

"I'm sorry, Angie, but I have to go," I said, as I backed away from her.

"But there's so much left for us to talk about," she said. "Don't you want to know what I've been up to since you left?"

"Of course I do," I said. "But not tonight. I really am sorry, my beloved Angel, but I have to go. I need to take care of something very important before I can devote the rest of my life to you."

She shot a look at me that told me she saw me as a liar. It broke my heart to have her look at me that way, as if I were betraying her, but I had to leave her alone with my manuscript, because I could not bring myself to tell her about it face-to-face. Yet the way she was looking at me was more than I could bear, and I took her in my arms and kissed her like the long-lost love of my life that she was.

Before I knew it the joy and passion I felt from kissing her transformed me. I had never been able to carry anything with me in ethereal form, but this time I did. We drifted straight up out of the room and into the night sky. Neither of us noticed at first. Have you ever had a kiss so intense that a bomb could go off next door and you wouldn't care? This was that kind of kiss. When I realized what I had done I stopped, hovering above the bar in solid form yet light as air. Angie noticed something was different and we broke off our kiss. I was looking right at her when she opened her eyes, and she stared at me in wonder before she looked down. She squealed, wrapping her arms around me and throwing her legs around me. I laughed.

"Don't be afraid," I whispered, spinning us around, drifting higher. I hadn't meant to do this, but I needed her to believe my story.

"What the hell's going on?" she gasped, holding me tight and staring down as the bar spiraled away below us.

"It's just a little trick I learned," I said. "How to fly. Would you like me to show you, or should I take you back down?"

"Yes. No! I-I don't know, this is scary," she confessed, and I felt her

shaking.

"I swear to you that hurting you is the last thing I'd ever do. But if you don't trust me I'll take you back down."

Suddenly she stopped shaking. "I trust you, Mike, but you've already hurt me."

That was enough to break my heart. "Oh, my God, Angie, I am so sorry. I knew you were fond of me, but I was afraid you didn't love me the way that I loved you. I had no idea until you told me that Lilith had faked my death, and if I had known the night that I left, I swear I never would have gone with Lilith."

"And who is Lilith?" she asked, with more frost in her voice than I would have expected.

I looked at her for a moment. "She is the most evil bitch who was ever born," I said, "and she has kept me prisoner in body, mind, and spirit since the last time I saw you." I sat us down in the parking lot behind the bar. "I am sorry I hurt you. I wish I had never met Lilith. But I did. I met her before I got to know you, and she came back into my life at a time when I was scared to death that you didn't love me the way I was in love with you. But I didn't know what I was getting into. Maybe I should just go." I turned away from her, so sick at heart that I could not bear to look at her.

"Wait, Mike," she said, spinning me around. "Oh, shit, you're bleeding."

"No, I'm not bleeding. I'm crying." And so it comes into the open. "I really have changed. I have become something so terrible that I can't believe I was stupid enough to come looking for you. I should have left you alone."

"What do you mean?" She watched as the blood leaked from my eyes, but I could not stop crying for this would be the last time I ever saw her incomparable face.

"I mean that this was a big mistake, nothing but selfishness on my part. You were better off thinking I was dead. I should have stayed away, but I had to see you again. But I was only thinking of myself; I never considered what seeing me might do to you," and then I broke off into sobs of grief, sitting on the asphalt and burying my face in my hands.

She put her arms around me, which only made it worse. "Mike, I'm glad you came back. Knowing that you're still alive makes it like a bad dream, something I can deal with. I never told you that I loved you. I didn't really know how much I loved you until I thought you were dead. And now I have the chance to say the things I thought I would never get to say to you. You are the sweetest, kindest, most gentle man that a girl could ever ask for, and I love you for that, and for lots of other reasons, besides," she said, sliding her hand down to my crotch and shaking my cock playfully. "But what you showed me was magical. We were flying. Teach me how!"

I laughed at the innocence of what she was asking. I wiped my eyes and looked at her, grinning at her in thanks for being considerate enough to cheer me up after all I had put her through.

"You really don't know what you're asking," I said, standing and taking her hands in mine. "I can take you with me and show you what it feels like, but teaching you would cost more than you could possibly know."

She slapped my shoulder. "So show me, then. Show me what it feels like to soar through the clouds!"

She threw her arms out in imitation of a swan dive, her face pointed to the heavens. She was so adorable. How could I possibly resist any request from her?

"Okay," I said, taking her into my arms. "I'll show you. Do you trust me?"

"Yes," she replied, smiling at me with open honesty.

"Do you love me?" I asked, and I watched the smile fade from her face. She stared at me, putting her heart into her eyes.

"Yes, I do love you," she said. "But I don't understand you, and it's a little scary."

All honesty and sincerity, so honest it frightened me all over again. Yet it freed me as well for this sincere expression of love gave meaning to my existence, gave me a reason to live, and nothing else mattered. I kissed her again, but this time I kept us on the ground until the kiss was done.

I took her flying, putting my trench coat around her to protect her from the

cold. She was so thrilled that I felt like a kid again, basking in her innocent joy. We barnstormed the city of Charleston until the cold got to be too much for her mortal flesh, and we went back to Cat Dancers'. I could not bear to pry myself away from her, and we ordered a couple of drinks. She did all the drinking, while I drank in the pleasure of being close to her again.

She noticed I was only pretending to drink the beers I ordered, but she did not mention it. She speculated about what it meant without ruining our reunion with questions I could not answer. Instead she let me ask her all the questions and I was astonished at what she had been doing since I left.

After my funeral she quit dancing and enrolled in college, intent on becoming a nurse. She had met a guy named Neil at college, and had married him after dating for six months. Something was missing from her life, and she had tried to fill the void with a change of career and then with marriage. But her marriage to this Neil asshole only lasted ten months. He had tried to turn her into someone she was not, and her giving nature made her try to re-invent her personality to live up to his expectations of what a wife should be.

I could only wonder what sort of freak of nature could possibly want anything else from a woman than the perfection sitting next to me. Angie was perfect for me, but not for Neil. She did not live up to the standard he measured her against: his own mother. I cannot pity Neil, for even his own mother could never live up to the ideal his mind had created. Maybe someday he would settle for some woman he didn't love and stay with her, but he would never know the joy of finding a truly compatible soul, the treasure of true love. I hope I never run into Neil, for I would probably regret what I would do to this control freak for hurting my beloved Angel, my Angie. She has a child-like vulnerability that brings out the protector in me, my nurturing instinct. She is full of joy and brings me joy, but when something hurts her it hurts me even more.

This disastrous marriage ended with her leaving both school and her husband to take up dancing again as a means of supporting herself and to prove to herself that she was truly desirable, and more importantly to hurt Neil, who hated the fact that she had been a dancer at all. She did not put all these

intangibles into words, but I knew her, and could read between the lines of what she was telling me well enough.

She had become a dancer again out of spite to hurt her ex-husband, and this was the thread of truth I picked out from her story. Yet it raised a new question. What had led her to become a dancer in the first place? It was a rebellion against injustice that made her want to dance more than a desire for adoration. She needed the adoration I gave her, but it was not the lack of it that had prompted her to become a dancer. There was something more; a pain buried so deep that perhaps she never thought of it any more. But I doubted that. A pain so deep is never truly forgotten. She had buried her pain so deep that I had not noticed the glimpses of it in the poetry she had shared with me, seeing it as abstract. But I had learned to look at the world through new eyes and this hidden pain was close to her the way my own hidden secret one was close and ever-present. My torment was something I could not share with her for she would hate me, I was sure.

“Your beer’s getting warm,” she said. “Have you quit drinking?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Then why did you order it?”

“Habit.” I shrugged. “Plus it helps me to blend in.”

“Did you give up smoking, too?”

“Yeah. I don’t need them anymore.”

As those words left my lips a revelation struck me. The last time I had tried to smoke a cigarette Lilith had told me ‘You will need those no longer’. Had the cigarette set my throat and lungs on fire for real, or because Lilith told me it would? I decided to try a little experiment.

“Let me have one of your cigarettes,” I said.

“Why? If you’ve quit then you don’t need to start back again. It’s a bad habit.”

“I know,” I replied. “I’m not going to start smoking again; I just need to test something.”

She gave me a cigarette and I lit it, inhaling. It tasted terrible, and I

wondered how I had ever become addicted to something that tasted so bad. But it did not harm me. This was proof that every time Lilith had spoken to me she had added a subtle mental command behind her spoken words, just as she did with all of her victims. How could I have been so blind? Did I really believe I was so special to her that she would respect me? I certainly knew better, but I was a total idiot not to notice before. Yet I could not be too angry at myself. She had centuries of practice to become subtle, making all her mental manipulations seem like the most natural thing in the world. I snuffed out the cigarette in the ashtray.

"It's late," I said. "I should be going." Thinking of Lilith reminded me that I was putting Angie in great danger by associating with her.

"Oh, no, you don't," Angie said. "I'm coming with you." Angie stood and stomped her foot. "Mike, I swear to God. If you walk out that door without me you'd better not bother coming back. You walked out on me once and got yourself into some big mess so terrible you're afraid to tell me about it. And I swear that if you do it to me again I'll never forgive you. Ever!"

I could see by the look on her face that she meant every word. What else could I do? I took her in my arms and kissed her.

"Angie, I love you so much that I could not bear to see something bad happen to you. If you come with me, we'll both be in danger."

"I love you, too. Do you think that makes it any easier for me to wonder what bad things might happen to you if you walk out that door on your own?"

She pinched me hard through my shirt, over my ribs, and I flinched. As usual I was thinking of my own feelings. But what about her feelings? At that moment I felt that the two of us could handle any situation, and besides, if Lilith wanted me dead I wouldn't even be here. How could I possibly justify walking out? Apparently Angie knew me well enough to guess what I was going to say for she threw herself into my arms with a firm hug.

"Let me get my coat and purse. I'll be right back."

She headed toward the dressing room at the rear of the bar with a purposeful stride, and as I watched her another thought occurred to me. Lilith

already knew about Angie, just as she had known about Jennifer and our baby in Tennessee. I had learned to shield my mind from Lilith before dreams of Angie had begun to torment me, but Lilith had stolen me away from Angie by manipulating my mind, and it seemed to me a miracle that Angie had been left alive. Lilith would kill such a rival out of sheer spite. Suddenly taking Angie with me seemed necessary. It was the only way I could have a chance of protecting her. Lilith could destroy her at any time. I had gotten out of the habit of thinking for myself, but I had better start thinking fast if I wanted to keep us both alive.

By the time Angie had gathered her belongings and come back I had a plan. First of all, we were going to need help and I could not count on the ring Asmodeus had given me, for Lilith's plan of giving birth to the Antichrist must have been his idea. Fabian and Diana were in as much trouble as me if they were alive at all, and so I must locate them. And then there was Anshar. He had a secret Lilith did not want me to know and it was past time I found out what it was. But it was late and all that would have to wait until tomorrow. For tonight I needed to spend time with Angie and try to explain just exactly what sort of trouble we both were in.

There was a motel not far away and I flew us there in a moment. I was happy that I got to sign my name as Juker P. Funkenstein when I rented a room. I don't know why I think that's funny, but it never ceases to amuse me. I had a lot of explaining to do, so I figured I should get some of it out of the way before dawn, even though sunrise was hours away. But Angie had other ideas, and it wasn't hard for her to convince me that being alone together was heaven on Earth.

Her mortal blood sang to me as we made love, but I was not even tempted to taste it. Being with her was better than such a physical fulfillment for making love to her was truly spiritual. I had been reunited with my soul mate and I reveled in the joy of becoming one with the one who completed me. I was keenly aware of how deeply I loved her, and I could feel her love for me that transcended what we had together so far beyond mere sex. I was reminded of all the reasons I loved her, the many things we had in common. Foremost was our

spontaneity, our unconstrained passion for life. She had the courage to make rash decisions on a whim, and damn the consequences, just like me. She had sense enough to obey her rational mind when necessary, but like me she was prone to give in to her emotions rather than conform to what other people thought you should do. We both had a talent for rationalizing socially acceptable behavior and discarding what seemed unnecessary; obeying moral codes that we created ourselves, unhindered by the perceptions of others. And we had the same unspoken law. If it feels good do it; but if it will get you into trouble, then don't get caught.

Angie lay in my arms, her head on my shoulder and her body pressed against mine, spent from our lovemaking. I felt her drifting off to sleep and realized that I had to tell her everything before the Rest overcame me. She would wake up to find me seemingly dead, and I did not want to give her a surprise like that. I squeezed her tighter against me, and whispered in her ear.

"My sweet, beloved Angel, you complete me. You make me feel whole," I said, as she rolled over to look at me. I gazed into her wonderful eyes, watching them shine forth love as she smiled tenderly. "But I need to explain to you why we are both in some really deep trouble."

"You mean you're actually going to tell me?" She rose up on one elbow.

"You'll probably hate me if I can make you believe me at all." What I had to tell her took a true leap of faith. I had found it hard to believe Lilith was a vampire even after she had not only told me so, but had bitten me twice. "Lilith, the evil bitch who has held me prisoner is the Queen of evil. She is a vampire, and she turned me into a vampire, as well." She waited for me to continue, looking at me in disbelief. "I can tell you don't believe me, but I swear on my soul that it's true."

I tried to think of something I could do to prove it to her. She knew I could fly, had seen me cry blood, and yet the rational mind has trouble grasping impossibilities. She could see the gears slipping in my brain as I failed to come up with proof she would accept, and she decided to lighten the mood.

"So what are you going to do? Turn into a bat or something?"

"I don't know how to do that. I bet Lilith could, but I can't imagine any

reason why she would.”

The mention of Lilith’s name again changed her mood; even though she did not know Lilith, the fact that I did was enough to make her a rival. I will never understand women if I live to be a million years old. I saw her tense up.

“I can’t turn into a bat, or a wolf, or a fox; not even a rat. But I can fly, as I have already proved to you, and I can do other things...” I had decided to assume ethereal form and slip out of the room as further proof.

“You have already amazed me tonight, Mike, but if you’re really a vampire, then where are your fangs?” She smiled at me, still unconvinced.

“I could show you, but I would have to let the Thirst overcome me and I do not want to do that.” I stared at her in desperation, hoping she would not require this.

She returned my stare. “There is no doubt that you have changed, but surely you don’t really believe what you are saying?”

“It’s the truth,” was all I could say.

“But you can’t be a vampire!” she said, as if I were some sort of delusional idiot. “You’re just as alive as me. Your heart beats, your flesh is warm,” she cast a lingering glance at my crotch. “And your dick is very much alive, even though he’s asleep right now. Oh, I see he’s waking up.” Watching her look at my cock was enough to cause the first stirrings of an erection, but it faded in my frustration.

“All right, never mind that,” I said. “The important thing is that Lilith is very powerful, with extremely powerful friends, and sooner or later she is going to try to kill us. But here is the worst part. I have to destroy her, absolutely must, because if I don’t it will mean the end of the world.”

“That’s some pretty heavy shit.”

“I’m totally serious. She knows about you and I wouldn’t put it past her to kill you out of sheer spite. That’s why I have to keep you close to me and hope I can find a way to protect you from her.” I had no clue how to do that, but I was working on it. “Anyways, that’s the basic story,” I said, pulling her close and kissing her earlobe. “Even though I don’t know how to convince you, there’s

something else you must know before you go to sleep. I don't sleep anymore; I do something Lilith calls the Rest. I lay perfectly still from sunrise to sunset, and it will look like I am dead. I wanted you to know, because I didn't want to scare you when you wake up and see me that way."

I could tell she did not know what to make of this, so I held her close until she fell asleep in my arms, and with the coming of dawn I let the Rest overtake me. When I awakened Angie was sitting in a chair beside the bed, smoking a cigarette and drinking a coke.

"Good evening," she said, setting down her drink and putting her cigarette in the ashtray.

Then she smiled at me. I smiled back, and she grabbed a pillow from between her feet and hit me right in the face with it. I saw it coming, but I was so surprised that I simply let her do it. The look of shock on my face made her giggle, and that sound made my heart swell with love for her. She started to hit me again, but I grabbed her and pulled her onto the bed with me. We wrestled, both of us giggling and tickling each other like children until I pinned her below me, staring down at her smiling face.

"You needed that," she said. "I was beginning to think you had forgotten how to have fun."

"You're right. I haven't had much fun lately," I said, my smile slipping a notch.

"I know. I read your little story while you were 'Resting'," she said, and I let her up.

"Really?" I asked, filled with excitement and dread. "Do you believe me now?"

She sat up, tucking her feet under her legs just as I had done. "Well, I believe that something really weird has happened to you, because the first thing I did when I woke up was check on you. At first I thought you weren't breathing, so I checked for a pulse. It was barely forty beats per minute, but very strong and steady." She had some training as a nurse, although incomplete; she could handle seeing me in that state more rationally than I could when looking at Lilith

in the same state. "I had to put the mirror from my compact up to your face to prove you were still breathing, since it was so shallow, but you were still alive. You just didn't look like it at first glance. Since you had warned me I didn't try to wake you up, even though you showed all the classic signs of catalepsy. I still did not believe your crazy idea about being a vampire, but I covered you with a blanket before I opened the door and went outside, just in case."

"Where did you go?"

"I had some guy in the motel lobby give me a ride back to my car, and then I went to my apartment to pick up a few things."

I saw that she had two large duffel bags by the door when she nodded her head in that direction. I had already noticed that she was wearing a different outfit: cut-off jeans (her Daisy Dukes), sneakers, and a tie-dyed tank top. But I had been so glad to see her when I awoke that I had not thought to question such trivialities.

"And then I came back here and started reading. I got so wrapped up in your story that I didn't even stop to eat. I ordered room service and kept right on reading while I ate. I hope you don't mind?"

"Mind what?" I wondered.

"That I ordered room service."

I laughed. "Like I would care about that!"

I wasn't even planning on paying the bill, but I realized that this was a bad habit I had picked up from Lilith, and that maybe I should find a way to pay my bills without manipulating other peoples' minds. Another debt of guilt to add to my soul. Then again, corporate greed and the obsession with material wealth are major flaws in modern society, and why should I contribute to them?

"But now that you have read it, do you believe me?"

She sighed and looked away. "I want to, Mike. Or should I call you Samael?"

I cringed. "Please. Don't! I love to hear you say my real name. And I wish I could forget all about that other name."

"But this is all so crazy. Do you expect me to believe that you really met

the Devil? That he is some sort of beautiful god and not a monster?"

I showed her my ring. She took my hand and examined it closely. "Oh, my God," she whispered, and I saw a measure of doubt fall from her face. "But how am I supposed to know where you really got this? I can believe that something weird has happened, because you have shown me some things I would never have believed, but this is more than I can take!"

She jumped up, putting her face in her hands. I left her alone for a moment, giving it a chance to sink in before I stood and wrapped my arms around her.

"It's all true; every word of it," I whispered, into her ear.

"But how can I know it's not some delusion, some spell you've been under, cast by a witch or something?"

"Would that be easier to believe?" I asked her. "We are going to need help, and tonight I am going looking for Fabian. If he's still alive I think I can find him. And if meeting him doesn't convince you, meeting Diana will for sure."

She hugged me fiercely, and I could smell her fear. "Make love to me, Mike," she whispered. "I really need you to make love to me."

Such a request from her was impossible to refuse. We made love with a tender passion as I tried my best to worship her, as she deserved. But when she came close to her first orgasm she cried out.

"Bite me, Mike! I want you to bite me!"

This brought me crashing down from the heights of passion. I pulled out of her and rose to my knees. "No!" I said, in a whisper that was a shout.

Her blood sang to me, and my fangs were exposed, but I was appalled that she would ask this of me. She gripped my arms, breathing heavily in her arousal, and pulled me down to her again. She rolled us over so that she was on top and I did not resist. She adorned my face with passionate kisses before she spoke again.

"I need it, Mike. I need to feel the ecstasy of the blood you describe so sweetly if I am going to believe you. If what you have told me is true, then I need this as proof."

I pulled her down against me, crushing her to my breast without hurting her. "Oh, Angie. I could never do such a thing to you."

She was excited and tried to break free from my embrace. After a moment of hesitation I let her. She sat up, placing a hand on my chest and tossing her hair back.

"But you said that it does not really cause any harm. You claimed that you had already been bitten before I ever met you. If you really want me to believe this crazy story, you gotta prove it. Bite me."

She met my gaze with determination. I could never refuse her any request. If she had told me to set myself on fire to prove my love for her, I would have done it, but this was something that would change us both forever.

"Okay," I said, "but not yet."

I needed time to build my courage and to regain the arousal her request had killed in me. We started all over as if nothing had occurred. I had to drop my mental shields and touch her mind. I basked in the joy of her pleasure without touching the persona behind it more than necessary. When I felt her passion coming close to a peak I sank my fangs into her neck. As her blood flowed into me I felt her cum, as if this were the pinnacle of pleasure towards which she had been striving all her life. Her sweet nature pulsed into me as I thrust myself into her, but I could stand no more. I came with her, my lips clamped hard on her neck, but no longer drinking. A simple sip of her was all I needed and I bit my lip and sealed her wound as soon as I regained control of myself. I looked down at her. She was panting, still aroused even after such an explosive orgasm. Her eyes were wide in astonishment.

"And now for you." I bit my wrist, and offered it to her slightly parted lips. She looked at me, uncertain. "Don't worry. The first time won't change you; it will just create an even stronger bond between us."

She hesitated, as my blood dripped onto her chest, and then she put her lips to my wrist. This was a totally new sensation for me. Feeling the euphoria of my blood projected back at me from her mind as my essence seeped into her, giving her a feeling of what it was like to be me. I had to close the wounds and

make her stop when I felt her mind would be overwhelmed. Too much too soon could drive her insane. When it was done she jumped from the bed and paced like a caged animal.

“My God. I’m so full of energy, I feel like I could jump right out of my skin!” She was excited, but it reminded me of myself when I had been seduced by the power and unaware of the consequences. “How do you stand it, to feel this way all the time?”

“You get used to it,” I said flatly, ashamed of what I had done.

Suddenly she leaped across the room and threw her arms around me and we rolled around on the bed. I knew what she was feeling, but I also knew it was a deadly trap, an addiction from which there is no recovery. The thought of her becoming like Lilith took the joy out of me, but I tried not to let it show. I didn’t do a very good job.

“What’s wrong, Mike?”

I broke loose from her embrace and sat up. “Do you finally believe me?”

“I guess I have no choice. But what’s bothering you now?”

I tried to explain how seeing her so excited reminded me of how Lilith had trapped me, and the thought of her becoming like Lilith made me wish I had never been born. And then she said something that made me look at everything in a whole new light.

“I know you, and you have changed, it’s true. You can do all these amazing things now, and you will never grow old. Yet you haven’t really changed at all. You’re still the same tender sweetheart, even after all that’s happened. This Lilith may be an evil bitch, but she always was. Becoming a vampire hasn’t changed you at all, not the real you inside. It bothers you that you take blood from people, but if they were to go to the Red Cross and donate it, they would be no better off. You are not evil, you’re just too damn considerate for your own good!”

Maybe she was right. Was I truly evil? I thought so, but then I compared my methods of feeding to what Anshar did. What I took from my victims was never more than what they could spare, and I did it with consideration. It was

fundamentally wrong, but I could live with it much easier now.

Locating Fabian turned out to be harder than I expected. I centered my mind on him and found nothing. This blankness led me to believe the worst. That Lilith had destroyed him. In desperation I concentrated on Diana afraid that I would find the same nothingness. But I remembered the name she had given me privately: Raquel. It was this name I called to, and to my surprise I received an immediate response.

“Stay put. I am coming.”

Forty minutes later she walked through the locked door of my hotel room. By then I had showered with Angie and we were dressed and awaiting her arrival.

“Well, it certainly took you long enough to call out to me,” she said, as I stepped toward her.

Angie stood, as well, but she merely stared in fascination at this vision of a voluptuous predator. The red dress she was wearing again reminded me of Jayne Mansfield as she hugged me and kissed me on the cheek in a motherly fashion.

“I see you have a new companion,” she said, staring at Angie.

“Yes,” I replied. “This is Angie, the love of my life.” I took Angie’s hand and pulled her forward. “Angie, this is Diana.”

Angie nodded, and said, “Nice to meet you.”

But it sounded as if it were the furthest thing from the truth. Angie slid her arm around me and pressed herself possessively against me. I got the impression that they were sizing each other up like fighters before a match with me as the prize. I will never understand women if I live to be ten million years old.

“Pleased to meet you,” Diana said, with a smile that was predatory. “She is beautiful, Samael, and you compliment each other perfectly.” This helped to put Angie at ease, at least a little.

“Thank you,” Angie and I answered, and we all laughed.

I asked Diana to call me Mike and she surprised me by saying that she would do so if I called her Raquel. I had not expected her to share this name with

Angie. Of course, I had already put it on paper, but Raquel did not know that. Suddenly I realized Raquel must know every thought in my Angie's head. I was offended, because Angie was defenseless against this intrusion, but I decided not to make an issue of it as long as Raquel did not try to manipulate her. I could extend my mental shield to cover Angie, as well, and when I did so Raquel gave me a secretive smile.

We talked about all that had happened and I thanked her for saving me. She told me that she wanted to help me when I had faced Lilith in the temple of Kali, but the coven was too powerful. Each member had their own agenda, and none dare challenge Lilith for the rest would descend on them to gain her favor. Lilith was queen strictly by right of birth, not power or age, and she was hated and envied by all. This sounded like something I could use to my advantage.

I trusted Raquel, so I told her the whole story. How Lilith had used me to father the Antichrist, and that I intended to destroy her before she could give birth to the abomination. She did not seem too surprised, but I did not know if she already knew Lilith's plan or if she had taken it from Angie's mind before I shielded it. So I asked her. And she opened her mind to me, letting me see her every thought. She hated Lilith as much as I did, she had known this was going to happen someday, but she had gotten her proof from Angie's mind. I sensed her apology for invading my lover's mind, but it was a source of information too tempting to pass up.

She then explained the nature of the true name, which was how I contacted her so easily. Such a trust was sacred, yet both Angie and I had what she called hidden names, just as Lilith did. My true name was Michael, or so I thought, but Raquel insisted that I had another name that even I did not know, and so did Angie. Lilith had a hidden name as well. These made our true names less of a tool for others to use against us, but such a thing was rare. It was easy to understand why Lilith might have a hidden name, given her unnatural parentage, but as for Angie and me our hidden names were a secret that only God (and maybe the Devil) knew. I could not comprehend how she could know this, but Raquel was ancient with a wisdom and knowledge incomprehensible to

one as young as I. She had survived for a thousand years and knew things I could not possibly guess.

I asked Raquel about Fabian, but she could tell me little about him. They had conspired together to set me free and he had disappeared when I did. As far as she knew he was in hiding somewhere, but she knew no more than that. I told her that I intended to confront Anshar and she agreed that this was an excellent idea. Raquel knew nothing about Janos, and had no idea what sort of secret Anshar was hiding, but she agreed that it was time we found out. If we could locate Lilith's creator and convince him that the birth of the Antichrist was a bad idea we would gain an ally with the ability to control Lilith just the way she controls me.

I felt I had a solid ally in Raquel, yet I asked her how committed she was to seeing this through. She had stood by and done nothing when I was in danger of being destroyed, and now I had to know just how far she was willing to go. To Angie it must have seemed that Raquel and I had spent the past few moments staring at each other, but Raquel spoke aloud, including Angie in our conversation.

"I have committed myself to you, Mike, by distracting Lilith so that you could escape. We are bound together, and your fate is mine. If we fail to destroy her, then I will be destroyed just as surely as you. But we will not let that happen."

We discussed our options. Before we could openly confront Lilith we needed some sort of leverage, and hopefully Anshar's secret would help us to turn Lilith's coven against her. For only a majority of these immortals allied against her could stand up to those who would come to her assistance.

We traveled together to Anshar's remote stronghold, and Raquel taught me how to shield Angie's mortal flesh from the cold by enfolding her in my aura, just as I did to carry her. I would have rather left her somewhere safe, but I knew of nowhere truly safe, and I am sure that Angie would not have put up with it if I had tried to leave her behind, so I simply brought her along. Raquel spoke to me telepathically.

“This would be much easier if you would just give her the gift of immortality.”

“It’s not a gift; it’s a curse. And I do not want to see her become what I have become,” I replied.

“Don’t you want to be with her forever? How else do you expect to do that? And she wants you to, even if she hasn’t fully admitted it to herself.”

I had no reply to that, so I kept silent until we arrived at the great stone doors that marked the entrance to Anshar’s lair. As I approached the doors Angie spoke.

“What about the dogs?” She was frightened, but she was brave.

“If I can’t control them, then I’ll have to destroy them,” I said plainly.

I had no fear that they could do me any permanent harm. I felt strong enough and quick enough to kill them without too much trouble. I pulled open one of the doors and drew my saber, waiting.

“I can keep the dogs at bay,” Raquel informed me, “but it will require all of my concentration. You may have to deal with Anshar alone.”

And then the dogs were upon us. True to her word, Raquel’s willpower was strong enough to subdue Anshar’s hellhounds, but not as thoroughly as Lilith had. She had no tie of blood with Anshar, so she could not cower them into instant obedience. But she managed to keep them at bay, snarling their hatred at us. I could not bring myself to slaughter them when they were no longer a direct threat, so I sheathed my sword and stepped around them keeping Angie close to me. Raquel stayed behind with the dogs, forcing them out the open door so she could shut them outside. But this was a battle of inches that could take a while and I did not want to wait. I went in search of Anshar taking Angie with me.

I headed for the master bedchamber. I could feel Anshar in there, but as we walked down the candlelit hallway Angie slowed and then stopped, just as I had done when Lilith brought me here.

“That’s her, isn’t it?” she asked. She walked up to Lilith’s portrait and I followed her. “She’s beautiful.”

“Not compared to you, she’s not,” I replied, tilting her face to look at me.

"You are everything she isn't, and far more beautiful than she could ever hope to be."

I kissed her, and she kissed me back with more passion than I deserved. But we were here for a reason, and I could feel Anshar's presence ahead of us. I found Anshar waiting for us.

"Samael, so nice to see you again," he said, kissing my cheeks.

"Anshar, this is Angel," I said, for I did not care to give him her real name.

He kissed her hand. "Charmed, my dear," he said, with a condescending smile. "A mortal, Samael? And she has tasted of you, has she not? What would Lilith have to say about this?"

"Lilith is the reason I am here. She has lost her mind and crossed over into the realm of insanity you are so fond of talking about. She means to destroy the world, and I intend to stop her."

He laughed. "You? What could you ever possibly do against her? But you have brought someone else. Who have you brought into my home?"

"Diana," I said, not knowing whether this name would mean anything to him.

Apparently it did, for he hissed a serpent sound through clenched teeth. His mental shield slipped and I detected fear for an instant.

"You would dare?" he screeched. "You presume too much, and trespass on my hospitality. Depart from here at once, and take that loathsome bitch with you!"

I took Angie by the arm and steered her behind me, toward the entrance and out of Anshar's reach. To my surprise she went, stepping away from us both to watch from the curtained doorway. I crossed my arms and stared at Anshar.

"I'll tell you what's going to happen," I said. "You are going to tell me about Janos. You know something Lilith doesn't want me to know, and you are going to tell me what it is. And then you are going to tell me where I can find him."

Anshar puffed up his chest and tilted his head defiantly. "And if I refuse?"

"Then you will give me an excuse to destroy you for the abomination you are." I uncrossed my arms and took four quick strides forward, which put me right

in front of him staring down his defiance with open hostility.

“I can do better than that,” he said, with a look of cunning. “I’ll send you to join Janos...in Hell!”

He lunged for me, putting a hand at my throat and slamming me into the wall twelve feet behind us. He was latched onto me with the tenacity of one of his dogs, trying to take my saber away from me. I felt him unleash a blast of mental power trying to force my mind into submission. I pushed back flinging him roughly away blasting his mind with my mental command to submit, each of us trying to overwhelm the other. Anshar slammed against the far wall and bounced back flying at me from across the room. I drew my saber and leaped toward him, intending to part his head from his body, but he was ancient, and faster than I expected. We crashed into each other in the center of the room and he ducked beneath my blade, grabbing my wrist and putting his shoulder into my sternum, pushing me toward the ceiling. I heard his dogs howling as they tried to answer his call for help, yet they were denied by Raquel.

We fought for control of the saber as we fought for control of each other’s minds. He was powerful, but I had been infused with the demonic essence of Asmodeus himself, which made me his equal for all my youth. We tumbled around the like two leaves in a tornado, and I beat him in the head with one hand while I tried to pull my saber away from him with the other. My fist was not hurting him, but I hoped my punches would distract him, anything to get my saber free for a swift strike. I kned him in the crotch several times as we bounced off the walls, but he ignored these blows as well, concentrating his effort into stripping my sword from my grip. This was getting me nowhere. I could not pry him loose. We both had one hand locked around the hilt of my saber, and I could not afford to let go of that.

Anshar’s ancient strength and blind determination were starting to shift the advantage in his favor, and I felt my sword beginning to slip from my fingers. If I didn’t get the upper hand soon I was going to lose this struggle. Out of sheer desperation I followed my instincts. Instead of pushing him away I pulled him in close to me and bit him on the throat. He stiffened up and convulsed, then he

struggled for a moment, but my will was strong enough that I overpowered his mind and he ceased to resist. As simple as that it was over. I drained fully half of his essence before I stopped to question him.

Anshar revealed Lilith's secret. Back when Anshar was still mortal Lilith had convinced him to go to Janos while the Rest was upon him and drive a wooden stake through his heart. This did not destroy Janos, but it made him helpless against Lilith, and she went to Janos that night. She pulled out the stake reviving him, but while he was wounded and weak she was able to steal his essence and suck him dry. She burned the body. Her destruction of her creator was Lilith's great secret, an unforgivable crime among our kind, the very same crime I was determined to commit. But this shattered my plans of recruiting Janos as an ally.

Anshar had no further information that I could use, and he begged me to finish what I had started and end his miserable existence while he had briefly found the courage to face death. He sickened and disgusted me, and this pitiful groveling did nothing to help. He deserved death for all he had done, so I obliged him. I drained the last of his essence, increasing my own power. This was another crime: one immortal feeding on another to the point of death, but I did not care. A sentence of death had been passed upon me, so I was already living on borrowed time.

I let Anshar's body fall to the floor and looked down at his withered remains. I had drained him until he was nothing more than a mummified corpse. His shriveled form felt lighter than a child in my arms when I dropped him, yet I suspected that a single drop of blood would be sufficient to once again stir the tenacious spark of unlife in this withered husk. I wondered if I had looked like this when Lilith had nearly killed me. With a single swift stroke of my saber I decapitated him, setting his head on his chest. I took a candle and set his clothing on fire. He caught quickly and burned fiercely, and then with a big flash nothing remained but smoldering ash.

Anshar's dogs died with him, for they were unnatural creations connected to him by a bond of blood. This made me wonder if I had just destroyed Fabian,

but Raquel assured me that I had not. Fabian had been made immortal in a way that no mere animal can be.

Now that Anshar was dead Raquel and Angie located his children. Before I knew it these two women were best friends or like sisters as they mothered these boys. They decided that we would have to stay and care for them until Raquel could find them loving homes. And so for the next few evenings they went shopping, bringing decent food, clothing, toys and motherly love into the lives of boys who had known none of these things. And one by one Raquel found homes for them, doing her best to erase the memory of what they had endured from their mortal minds. But the trauma was deep, and although she could bury it even deeper where they would never remember it, she could not purge it from their memories completely.

Angie and I were sitting at Anshar's huge dining room table and talking when I felt the presence of an immortal entering our temporary home. Raquel was taking one of the boys to his new foster home, and for a moment I hoped that it was Fabian, but it wasn't. It was Gilgamesh. I stood and drew my saber when I recognized his aura.

"Maybe you should go check on the kids." I said, stepping toward the main entrance as I felt Gilgamesh approaching rapidly.

"Why? What's the matter?" she asked.

"Just go. Hurry!" I shouted, more roughly than I intended.

I wanted to get her out of harm's way, but it was too late. Gilgamesh stepped into the room and Angie froze, paralyzed by Gilgamesh's dominating will. He smiled at me and it was not a pleasant thing to see.

"Well, fledgling, I did not expect to find you here," he said, coming near. "But you are just the one I wanted to find."

"What are you doing here, Gilgamesh?" I pointed my saber at him, and he stopped just out of reach.

"I came here to force Anshar to find Fabian for me, but that no longer matters. You are the one I really want. Lilith will be most pleased when I bring you back to her."

“Try it, and you just might lose your head,” I said, balancing myself on the balls of my feet and cocking my wrist.

Gilgamesh laughed. “You are no match for me, fledgling,” he said, and to prove his point he reached out and snapped the blade of my saber in half.

Our eyes locked in a battle of willpower, and I could feel my mind bending slowly. He stepped closer, and I dropped my broken sword and raised my hands instinctively, although I am not sure what good this would do. Suddenly a glint of ruby light caught my attention. It was a sparkle from my ring. Had it reflected a stray beam of light, or was it more than coincidence? In desperation I called out to my Lord Asmodeus and instantly he was there, as if he had been there waiting in the shadows. When Gilgamesh felt the presence of Asmodeus our mental struggle immediately ceased. Gilgamesh fell to the floor, prostrating himself in a quivering mass and blubbing incoherently. I dropped to one knee beside him and bowed my head.

“My Lord,” I said, reverently. I felt Asmodeus place a hand on my head tenderly.

“Rise, my son,” he said, putting his fingers under my chin and tilting my head up to meet his gaze.

Suddenly it was as if my blood had turned to water and I shivered. What had I done? Surely he would blast my soul from my body and condemn me to eternal damnation for considering the destruction of Lilith and what was to be his vessel for mortal incarnation. My mental shields were worthless against him. He was fully aware of my every thought. Asmodeus smiled at me and shook his head.

“Do you really think I would destroy you, Samael? You have no idea who you are, do you? There is not the faintest spark of memory in you. But that can be remedied.”

I was overwhelmed with relief and wonder. I had no idea what his cryptic words meant, but before I could ask a question I was overcome with anxiety as a single thought drove all others out of my mind. Angie! I turned to see her standing at the head of the table. She had watched helplessly while I struggled

with Gilgamesh, and now she was faced with the sight of Asmodeus himself. My heart went out to her.

“Go to her,” he said, just as I was taking my first tentative steps in her direction.

I needed no further encouragement, and I rushed to her side. She was frozen with awe at the sight of Asmodeus, tears streaming down her cheeks, but when I took her in my arms the spell was broken and she hugged me back fiercely.

“Oh, God, Mike!” She cried on my shoulder.

“I know, I know,” I said, stroking her hair. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

At least I hoped so. And somehow I had the feeling it would, although I did not know why. Besides, it was too late for worries. The time had come to accept my fate and face my destiny. I was only sorry that my selfishness had gotten my sweet Angie involved. I put my arm around her shoulder and led her to Asmodeus.

“My God, Mike, you never described how tragic he is.”

I understood what she was saying. There was a tragedy evident in his beauty, the tragedy of his fall from grace. It was this that caused us to weep at the sight of him. His beauty was truly tragic, for as flawless as it seemed, you could feel that he had once been even more radiant, a being of pure light too bright to look upon. As we approached Asmodeus I heard Gilgamesh finally utter an intelligent sentence.

“M-my Lord God, what brings You here?” He could not look upon Asmodeus, but had managed to rise to his knees with his head bowed and his arms covering his face.

“Silence, fool,” Asmodeus said, without bothering to look at him. “I will tell you when to speak.”

I believe Gilgamesh would have bitten off his tongue if he hadn’t been afraid Asmodeus might want him to use it later.

“My Lord, allow me to present to you,” I began.

“I know who she is, Samael, better than you do for I know who she truly is.”

He smiled warmly, taking Angie’s hands in his and kissing her forehead. I was relieved that he did not greet her in the familiar way he had greeted Lilith, although it would have done me no good to get jealous if he had decided to truly kiss her. I could see that Angie was every bit as much in awe of him as I was, yet she was slightly more afraid of him. I feared him, as well, but there was a bond between he and I that allowed me to overcome my fear.

“Relax, my son,” he said. “Your beloved Angel is safe, and I promise you no harm will come to her. I know everything, for I am God and He is Me. We share the same omniscience. I told you that time is a river that flows at a steady pace, but it was not always so. Time was once a lake, and for God and for me, it still is. For me a thousand years are but a day, and a day can last for a thousand years. You have nothing to fear, for I have known this moment would come since I was cast from heaven. I only ask that you speak your heart to me and tell me what you feel.”

I did not know what to say. He asked me to speak my heart, and my heart was dedicated to Angie. I felt compelled to tell him my true feelings for her.

“Asmodeus,” I said, at last bringing myself to call him by name, “you once said that a perfect woman would complete a man, turning two individuals into one inseparable whole.” Those weren’t his exact words, but an accurate summary. “I must admit that it is not your daughter, but rather Angie who makes me feel whole and is more precious to me than Heaven itself.” I slid my arm around her waist, and she put her arm around me before I glanced back at Asmodeus. But as much as I was in awe of him, my words were for Angie’s ears as much as his, and I was compelled to stare at her fascinating eyes. “I love her more than I ever thought a person could love someone else, and my fondest dream is that she feels the same way about me.”

I watched Angie’s face, trying to judge her reaction, and she gave me a tender smile. In all the time I had known her I had never seen her blush, but she did so now, averting her eyes shyly for a moment. Then she looked at me, her

eyes shining with unshed tears.

“Oh, Mike. Those are the sweetest words I ever heard!”

She did not need words to show me how much she loved me. She did it by throwing herself into my arms and squeezing me tight, giving me her most passionate kiss as if she were trying to merge with me into a new being.

Asmodeus laughed, hugging the two of us together to his chest.

“Perfect!” he exclaimed. “A wedding is in order, and you two shall be wed with all the pomp and ceremony that Hell has to offer.”

This took me by surprise, and I looked at Angie to judge her reaction. I wanted more than anything in the world to marry her and have a normal life, but such a thing was beyond me. My life had long since ceased to be normal since I met Lilith. And what sort of wedding takes place in Hell? Angie was probably thinking the same things that were going through my mind. And then I realized that none of that mattered. What truly mattered was that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her; having her at my side was more important than anything else. I knew what I had to do, but I cast a glance at Asmodeus as I got down on one knee in front of my beloved Angel. To my surprise he produced a ring from thin air and slipped it into my hand as if he had been expecting this. I clasped Angie’s hands between mine and stared up at her with my heart in my eyes.

“I’ll understand if you say no, because I am no longer the man you fell in love with, but the fact is that I love you more than ever. You truly are my soul mate, the love of my life, and I am nothing without you. If you would consent to be my wife, I promise I would worship you forever and treat you with the tender kindness you deserve. I can’t promise you a normal life with a two-car garage and a white picket fence, but I can give you my love, and I lay my heart at your feet, for you to pick up and love me, or to step on and destroy me as you see fit.” Once again my talent for saying too much came out, so I wrapped it up, asking, “Angie, will you marry me?”

I held out the ring Asmodeus had given me ready to put it on her finger. It was a smaller version of the ring I wore, although that fact didn’t really register since my attention was focused on her reply. She stared at me for a timeless

moment, her eyes shining. I felt that her only possible answer would be no.

“Oh, Mike,” she said. “I love you so much, but there’s only one way I’ll marry you. You have to change me. I want to be like you and Raquel. I don’t ever want to stand by helpless again while you’re in danger.”

I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to be with her, but I had been living in the joy of each moment. What kind of future could we have together? If I did not change her I would have to watch her grow old and die. If I truly wanted to be with her, and I couldn’t bear the thought of not being with her, then there was only one thing I could do.

“All right,” I said. “I will give you the gift that is a curse, if that’s what it takes to be with you. Now stop tormenting me and answer the question. Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” she cried. “Yes, Mike, I would love to marry you!”

She pulled me to my feet and into her arms where I belonged, where I was whole. After a moment of bliss I remembered to complete the ceremony by putting the ring on her finger. It was a perfect fit, and while she was admiring it I heard Asmodeus speak to Gilgamesh.

“As for you, fool. You will say nothing to anyone, most especially my beloved daughter Lilith. Your loyalty belongs to me and you will worship and obey Samael as if he were my first-born son. Is that understood?”

“Perfectly, Lord God Asmodeus,” Gilgamesh replied, without looking up.

“Excellent. Now go, and keep your silence,” Asmodeus commanded, and Gilgamesh fled without a glance at any of us.

Chapter IX

For when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage;

but are as the angels, which are in heaven.

Mark 12:25

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest,
Where can we find two better hemispheres
Without sharp North, without declining West?
Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.
John Donne. "The Good Morrow"

I was overwhelmed with joy that Angie had agreed to marry me, and she seemed overwhelmed, as well, especially when Asmodeus took us to Hell and preparations began for a spectacular and unearthly wedding ceremony. Asmodeus seemed like a proud father as he issued orders, although I was unsure why he took such an interest. He introduced Angie to Ramiel, the fallen angel who would coordinate the ceremony, and left it to them to work out the details.

Angie and Ramiel were chatting like old friends, and that was what Asmodeus wanted for he needed to get me alone. He guided me away from their animated conversation leading me into the peaceful tranquility of his private gardens. I became apprehensive for I could guess his motives: Lilith and the Antichrist she was carrying in her womb. I did not know where to begin, so I kept silent as we walked.

His private garden was what I would imagine Eden to be like at night: perfect patch of woodland with open paths for walking among immaculate trees

and bushes, overflowing with delicate flowers and no thorns or brambles in sight. It was always twilight here, yet the garden bloomed with beauty. I was admiring a particular flower, a pale shade of blue that was nearly white, when Asmodeus broke the silence. He placed a hand on my shoulder, and I turned to face him intending to ask him what flower I was studying, but the look on his face drove the question right out of my mind.

Asmodeus slowly stroked his chin, and said, "Tell me, Sabbathiel. When you were mortal, did you ever dream at night that you were someone else?"

The name Sabbathiel sent a jolt through me, as if I had been struck by lightning. "I think so. I no longer remember what I dreamed about as a mortal. Those dreams are a thing of my past."

Asmodeus gave me a sad smile. "But you should think about them. You should examine them with careful introspection. Dreams can be very enlightening. After all, your mortal existence ended so recently that you cannot discount its role in making you who you now are. To understand your role in the Cosmos you must understand yourself. Think of your mortal life as your infancy. You are now taking the first steps on your long journey to maturity, and to know where you are going you must first know where you have been.

"Let me tell you a story. Two hundred years ago there was a young French priest who had just been given his first parish. His name was Jean-Baptiste Olivier and he was in love with his God, until he met my daughter Lilith. She had recently been reborn an immortal during the epidemic of vampirism that swept across Europe in the 18th Century. She was intoxicated with her new abilities and the challenge of seducing a priest, the perversity and blasphemy of it appealed to her tremendously. She succeeded in seducing the priest, ruining his life, but he cheated her by killing himself before she could convert him. That priest was you, Sabbathiel."

He was looking at me and grinning like a fox eating popcorn off a porcupine. I let what he said sink in, but I could not comprehend what he was telling me. I had no idea why he kept calling me Sabbathiel, but it was obviously important since it gave me a jolt every time I heard it. As for his story about Lilith

seducing an 18th Century priest who committed suicide, it must be some sort of riddle that I did not understand.

“What do you mean, My Lord? Are you trying to tell me that it would be suicidal to challenge Lilith?”

Asmodeus laughed. “I may be the Father of Lies, but that does not mean that I cannot comprehend the truth, and the truth is so simple that you are distorting it in an effort to understand it. Do not complicate matters. Let your memories be your guide. Open your mind, Sabbathiel, and you shall understand. Let me teach you how to tap into your memories, how to recall your dreams, and all will become clear to you.”

“What must I do?”

He put his arm around my shoulder in a fatherly fashion, pulling me close as we walked. I felt honored by such close contact with a being of such power and knowledge. I let him guide me through his garden to a grassy knoll with an ancient tree jutting up from its summit. He plucked a piece of fruit from the tree, something that could have been an apple. He sat down in the shelter of the great tree and motioned for me to sit in front of him. We faced each other, sitting cross-legged like a couple of gurus, and I watched him devour the fruit with something akin to religious ecstasy. When he was finished he tilted his head back, eyes closed, and sighed deeply. He did not move for several minutes and it seemed that he did not even breathe. At last he tilted his head forward and opened his eyes to stare into mine.

“The fruit I have eaten is the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and it will set you free,” he said to me.

“But how? I have ingested nothing but blood since I was reborn.”

“Exactly, my son,” he replied, and then he presented his neck to me.

I needed no further invitation. I drank deeply from his fiery essence, as deeply as I could stand before he pushed me away. I felt my perceptions altering, a strange sort of vertigo causing my mind to spin. Again we sat facing each other and he coached me through the experience. He told me to close my eyes and I obeyed, sighing deeply and slowing my breath as I had watched him do.

“Now,” he said, “you must think back; concentrate on your dreams. Let them overwhelm your mind and take you back to your former existence.”

I let my mind go blank, concentrating on dream images from my mortal life, willing them to surface. I jolted awake, sitting bolt upright in bed with a shuddering intake of breath. I repressed the urge to scream as the nightmare faded, sinking back into the recesses of my subconscious mind. I looked around the darkened room in confusion. I felt a strong detachment from reality, uncertain of where I was. A silver crucifix on the nightstand gleamed faintly in the moonlight, and somehow it brought me into focus. The sheets were damp as I flung them from my sweaty body. I wondered when I had started sleeping nude; it seemed inappropriate for a priest.

I sat on the edge of the bed, my face buried in my trembling hands. The room was deathly silent, as it was past midnight and the entire town was fast asleep. I sighed, and wondered how much longer I could go on this way. My nightmare had become familiar of late, its macabre images haunting me even in my waking hours. I allowed myself to remember the chilling scenes, trying to understand what it meant. It always started mildly enough.

I was standing in the church looking down on my congregation. They rose to their feet and began to sing, “Oh, the blood of Jesus!” over and over. Then they started to chant, like some pagan ritual. “Lord, cover us in Your blood!”

Thick crimson droplets rained down on them and soon the whole church was baptized with bright red blood. I could feel something breathing down my neck, as the voices became a maddening babble. With a white-knuckled grip on my Bible I tried to move out, but I was frozen. I observed in horror as their veins opened up and the blood drained from their bodies until a great river of scarlet washed over me, drowning me. I could feel the hot breath of something horrible and unholy soaking up their blood like an insatiable parasite. But there was too much blood and I was smothering, and soon this creature would consume me as well.

The thought of that unholy breath on my neck caused me to shudder even though I was fully awake. I was not sure what this nightmare represented, but it

had started with the mysterious death of Francois Laugier two months earlier. Francois had been a healthy young man only twenty-three years of age when he took sick. One day he was fine, the next he was lying in bed and shivering with fever. He had a deathly white pallor and was incoherent, unable to recognize even his own wife. The physicians could do nothing, and two days later he was dead. The nightmare began to haunt me soon after, and it became more frequent with each person who died. The physicians could offer no cure; they could not name the disease or its source. And so I prayed desperately for an answer, but God was offering no ready solutions.

I decided that I was through with sleep for the night and lit the candle by my bed. I needed to clear my head. I flung the shutters open hoping that a hint of a midsummer breeze would cleanse the stale air. My bedroom felt like a tomb; the need to get out into the fresh air was overwhelming. I dressed hastily, my fumbling hands numb and clumsy as I splashed water on my face. With wet fingers I combed my dark hair back from bloodshot eyes and with trembling hands I lifted the silver crucifix to my lips, kissing it tenderly. I put it around my neck and a peaceful contentment washed over me. But the armor of God had been heavily battered of late and my relief was only temporary. The room pressed in on me until I fled the dark house into the moonlit summer night.

My frantic random steps led me down the hill past the graveyard. The number of new graves caused me to shiver with a sense of foreboding. So many fresh mounds of earth and somehow I knew it was only the beginning. I wandered into the eerie forest, and the trees crowded in on me like specters. I followed a path that was shunned in the light of day and arrived at the broken gate of the accursed Chateau de Quesnet.

The place had stood empty for a century, ever since the mistress of the house had been burned at the stake for witchcraft. But that was long before I was sent to lead this parish, and the townsfolk avoided the subject. Thus I knew little of the facts surrounding this ill-fated family. I wrote to Archbishop Blanchot about the epidemic that was plaguing the town looking for guidance. He had responded with a letter concerning this place. The Archbishop hinted that witchcraft may be

at work in this town, but I feared that the truth was far more terrible.

Tall weeds and twisted trees grew unchecked in the broad yard, the house shrouded in clinging vines and encroaching trees. It was deep into the process of being reclaimed by the woods. I stood in front of the broken gate and stared at the ominous place, and then She appeared as if from thin air. She was wearing a beautiful white dress, flowing behind her perfect body with angelic grace. Her waist-length hair was framed by moonlight and it glistened like delicate strands of silk. Her unrestrained tresses danced in waves of loose curls, the summer breeze their partner, as she moved toward me. Her eyes were pools of unfathomable shadow compelling me to drown in their depths; so wide and inviting, so dark and mysterious. So many powerful emotions, so much worldly experience I could see lurking within these mesmerizing orbs.

“Jean-Baptiste, my love, I knew you would come,” she said.

Suddenly it became clear to me. “Marie!” I called.

I remembered everything. She had come to me one night months ago as I was walking home from a visit with dying Francois. I had been helpless to resist her flawless beauty and she had seduced me. God help me, I even let her drink my blood!

“It was you that killed Francois, and everyone since!” I exclaimed, reaching to my crucifix. “In the name of God, you are an inhuman monstrosity!”

She smiled, trapping me with her spellbinding eyes and I was her pawn. “I am more than merely human, my love. I am Immortal. I am a goddess! I killed them because they were weak. But you are not like them, Jean-Baptiste. You will not die as they have; you will become my eternal lover and we shall be together forever.”

I tried to resist her. “Get thee hence, Satan,” I cried, without conviction. “For it is written, ‘Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve’.” But my voice trembled and I gripped my crucifix with sweaty palms.

“I want to give you eternal life,” she replied, pressing her body against mine.

I could feel her warm breath on my neck. “God has already promised me

that.”

I stood rigid, but I did not have the strength to push her away. Her body writhed against mine as she showered me with passionate kisses, her hands groping, tugging impatiently at my clothing. I prayed fervently to God, but not for the strength to resist; instead I prayed that my parish would be freed of her curse. As for myself, I pleaded to God to be forgiven for what I was about to do again.

I clasped her to me and we crossed the threshold to the house, although I did not recall crossing the lawn. The house was full of cobwebs and shadows, but my eyes were held captive by her immaculate beauty, compelling me to ignore all around us. We drifted into a bedroom that had withstood the ravages of time. This was her lair, a chamber shut off from the light of day and from the Light of God.

She let her dress slip to the floor and stepped toward me. The sight of her flawless nude figure was more than I could stand. My mind was racked with a fever born of fleshly desires and I threw my crucifix from me and shed my clothes as if they were on fire. We fell onto the bed my inhibitions discarded like so much chaff on the wind. She pressed me down into the bed and sat on top of me, pinning my wrists with amazing strength. She took me inside her and made love to me in a very aggressive manner. Just as my seed was ready to flow into her she leaned forward and sank her fangs into my neck. The instant of sharp pain became unbelievable ecstasy and my orgasm erupted into her with incredible intensity. With a long sharp fingernail like a talon she made a small gash on her breast compelling me to drink her blood. God curse me for my weakness, but I drank. I put my mouth to her breast and suckled the hot blood. This forbidden nectar gave me such a blissful sensation that I would have drained her dry had she not pushed me away. She laughed, her head tossed back and her dark hair swaying seductively.

“You see that your God is not so omnipotent after all,” she said, with a smile that displayed her glistening fangs. “Could He possibly give you such ecstasy as I have shown you tonight?”

In shame I looked away. “No,” I responded feebly.

Yet these were carnal pleasures. I wanted to explain to her the spiritual joy that came from God, but my own guilt kept me silent. My family was wealthy and it had been my father's money more than my own righteousness that had advanced my position in the church. This knowledge was a cross I bore daily, and the ease with which I succumbed to her temptations only proved my unworthiness.

"Come, my love. Do not be so sullen," she said. "Denounce your inferior God and worship me instead!" Her hands caressed my body and I felt myself becoming aroused again. "Let me convert you, let me show you what it is like to be a god!"

This was too much to comprehend and I drew away from her. "Why have you chosen me? What prompted you to damn my soul to hell?"

"Don't you see, my love? I offer you an eternal life of pleasure, not damnation. It was fate that brought me back to my birthplace after so many years, fate that has brought us together, my darling lover. Join me and we shall rule the night, feasting on the souls of the weak," But my uncertainty caused me to shy from her touch. "Think about what I offer you." She dressed in haste as I sat at the foot of the bed, my mind a chaotic maelstrom. "I shall leave you alone for a while, but I shall return before dawn."

I saw nothing but a blur by the window as the shutters flew open and slammed shut again. I knew where she was going: to steal the life from Louis Trillet, the latest person to show signs of the curse. I had prayed to God for an answer to this plague, but I had not been prepared for this. Louis and I were both beyond salvation, but there was still hope for the rest of the town. I knew what I must do. I could not become like her; she must be stopped, destroyed even at the cost of my own soul.

I dressed, leaving my crucifix where it had fallen, resolved to find some way to end this madness while I had the strength to resist her. I dashed madly from that accursed house and sprinted through the dark woods, tripping and falling and slamming headlong into three different trees in my reckless haste, but I did not let such things delay me. I arrived breathless at my church, but I stopped

short of entering the holy place. I fell to the ground and wept. I had forsaken God's love for the pleasures of the flesh, and my shame was too great to overcome. Anger coursed through me; anger and black hatred for the witch who had reduced me to this. With grim determination I rose to my feet and turned my back on the church, heading for the home of Antoine Marais, my closest friend in this town.

My insistent pounding brought his servant to the door and I demanded to see Monsieur Marais as once. My disheveled appearance and abrupt manner greatly startled the man, and he fled back into the house, leaving me standing in the open doorway. I let myself in and Antoine came rushing down the stairs half-dressed, his manservant following along timidly behind.

"Jean-Baptiste! What brings you here at this ungodly hour?"

"I have found the cause of our mysterious disease, but there is no time to explain." I grabbed Antoine by the shoulders and stared into his startled eyes. "I need to borrow your carriage, and a pistol."

"A pistol? But father," he gasped, in astonishment.

"That is right, a pistol. I also need several pints of oil and a cask of gunpowder if you have it," I said, pacing as I contemplated what I was about to attempt.

"I shall do as you ask, but you must explain your reasoning. I implore you!"

"There is no time for explanations! Will you help me or must I go elsewhere?" I demanded, my patience exhausted.

"Very well," he said, stiffly. "Latour! Ready the carriage! Father Olivier and I shall be departing shortly."

"No, my friend, this is something I must do alone."

"But surely I can be of some assistance?" Antoine asked.

"You can help me by loaning me the things I have asked for, but you must not accompany me on this dreadful mission. I do battle with the forces of Hell this night and your very soul could be forfeit." With these cryptic words I persuaded him.

He led me into his study. "I can give you all the oil you can carry," he said,

as we walked, “but I have only one horn of powder. Just enough for a few loads.”

“Then I will have to make due without the gunpowder.”

He opened a cherry wood case and removed an ornate pair of silver-trimmed dueling pistols. He loaded them with practiced ease. “Here you are, my friend, but I do not understand how you expect to accomplish God’s work with such tools.”

I sighed, thrusting the pistols into my waistband like some sort of privateer. “Neither do I, but God willing, I shall explain everything to you in the morning.”

The carriage was ready and I climbed in beside a large sack full of oil flasks.

“I shall pray for you, father,” said Antoine.

“Pray for yourself and the rest of this town,” I replied, and I left him behind as I coaxed the matched pair of geldings to their most rapid pace.

The moon had set and dawn was a few hours away. I did not have much time left, but I was forced to let the horses establish their own pace in the darkened woods while I urged them on with the best of my ability. The moon had set by the time I reached my destination and I went into the house burdened by the sack full of oil flasks on my back. I sat the sack down and began to fling the flasks of oil all around. I went up the stairs into the bedchamber, shattering flasks of oil against the walls as I dragged the sack behind me. I shattered the rest of the oil flasks in the bedchamber and stood like a statue at the foot of the bed, a lit lantern in one hand and a loaded pistol in the other. I cocked the hammer and waited. It was nearly dawn when Marie slipped into the room through the closed window. She was as silent as fog and just as intangible when I felt her presence.

“My Love! What have you done?” she demanded. Suddenly she was standing in front of me, barely a foot between us.

“Your evil must be stopped,” I replied, taking several steps backwards.

“I offer to share my life with you, I give you my heart, and this is how you respond?” She stepped towards me and I raised the pistol.

“You do not know love, Marie. You are a killer, a bloodthirsty fiend!” My hand trembled terribly as I tried to keep the pistol aimed at her.

She stood a few paces away from me, and her eyes flashed in anger. "By God's own bastard son! Damn you, you ungrateful fucking cur! Marie? Ha! You are no longer worthy to speak that name. You call me evil, but I am no more evil than an owl or any other predator. I only do what I must to survive." She was suddenly calm, and looked at me imploringly. "I love you, Jean-Baptiste. I even took the name Marie-Constance Quesnet for your sake, for such would have been my rightful name had I been given a Christian baptism."

I lifted the lantern above my head. "The night is far spent, the day is at hand," I quoted, from the scriptures. "Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of Light!" I flung the lantern against the oil-soaked wall behind her bed.

She watched the flames lick eagerly at the ancient walls. "My mother was burned alive for her religious beliefs," she said, calmly.

"I know of your mother, and her religious beliefs were a blasphemy against God and man. There was nothing religious about her. She was a witch, just like you."

"She was nothing like me!" She spread her arms and seemed to be towering above me even though she was halfway across the room. "What I am transcends good and evil. I am Lilith, the Queen of Darkness; I am Kali. I am Death personified, and you would be wise not to invoke my wrath!"

The flames were spreading rapidly and it was time to finish what I had come to do. "You are evil incarnate, and I shall send you back to the pits of Hell where you were spawned!"

I fired the pistol and she staggered back, a look of astonishment flashing across her face. "Your mortal weapons are of no use against me," she spat, with contempt.

I flung the spent pistol from me and drew the other, but with her inhuman speed she crossed the distance between us and knocked me to the floor. Her powerful grip shattered the bones in my right wrist and the pistol fell from my useless hand. Then her features softened.

"I must leave you now, Jean-Baptiste. The dawn is nigh, and since you

have destroyed my home I must seek shelter elsewhere.” She kissed me tenderly. “Farewell, my love.”

I lay where I had fallen watching the flames close in around me. I suppose that I knew all along I would fail. At least I had destroyed her lair, and I hoped that she would move on and lift her curse from this town. I had been too weak to stop her. No matter how murderous she may be I could not help but love her. Beauty such as hers deserved immortality even at the cost of innocent lives. But I was not worthy to be her lover; I did not have the courage to be like her. With a wistful smile I picked up the unfired pistol in my left hand. I placed the cool comforting barrel against my temple, and with a steady hand I pulled the trigger.

I cried out as my eyes snapped open and I regained consciousness. I looked down, expecting to find a flintlock pistol in my hand. The experience had been so vivid that I felt as if it had just happened, but it had been another lifetime. I was bursting with questions, but Asmodeus motioned for me to be silent.

“Digest this for a while,” he said to me.

I wondered just how thoroughly he could read my mind, if he was aware of what I had just discovered about myself. It all made so much sense. The nightmares I had as a mortal, the ease with which Lilith had seduced me, even the fact that I had been born left-handed all seemed connected to my previous confrontation with Lilith. Did this also explain how I had learned French so easily, or was that a side effect of my telepathic abilities? Asmodeus had known about my past life, but what about Lilith? Was it mere coincidence that had led her to me again, or had she known who I once was? I needed to know the answer to that question.

“Oh, she knows exactly who you are. She has known for centuries and has been waiting for you to be reborn. She located you at the age of nineteen while you were in France, during your brief stint in the military and she has been stalking you ever since, waiting for the moment when you were ready to let yourself be seduced. She knows who you are, even though you yourself do not remember yet. Try again, and maybe the truth will come to you.”

And so I did.

“Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!” she cried, with each stroke as I thrust my stiff cock deep inside her.

And then her first orgasm crashed down upon me like the walls of Jericho. I paced my strokes to match her clenching muscles as they gripped my shaft and her sweet juices flowed upon me like ambrosia. As her first orgasm subsided I slowed, holding myself above her with one arm while I slid the other one beneath her, pulling her up to my chest. Her heels were locked behind my thighs as I lifted her and leaned back, bringing her with me.

“One moment,” I said, as I repositioned us. I leaned back on my heels with her on my lap, her legs still wrapped around me without ever removing my rock-hard cock from where it belonged; deep inside her.

“What is it?” she asked, gasping through a rosy glow, a light sheen of perspiration on her lovely face and a feral gleam in her cunning eyes.

“You were laying on my hair,” I replied, with a grin, sliding my hands down to grip her slender hips.

She brought her dainty hands down from my broad shoulders and placed them behind her, leaning back with a delightful chuckle. This position gave me the leverage I needed to recommence my thrusts, which I did slowly at first, until she began throwing herself against me as I drove into her, as if we were trying to merge into a single person. Soon she was cumming again, and her intensity brought me to my own climax. I leaned forward over her as she wrapped her arms around me, sinking her nails into my back, clinging to me as tightly as my own skin. I lay beside her breathing in the delicious aroma of us intermingled as she ran her nails along my chest in random patterns.

“You are magnificent,” she said. “Such a mighty lover. And such a strong man.” She rolled over, throwing one leg across my body. “Do you love me, Samson?”

I grinned up at her. “Yes, Delilah, I love you. You know I love you.”

“Then prove it!” she said, with a passion I found out of place. “Tell me the secret of your great strength.”

I sighed and looked away. “Do we have to go through this again?”

She pulled away from me, throwing her robe around herself in a huff. "I knew it! You're just using me. You don't care about me at all!"

"Delilah," I began, reaching for her.

"Don't touch me," she pouted. "If you really loved me you would tell me your secret. How else can I ever tame a lion like you?"

"We've been over this."

"And you have teased me with lies three times," she cried.

"And you betrayed me to the Philistines every time!" I roared, like the lion she had named me.

I immediately regretted the rage I had directed at her as the tears welled up in her eyes. She wailed as if I had struck her curling up on the tangled sheets. I paced beside her, my anger redirected into restless energy. The arrogance of my invincibility was upon me, and I was convinced that I could handle any situation and conquer any foe sent against me, just as I had done countless times before. I would have scoffed at a jawbone as unnecessary and killed a thousand Philistines with my bare hands.

I could stand her tears no longer. I reached out to touch her, but she flinched and curled into an even tighter ball as she sobbed so hard that her whole body jerked to the rhythm of her sobs. I could never bear to see a woman cry, and I knew that a white lie would not work this time. I truly loved her, and I convinced myself that the only thing that kept her from returning my love completely was my secret. If she knew the secret of my strength she would know that I had bared my soul to her, proving my trust in her. Surely she would return my love by holding sacred my secret as a bond between lovers.

"Delilah? It's my hair," I said.

"Wh-what?" she sniffled, sitting up.

"My hair," I repeated, grabbing one of my long locks for emphasis. "Never has a razor touched my head, for I was born a Nazarite straight from my mother's womb. If my head were to be shaven I would lose my strength and be like any other man." I stood before her, head bowed and shoulders slumped, wondering what I had just done.

“Is this true?” she asked, reaching up to run her fingers through my locks.

“Yes,” I replied, my voice husky from the depths of passion. I snatched her wrist in one hand, as I cupped her chin in my other hand, tilting her face up, forcing her to meet my gaze. “My strength comes from God, and I carry it in my hair. And now you know my great secret.”

She returned my gaze for a moment, searching my soul through my eyes for the truth of my words. Then her face lit up and she squealed in delight, jumping up and down throwing herself around me.

“Yes, oh, yes, Samson!” She laughed giddily. “I knew you really, truly loved me!”

Her delight eased my misgivings and I relaxed, allowing myself to join in her mirth. I picked her up and carried her back to the bed, my passion overwhelming me, But she jumped up.

“Wait! Let’s have a cup of wine to celebrate our love.”

We did. And with that she was she drugged my wine. While I slept she shaved my head. I awoke to the sound of her voice.

“Samson, the Philistines!” she cried.

I jumped to my feet fully intending to deal with this threat as I always had before, but I was still groggy from the evil herbs she had drugged me with and did not notice that my head had been shaved. By the time I did I was subdued. The last thing I ever saw in that life was the hot and glowing orange tip of a bronze poker coming towards my eye.

“So who were you this time?” Asmodeus asked me, as I recovered.

“Samson. I was Samson.”

“Yes, indeed. You were Samson. The woman you fell in love with sold you out to her people. She looked at you with those pouty lips and moist eyes and what did you do? You told her, of course. And when she cut your hair, your enemies gouged out your eyes with a hot poker and made you a slave. But you had been her slave all along. Yet the Philistines weren’t smart enough to keep your hair cut short. When it grew back you prayed to God to return your strength so you could get your revenge. You killed yourself, taking thousands of your

enemies with you. And all in the name of love. You have been reincarnated over and over again, doing foolish things in the name of love time after time. Can you guess who Delilah was?"

Of course I knew what he was hinting at. "Lilith," I answered.

"Yes, Sabbathiel. Delilah was Lilith. But her true name is Naamah." This sent a jolt through me just as the name Sabbathiel did every time he said it. "You have managed to find each other through countless reincarnations. You have found brief periods of happiness in other incarnations with another eternal spirit." Again he waited for me to guess who he was talking about.

"Do you mean Angie?" I asked.

"Yes. Can you remember her true name, Sabbathiel?"

A name popped into my head from the back of my mind. "Anahita."

"Yes!" Asmodeus said. "Do you remember now?"

Images flickered through my mind. Violent, disturbing, tragic; but they were jumbled and chaotic and I could not stand to think about them.

"No," I whispered.

"Think, Sabbathiel; Remember!" Asmodeus commanded me. I buried my face in my hands. "I told you of my fall from grace, how I had many mortal wives who gave me children called Nephilim. You were the first born of my children, Sabbathiel. For fathering you I was cast from heaven, doomed to dwell in perpetual twilight until the end of time. As for the other Nephilim, well, God decided that it was a sin that you had been born at all. This was all the justification he needed to decree that you must be punished, and God's punishment for you and those like you was to be reborn into one mortal life after another, denied both heaven and hell until the Armageddon, when life as you know it will cease to exist. You were my firstborn son, Sabbathiel, and Lilith, whose true name is Naamah, was your half-sister, my daughter by another wife."

"No!" I cried, but I could not make the images stop flashing through my mind. I did not want to remember any of this.

"You always were an inquisitive soul, a trait I like to think you inherited from me, yet you took many of your traits from your mother and it is she who you

have always reminded me of. Carrying the memory of her to me in the very essence of your soul through all these millennia. She was a gentle creature, utterly adorable in her tenderness. That is what you inherited from your mother and what drew me to her. I could have seduced any woman on Earth, but it was a rare sort of woman who could seduce me. Your mother did it with her angelic poise and her pure love for life and all its wonders. Her love was genuine, and love for me has always been an abstract idea. Do you remember her name?"

"No," I replied, with utter sincerity.

I almost wished that I could remember her name. Asmodeus gave me a profound look of sadness that I could have possibly forgotten such a thing, but this was a memory he was forcing on me against my will. Eventually he continued.

"Naamah's mother was nothing like your mother; she was greedy and conniving. She decided that when you were both old enough you and Naamah should be wed. You were destined for greatness, and her mother wanted to be a part of it. Your mother resisted this, determined to let you choose your own wife. And then you met Anahita and it was love at first sight. She was the daughter of the angel Ramiel and she was a truly radiant soul. Your mother approved of her, but Naamah flew into a fit of jealous rage."

"My Lord, please! I am begging you. Do not make me re-live this!" I could feel the tragedy unfolding in my mind, but he would not relent.

"Naamah was not about to let another woman come between you and what she considered her birthright. And so on the night before your wedding she crept into Anahita's bedchamber, your beloved Anahita, and murdered her while she slept."

As he told the story the distant memory became real, and I lived through it once more in detached and jumbled pieces, as if it were happening in a dream. I saw Anahita's lovely face distorted in death, swollen and discolored from being strangled with a leather cord that was still embedded in her neck. The memories were distorted by a madness that threatened to overwhelm me even now, so many thousands of years later.

“Naamah murdered her, Sabbathiel. And your grief and outrage were so great that you went mad. You stormed into Naamah’s home, killing five of her brothers, and anyone else foolish enough to get in your way. When you found Naamah and her mother you bashed their heads against the walls, and with bloody hands you choked Naamah’s corpse, trying to kill her again as her brains leaked out onto the floor. When the realization of what you had done penetrated your madness, gentle soul that you were, you threw yourself off a cliff. But you could not fly, and so you died, cutting short a promising life as a king among men. Yet you threw it all away in the madness that came over you. You have continued to love Anahita throughout all your incarnations, although fate has decreed that it is usually Naamah you end up with, and almost never do you meet them both in the same life. But now you have done so again.”

The memory quickly faded and I was relieved. It took its proper place as a dim memory of another life, a life that still influenced who I was. I had been reunited with the first love of my first life, a half-divine eternal soul like me. Angie had always been the love of my life since I had first met her thousands of years ago. The implications were more than I could comprehend. I felt like a pawn in some divine game of chess, being moved through the millennia with no will of my own.

“But what does it all mean?” I asked Asmodeus.

“It means that this moment when you will marry Anahita and be at last joined together as immortals for the rest of eternity, has always been your fate, a destiny stolen from you by Naamah. I had trouble convincing Lilith that it was in her best interest to leave you and Angie alive, but I managed to do so. She would have killed Angie when first she saw you with her had I not intervened, and it was my advice that has kept her from killing the two of you for the past few weeks. Now you are faced with a decision, and I leave the fate of the mortal world in your hands. You can spend eternity in Hell with your beloved Anahita untouched by mortal concerns and pampered by my servants who will cater to your every whim as my firstborn son. Or you can challenge Lilith and break the cycle of her endless greed by destroying her and preventing the coming Armageddon.”

This was no choice at all. How could I do nothing while the world was destroyed? Being with Lilith made it easy for me to look down with contempt on people, yet humanity had unlimited potential yet to be realized. The world was on the verge of remarkable discoveries and the stars themselves were nearly within reach. Given the opportunity, who knew what humankind could accomplish? Of course, they also had the potential to destroy the entire planet without the assistance of either God or the Devil.

“And what about you, My Lord? Why should you allow me to challenge Lilith, if by defeating her I would prevent your birth as the Antichrist?”

“Fate has determined that if that child is born it will be me, and if so I shall destroy the world. But do you think I want that to happen? I have been around since the universe was born and I am nothing if not patient. I did not choose this role for myself. I am the Great Adversary, for there can be no good without evil, no light without darkness. I shall have to face God in the final battle and the odds are currently in my favor, since I have amassed quite an army. But with more time I will become stronger. At this moment in time the entire universe is in a state of flux awaiting the outcome of your decision. God will not make this decision for you and neither will I. You control your own destiny and the fate of the world hangs in the balance.”

I returned his stare for several heartbeats as I digested all he had revealed to me. It was up to me; not God, not the Devil, but me. The fate of the entire world was in my hands, and even though I had never asked for this responsibility there was only one answer I could give him.

“What you offer me is no choice at all, My Lord. I must face Lilith and try to stop her. But I don’t see how I can stand up to her without help.”

Asmodeus smiled at me. “Are you ready to make a deal with the Devil?”

He made an offer to assist me in my battle against Lilith and in return I would take her place as His agent upon the Earth. I would assume the role of judge, and Armageddon would be postponed, although it was inevitable that someday the Antichrist must be born. When this should happen would be left up to me. I alone would decide the fate of humanity based upon my own

observations. If mankind degenerated to the point that humankind deserved to perish I would at that time father another mortal vessel for Asmodeus, another Antichrist to replace the one Lilith carried. In the meantime humanity would be free to shape its own destiny.

I am optimistic. I believe that mortal man can create a Heaven on Earth if given enough time, but Asmodeus is skeptical. The potential for evil in the world is ever-present; global society could collapse into anarchy at any time with violence, pain, and suffering becoming a general state of life to an even greater degree than it already is. This has happened countless times in the past and is the natural state of human existence, according to Asmodeus. I would observe the world's progress until I saw that the world was a place of eternal suffering that must be destroyed. I had faith in human potential. I did not believe the day would ever come when mankind would prove that it deserved destruction.

But I could not take this responsibility upon myself alone. Angie, my Beloved Angel, my Anahita would have to share this with me. If in the end I had to father the Antichrist it would be her who would have to give birth to him. I asked Asmodeus to give me time to discuss it with her before I gave him an answer.

"There is no hurry, my son. Do not dwell on this. You shall be wed tomorrow and I want you to enjoy your happiness. The future will be placed on hold until after your marriage has been consummated. If you find you are content to stay here with Anahita that will be all the answer I need. But it was necessary to make you remember who you really are so that you could understand what is at stake. Not only the fate of the world, but your own destiny as well."

Angie was asleep when I returned to her, and I spent the rest of the night brooding. Who was truly responsible for all the pain and suffering I had endured through countless incarnations? Was it God's fault for condemning me to be reborn perpetually into a world of grief? Was it Naamah's fault for relentlessly tormenting me with her greed and cruelty? Was it Asmodeus' fault for fathering me in the first place? Or was it my own fault, just punishment for killing Naamah and her family for revenge? Only one thing was clear to me. The only true

innocent in all of this was Anahita. She deserved whatever happiness I could give her.

Angie was so happy to see me when she woke up that it nearly made it possible to forget everything else and bask in the pleasure of her joy. But I had to explain this situation to her. I could think of only one way to give her full understanding. I opened my mind to her. I touched her mind gently, revealing everything to her in gradual layers until the truth was exposed. I dredged the depths of her mind pulling up her past life memories laying bare the pain and suffering, as well as the joy. We had always found joy in each other, although sadly these periods of bliss were too brief. But we made each other happy when we did manage to find one another, a sharing of self with self that completed us both. I was humbled at the depth of her love for me and she was flattered by the intensity of my love for her. We needed each other to make life's sorrows bearable and to make life's pleasures even sweeter.

When we had shared our every thought I was amazed that she was more determined than ever to marry me and become immortal. She was eager to stand at my side when I faced Lilith. It was a need for revenge, but I could not blame her for that. She was even willing to accept the fact that she may someday have to give birth to the Antichrist. Like me she believed that such a day would never come, and with the powers we would possess we could play an active role in making sure that it never happened. Why should a vampire need to feed on innocent victims? We could feed on the evil elements of the Earth, taking our nourishment from beings like Anshar and Lilith instead; there were countless such at work in the world and we could get rid of them all, to cleanse the world of the evil souls that preyed upon innocent victims. This was such a good idea that I laughed out loud at her cleverness, and all my misgivings were at last laid to rest.

Our wedding was an incredible spectacle arranged by Angie's father, the fallen angel Ramiel, and it was Asmodeus who conducted the ceremony. I drifted through the entire thing as if it were a dream excited and nervous, unable to focus on anything, yet caught up in details like the scent of Angie's hair. It smelled like cedar wood and incense from the braziers around us, but it had an

underlying scent that was sheer perfection to me, the scent of her.

On our wedding night I gave her the gift of immortality. It no longer seemed a curse to me; it was a blessing in disguise. The Thirst was only as evil as the use you made of it, and we had plans to use it for the good of the world. Whether or not we would be successful, only time would tell. But at least the world would have that time, assuming I could manage to defeat Lilith.

I agreed to Asmodeus' pact while Angie slept the sleep of the dead, the three days when her body would be transformed. I stayed away from her as much as possible, but I couldn't keep myself from checking on her from time to time. By the third day her hair, which had been dyed red, had changed back to its natural color: chestnut brown. Asmodeus must have read my intentions in my mind to rid the world not only of Lilith, but of all those like her.

"So, my son," he said, with a grin. "You think you can save the world from evil?"

"I don't know, but with the help of my wife I mean to try," I answered. It was wonderful to refer to Angie as my wife; an unfamiliar word on my lips, yet perfect.

"There is more evil at work in the world than you could ever hope to defeat, not even given a million years to do it. But you will have your opportunity to try. I am patient, and you will learn the folly of your ideals in time. Mankind may someday reach the pinnacle of its potential; may achieve all it is capable of accomplishing. Then they will stagnate and degenerate. And when they do, you must fulfill your end of the bargain."

"All right," I agreed, not convinced. Human potential was too great for the entire race to stagnate and degenerate. "Where do I sign?"

"Your word is your bond, your promise all the contract needed between us."

"So, Angie and I will return to Earth, and you will help us to defeat Lilith, even though she is carrying your unborn body inside her?"

"I have already given you all the help you need. I have withdrawn my patronage from Lilith and given it to you. Do you remember what I told

Gilgamesh?”

His words echoed in my mind. ‘As for you, fool. You will say nothing of this to anyone, most especially my beloved daughter Lilith. Your loyalty belongs to me and you will worship and obey Samael as if he were my first-born son’. Indeed. What more help could I expect from him than that?

Angie was thirsty when she awoke from her Rest. A succubus named Laurantah sacrificed herself to Angie, who drank her essence the way I had with Kitarah. I coached her through it, just as I had coached her through our final sharing or the blood. The threesome was fun, but making love to Angie afterwards was even better. We were both inspired by Laurantah’s passion and having Angie all to myself was better than sharing her. I am selfish like that. I had no reason to be jealous of Laurantah, but I wanted Angie alone, and Laurantah was a distraction keeping me from becoming one with the one I wanted to be with more than anything.

We said our good-byes to the fallen angels who had attended our wedding, including Angie’s spiritual father Ramiel, and Asmodeus sent us back to Anshar’s dining room; the very spot we had left five days before. The first time I went to Hell three months had passed in the space of a single day, but this time the reverse was true. On Earth no time had elapsed at all. I could still sense Gilgamesh as he fled to the surface and I reached out to his mind commanding him to return. As he stepped into the room he smiled at me. Asmodeus was no longer here to save me and he relished the thought of taking me to Lilith.

“I see that the fledgling has created a fledgling of his own,” he said, with an evil grin on his face.

He stepped closer and I put my arm around Angie. She was broadcasting her every thought, her inexperience painfully obvious. I started to shield her mind, but then I held off. Gilgamesh could gain nothing from what she was thinking other than fear. Our pact with Asmodeus was foremost in her thoughts, as well as speculation on when we would destroy Gilgamesh. Her Thirst was new and she wondered what his blood would be like as she sucked him dry. But then I did shield her before Gilgamesh could probe her mind and possibly learn our

true names. Gilgamesh stopped as he digested Angie's thoughts.

"Come closer, Gilgamesh," I said. "This is my companion, Angel; the new Queen of Darkness, Lilith's replacement. Isn't she perfect?" I held out my ring to him. "Do you know what this is?" He stared at it, letting slip his guard so that I plucked from his mind an image of him kissing this ring when it had been on the hand of his Lord God Asmodeus. He bowed to me. "This ring represents the pact between my father and me. He is my father, and I am his firstborn son. Lilith is to be removed as Queen of Darkness and I will become your king with my lovely bride ruling beside me." I kissed Angie briefly. "I will allow you to serve us, Gilgamesh, if you swear loyalty to us and agree to live by our rules."

Gilgamesh remembered his promise to obey me and decided that it would be wise to honor it. He came to me on his knees and kissed my ring. "I am your servant to command, Samael," he said.

I knew better than to trust him, but I needed him, so I took him at his word. Hopefully, I could use him to help me defeat Lilith, but I had no delusions that he would betray me given the right opportunity. I had a plan in mind, but to implement it I needed information.

"Where is Lilith?" I asked him.

"Probably sitting in her chateau in France plotting ways to torture you just as she has been for weeks," he answered.

I could believe this, so I motioned for him to rise and we sat down at the table, Angie sitting beside me with a hand on my thigh as Gilgamesh sat across from us. I put my arm around Angie and continued my interrogation. I asked him about the rest of Lilith's coven and with the exceptions of Fabian and Diana they were making nightly reports to Lilith. They were supposed to be searching for me, but he doubted that any of them were taking this seriously. They each had their own agendas and pleasing Lilith was something they did only through necessity, not out of loyalty. He himself had stumbled upon me entirely by chance. He had come here to force Anshar to locate Fabian for him because he hated Fabian and he intended to destroy him, now that he could get away with it without incurring Lilith's wrath.

“But it is no longer Lilith’s wrath you need concern yourself with,” I informed him. “It is my wrath you must now fear, and if that does not persuade you, remember who I can summon with this ring.” He paled at this reminder. He was thick-headed and arrogant, but he was rightly terrified of Asmodeus. “Fabian and Diana are under my protection and if you wish to join them you will forget petty hatreds or jealousies and treat them as equals. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Samael,” he said, inclining his head toward me.

“All right,” I said. “Here is what you are going to do.”

I gave Gilgamesh his marching orders confident that he would obey me out of fear of Asmodeus. When Raquel returned she was amazed at the miracle of Angie’s instantaneous transformation, but we told her the whole story. She hugged and kissed us both, congratulating us and wishing us a long and joyful life together. She offered to help me teach Angie how to control her new abilities. She had far more experience than me, and since she was also a woman, I figured she was better suited to this task than I was. I let her handle it and spent the rest of the night trying to locate Fabian.

I was worried that Fabian had been destroyed for rescuing me. I didn’t know where to look for him, so I just flew as high into the atmosphere as I could. I climbed into the upper exosphere where the air is so thin it practically doesn’t exist, certainly not so that you can breathe it. I called out to his mind as I had before. He did not respond, but I got a feeling too faint to describe. Perhaps nothing more than a memory from having been inside his mind, and I followed this feeling to New Orleans.

Fabian was none the worse for wear. In fact he was enjoying himself tremendously in a city he had always wanted to visit. I informed him of all that had happened telepathically, leaving nothing out. He had felt the destruction of Anshar and was stunned by it. He had not known whether to laugh or cry when he felt the bond severed, and he was still saddened for some reason I could never understand. But he did not blame me; he thanked me in the name of the children who had perished at Anshar’s whim, and for the children who would go untouched by him now.

We returned to Anshar's lair, and I introduced Fabian to his new queen. Everything was falling into place nicely, and after tomorrow would come the moment of truth when Angie and I would face Lilith to make her pay for her crimes. It would be Sabbathiel, Anahita and Naamah facing off all over again. But this time Anahita and Sabbathiel had allies and I was confident everything would end well. Fabian was a true friend, whose loyalty had nothing to do with a fear of Asmodeus and the same held true for Raquel, although I couldn't explain why these two felt such loyalty to me; I was merely thankful and accepted it.

When I tried to share the secret of sex for our kind with Raquel she admitted that she already knew it, but it was not something she cared about. She shared her life story, telling me about her family. She had given birth to eight beautiful children before she had been seduced away from her husband by a monster who had promised her paradise. In the end what he gave her was a living hell.

She had watched from afar as her children grew old and died, had kept track of their descendants for centuries. But the tragedy of her separation from them was a terrible curse; she was by nature a nurturing soul, and to be cut off from her family was the worst fate she could imagine. Sex could not replace what she had lost, but she continued to look after her descendants, aiding them in subtle and anonymous ways whenever she could. The simple goodness she felt in me was what had attracted her to me, and I was humbled. I knew that I was no better or worse than anyone else.

According to her, everyone has within them a dark side and a light side, a duality of spirit that mirrors the natural world. Day follows night, just as surely as night follows day, and everyone born on the face of the Earth has both darkness and light as a part of their essence. Everyone has a dark side, but in some people it is dominant while in others it is eclipsed by the brightness of love and light. She had learned how to tell the difference at a glance, and she assured me that I was bright and full of light, in direct opposition to the darkness dominating Lilith. This was the reason Angie and I complimented each other perfectly. Angie was filled with the same light, whereas Lilith's darkness had eclipsed me, just as

it did with everyone who came in contact with her.

My Angel and I awoke simultaneously and I wondered if Lilith were awaking at this moment, as well. I could have found out by reaching out to her mind, but such an idea was not only distasteful, it was dangerous. I wanted no contact with her until I faced her this evening. Everything was coming together better than I had dared to hope, and tonight would decide my fate and Angie's, as well as the fate of Lilith and the entire world. We traveled to Paris together: Fabian, Raquel, Angie, and me. As we approached Lilith's chateau I extended my senses, detecting the presence of Lilith and the rest of her coven.

"Looks like the gang's all here," I broadcast, to the minds of my companions.

This was it. The moment of truth when I would find out just how loyal Lilith's coven really was. We stepped boldly through the front doors. Angie walked proudly at my side with Fabian and Raquel behind us. Lilith and her coven were gathered in the library and I threw open the door and stepped inside as if I owned the place.

Lilith was seated in her favorite chair and everyone else was standing around making an effort to avoid looking at me. Perfect. Gilgamesh looked pissed off, staring at the floor as if he wanted to kill it and see if it would bleed, but that expression was normal for him. Ishtar was standing near the fireplace studying a statuette in which she had no interest. Danatalian, Sabrina, and Jasmine were clustered together in the back corner talking in whispers. Nigel and Passion were standing together near the door, and they glanced at me and then looked quickly away. They ended a conversation without substance and drifted apart to give us room while pretending they did not even see us. Vassago, the immaculate ass-kisser, stood at Lilith's side like an obedient dog awaiting his next command. Absolutely perfect.

I took all this in at a glance without ever taking my eyes off Lilith. She was sitting with her left leg crossed over her right swinging her left foot in agitation, tapping her fingers on the arm of her chair. She grinned at me like a shark, totally devoid of mirth, and fierce anger shone in her eyes.

“So. You have come to beg forgiveness, have you? It will not help you.”

I approached her steadily. “I have not come to beg forgiveness, Naamah,” I said. “I have come for justice.” The mention of her true name made her sit upright and she hissed like a cat, her fangs flashing. “I have brought someone with me, Naamah. Don’t you recognize her?”

She had not even glanced at Angie, but now she jumped from her chair and charged towards us. “How dare you bring *her* into my presence?” she demanded.

Her hands formed into claws and her eyes darted back and forth between us as if she were trying to decide which one of us to strike down first. Angie was eager to face her, but I laid a restraining hand on her arm. Lilith stood to her full height and seemed to grow taller as she focused her anger.

“You shall suffer for this,” she said, and she unleashed a blast of mental anguish at both of us.

I knew her true name and this was some protection, but she had created me, and neither Angie nor I could have resisted this onslaught without help. This was the moment of truth when my gamble would pay off, one way or another. And pay off it did. As soon as Lilith blasted our minds she was hit by a mental attack from every immortal in the room. None had betrayed me, not even Vassago. I had every confidence in Fabian and Raquel, but until that moment I was unsure my plan would not backfire on me. Gilgamesh had sought out each member of Lilith’s coven, and sent them to me. All had kissed my ring and swore fealty to me, but I had nothing but a mutual hatred of Lilith and fear of Asmodeus to insure their loyalty. It was a risk, but the look of impotent rage and fear on Lilith’s face was well worth it. She was frozen in place, utterly helpless, and she managed to utter a single word.

“Betrayed!” she wailed, in absolute astonishment.

I stared at her remembering every torment she had subjected me to through countless centuries, and I answered her with the utmost satisfaction.

“Shut up and die, bitch,” I said. “Angel, she’s all yours.”

Angie needed no further encouragement. She stepped forward and

gripped Lilith's hair, tilting her head back. She sank her fangs into Naamah's neck, revenge for a murder that happened eons ago, and I watched as Lilith shriveled into a lifeless husk. By ingesting Lilith Angie had become my equal. We were creator and created, with no ability to manipulate each other beyond the mundane methods all couples possess.

When it was done I stepped forward and took Lilith's body in my arms. It felt as light as a sack of feathers. I carried her outside to the funeral pyre she had erected for me, ironically, and laid her undead corpse upon it. The coven that had once been hers followed behind in somber silence. Each of us lit a torch from the waiting brazier and we cast them onto the pyre together.

I put my arm around Angie, my beloved Angel, my immortal Anahita, and she slid her arm around me. After thousands of years of being split apart by this evil manipulator we had achieved the destiny we had been born for. I looked into her sparkling eyes and felt my love for her wash over me in a wave of emotion so pure that I thought my heart would stop. We were together at last, forever and always, and the one who had come between us so many times was out of our lives forever. She grinned, that adorable and honest expression of emotion so different from Lilith's wicked and cunning grin, and then she turned to me.

"We did it, Mike," she said, her voice subdued and her emotions were a complex knot, but her love for me shone through above all else.

I took her into my arms and held her close, for this moment of freedom was too big for words. Our happy destiny had been secured; now all we had to do was purge the rest of the world of evil, but with such a woman at my side I had no doubt we could achieve the impossible. We watched the flames reach toward heaven and I thought, *it's a good start*.

Coda

Study me then, you who shall lovers be
At the next world, that is, at the next spring.
For I am every dead thing,
In whom love wrought new alchemy.
For his art did express

A quintessence even from nothingness,
From dull privations, and lean emptiness.
He ruined me, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darkness, death. things which are not.
John Donne. "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day, Being the Shortest Day"

She walks in Beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which Heaven to gaudy day denies.
"She Walks in Beauty" Lord Byron

What is love? Alas, I am the Lord of Lust; an emotion I know too well. But love? I do not even love myself. Even before my fall from grace I had no love for God, but as for you, my son. I have always tried to love you as well as I can in my own imperfect way, and I am pleased that you have found happiness after all these millennia. I am only sorry that it took you so long to find your true love again. If it were up to me you would have shared your joy with her through eternity. If such a thing as eternal joy exists, you at last have a chance to enjoy it. You are reunited with the eternal soul that completes you, and you shall be together until the end of time, whenever that may be. I can touch the future, but it

is quicksilver and ever-changing and thanks to me you have the power to decide the fate of the world, a responsibility I never wanted.

I hope you learned a few things in this incarnation for it will be your last. The main thing I hope I have impressed upon you is that there are no absolutes in the universe. God is not absolutely good and I am not absolutely evil. He could not exist without me, nor I without him. We were here before time and will be reborn at the end of time to suffer through it all over again. In that respect, my fate is unique.

I leave the determination of when the end will come to you. I hope your resourceful humanity lives up to your ideal expectations, because nothing would please me more than to see humanity conquer both space and time and become masters of their own destiny. Such a feat would make God obsolete. He would be infuriated, and I would at long last get the last laugh. Only time will tell, but I wish you luck just the same, my first and favorite son. May your life be filled with joy and love everlasting. Amen.