

ONLY THE FALLEN SOAR...

and
FALLING, *fly*

SKYLER WHITE

SOMETIMES THE HUNT IS ALL THERE IS . . .

She's alone. I see her now, walking briskly north. She, too, has learned not to run. I shorten the space between us too soon, pressing down need and anger. Shall I let her hear me? *No*.

She turns, sensing the darkness moving . . . Her tender heart rate is rising. Now she knows it's me. She struggles not to run, looking hard over her shoulder. Does she hope for a different ending? How could she believe that? How could she try so valiantly if she does not?

Disciplining my strength into grace, I shadow her . . . I'm almost touching her, breathing the slippery smell of her fear. But the thrumming beat of her, visible through the warm flesh of her throat, summons me. My pulseless fingers reach out for the hammering vein and feel it pound swifter against them. She makes a strange noise and runs.

I watch as long as I can, her strong body straining forward, before I slide in behind her. Magnificent, striding flight, her legs stretch and mine shadow. I rein myself back as her endurance fails. Her blazing lungs and her tearing heart echo through me. I could so easily overtake her, drive my teeth into her now, but she will exhaust herself soon and have to stop. And then . . .

Then I will take her . . .

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To Scott and Molly,
who put my feet on this path
and pushed

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My darling ones, Reborn and Undead, Damned, Cursed,

and Misbegotten—Hell calls her absent children home.

De profundis,

G.

The apparently unendurable conflict is proof of the rightness of your life. A life without inner contradiction is either only half a life, or else is a life in the Beyond, which is destined only for angels. But God loves human beings more than angels.

—C. JUNG, *LETTERS, VOLUME I, P. 375*

1

WHAT YOU SEE

The angel of desire is damned. At least that's what my tattoo says. Okay, if I'm honest, it just says *dam*, with *ned* still only outlined in purple stencil. But twenty-first-century angel that I am, I don't give a fig for honesty. I want speed. If Ed doesn't hurry, no lie I can invent will explain what he'll start to see.

He begins the *N* and glances up from the black halo of letters whose half-circle crowns my pubic mound. "So, Olivia, you wanna tell me the story?"

Tattooists are the new priests for the fucked-up and the thrown away. They speak the language of symbol, and administer penance in tiny metallic lashes. They hear confession; and Ed wants mine. Or he thinks he does. And for a minute, amidst the jumbled iconography of Celtic and tribal patterns, the pick-your-own pantheon of Saints Teresa and Betty Boop, I want to tell this handsome nouveau-cleric, bent in genuflection over my crotch, everything I am.

"It's my birthday," I say instead.

"Yeah? Happy birthday." He bows back over the *N*, the electric drill buzz of his pen my only indication that the needle has started again. "You just break up with some guy?"

"No, but give it a couple of hours."

He laughs, but it's my birthday, and my boyfriend has something special and secretive planned—a dark omen. Men can never resist giving me what they want for my birthday, and so I've slept alone that night every year since at least the shift from the Julian calendar. Probably longer.

“Wanna tell me about it?”

“It's not a story you want to hear,” I tell him.

“You can't surprise me, girl. I've seen it all.” Crouched like a cobbler, Ed hovers inches above my low-rider briefs. I like the way this new style of underwear exposes the unblemished white of my belly for him. I like that it conceals what would freak out even this New York City pierce-and-brand-style veteran of the skin artist's trade.

“My body misrepresents me,” I say.

The whirl of the needle stops as Ed's dark eyes take a slow tour. “I don't see how.”

No, how could he? He smells of clove cigarettes and filth, and against the fabric of my unbuttoned jeans, my hips begin to swell. *So Eddie likes his girls a little plump, eh?* With a nervous clearing of his skinny throat, he returns to his work, but it's too late. Already, my tits are filling, pushing against the fine lace of my bra, growing under my T-shirt. My hair darkens a fraction. Ed won't notice I've changed. He'll just wonder why he didn't realize before how gorgeous this rockabilly birthday girl is. I shove my hair back from my face, inventorying the way it now falls in Bettie Page bangs. It's okay, unless it slows him down. I can't risk that.

“Four down, two to go.” He grins up at me. “You doing okay?”

“I'm fine.”

His conscientious, gloved fingers avoid the white cotton framed by my jeans zipper and belt, but he rests his wrist against the inside of my now-plump thigh. His sunken eyes glance up over the heightened rise of my breasts, and his habitual dabs wipe blood that no longer wells from the finished *D*. If he notices, he will worry. “Do the last two letters,” I whisper, injecting sexy into my voice to hurry him.

I can’t hate him. He is too young and can’t help the way his dominatrix fetish molds my breasts into Wonder Woman cones. I can hate them, though. Just once, on my birthday, I would like to keep my native form. Ed works steadily on my *E*, humming along to the music grinding from the tattoo parlor’s massive speakers. The word *parlor*, with its vague overtones of powdery old ladies and prostitutes, comforts me somehow. I’m grateful for it. Tonight is likely to go badly. I’m meeting my boyfriend of seven months for dinner, and trying not to hope.

To him, I am beautiful and pure, saving myself for marriage and motherhood. He sees me as a virginal holdover from a more romantic age. He has spent entire nights simply kissing me. But he’s genuine twenty-first-century and only faking patience. Tonight he is likely to dispose of pretense and ruin everything with a nineteenth-century idea. I catch myself twisting the hair-fine chain around my wrist, grating the brass key against the lock it can’t reach. I still my restless fingers and swallow a growl.

“I think you’ve got a killer body.” Ed has finished the *E*.

I give him a slow, midnight smile. “You’re about half right,” I tell him.

His needle stops again. “You’re sick, aren’t you? You’ve got cancer or something, you know, down there?” It’s cute, the way compassion wars with disappointment on the poorly mown field of his face.

“No. I’m perfectly healthy,” I tell him. “In fact, I don’t think I’ll ever die.”

It’s the most truthful thing to pass my hellfire-red lips in years. “I’m just . . .”

“Screwed?”

I laugh. “Not ever.” *My, what an honesty streak I’m on.*

“I could, you know”—Eddie shrugs—“help you out with that if you want?”

“I’m sure you could.” *Better. Back to lying.* “Don’t stop.”

“I didn’t.” But now he has. The electric needle hangs above the fork of my legs, immobile. His confusion peers across my newly fleshy belly, over the twin tit pyramids. I have screwed up again. I force a giggle.

“Are you high?” Ed touches the machine to me without breaking his gaze. I wince. He grins. “You’re high, aren’t you?”

The needle jabs again. Again I pretend it hurts me, and Ed’s black, Brylcreemed head bows over my pubis once more. He shares that with the ancient priests, at least—the pleasure he takes in my pain.

“You never told me why you wanted the tat.” Ed’s long, artist’s fingers rub ointment into my belly, oblivious to the lack of inflammation around his freshly drawn lines. “Damned,” he reads aloud. His fingers dip below the elastic of my panties, spreading the slick protective gel to unmarked skin. “What did you say, your body betrayed you?”

“Something like that.”

“What, it go cheat on your boyfriend without you?” He winks, carefully taping gauze over his work. His fingers are smooth as his lines, but I don’t answer him.

“What’s his name?”

“Adam.”

“He’s a lucky guy.”

If Ed takes any longer taping my bandage, or running my credit card, or explaining my wound care instruction sheet, I run a very real risk of tearing his face off.

“And you’ve got some good antibacterial soap at home?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve got my phone number there. I put it on the sheet, so if you have any trouble—any questions—you call me, okay?”

I leave him at the cash register and walk, with as much poise as an impatient immortal can wrangle, to the electric blue bathroom, where I yank up my shirt and peel down the right corner of Ed’s meticulous bandage.

The letters are already fading. I sit on the toilet lid and stare at the dirty floor.

I get the same tattoo every February fourteenth. It's my little birthday joke on myself, but today it just isn't funny. Not with the dread of what Adam will do. Not with my breasts inflated to a size they haven't been since the days when my brother Jack walked the London streets. In those days, a lady could stretch a courtship over a year, and be thanked for the privilege. A few months of kissing Adam, and the darling expects me to say yes tonight. Ten minutes of kissing Ed, and the ass would expect a different acquiescence. All I want is a tattoo—a bad girl brand on my perfect body to mark me with what I truly am. I check it again. The first *D* is gone.

“Eddie,” I call out the bathroom door, “can you come back here a second?”

I put my alabaster hands on the stained basin of the sink and stare into the mirror above it. I wait for Ed's reflection to show me my face in the silvered glass. He slouches in. I scowl at the pinup parody of myself and slip behind him to lock the door. I lean against the flimsy wood.

“Does it hurt?” he asks.

“Yes,” I lie. My perfect body can't feel pleasure or pain, can't transmit any sensation more acute than simple pressure. But my other senses are keen, and his masculine smell rises over the clove.

His hands take my waist—do they tremble just a little, tough guy? A choked prayer of desire escapes his tight throat, and I put my scarlet lips against his. I let him kiss me, lipstick messy between us for elongating seconds, before I bite into his mouth.

I don't mean to do it, but the subtle razor surfaces of my teeth and tongue erupt, grazing the insides of his mouth, making cuts too small for him to feel. It doesn't take much to feed me, microscopic globules of blood from the tiny surface cuts my quilled teeth make in his lips and against his gums. I suck on his mouth and he shudders against me. He's hungry, too.

In his blood I taste only tedious, arcane desires, but am tempted by the whisper of the dreams that feeding full-tooth would bring. Still, I don't strike. It's not his fault. He worked diligently to give me what I asked for—a word for my flesh, a name for my body. But if his inky blood is all I can get of what I want, I'll swallow what I can.

He grapples at the zipper of my jeans, and I recoil from the danger of his callused fingers finding my tattoo gone. He mutters something about hurting me and slides his innocent hands over my body, away from the bandage, to tug on my shirt. I pull it over my head for him. I will give him anything he wants with my sandcastle tits—I can't feel them—just let me keep feasting on his stained and smoky mouth.

His delicate hands run up my back, the only ugly part of my body, and close over my breasts, grinding roughly, but my tongue laps at his gaping mouth. He would take me right here, if I let him, hard against the too-blue door. Sex is naked in the twenty-first century, naked as Ed's need, and it fucks its angels fast and hungry in the nasty bathrooms where kids who find they can't take the needle come to puke their humiliated guts out. If I could, I would let him, because *yes* is easier than *no* these days, and I'm not a cock-tease or a good girl. But I cannot, because of what I really am.

"Damned . . ." Ed's fingertips graze the dressing again.

I remember to pretend it hurts me, and his cock throbs against my fat thigh. All the letters are gone, but desire still whimpers to him, and he brings his mouth down hard over mine again. I press his thin hand against the bandage. Why have I never thought of this before? Pain is easier to fake than pleasure. Could this—finally—be the loophole? Could it be suffering that frees me, instead of love?

"Look at you," he whistles.

"Behold, the damned!" I make a comic little flourish and shimmy my tits.

He groans. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

"Yeah, and I need you to, okay?"

“You’re kind of messed up, you know?”

Ed, Eddie, Pontius Edward—he will ask the questions, he will drive the tiny, electric nails into my flesh, but all the time, he’s washing his hands. He doesn’t want to know, doesn’t want to be involved. He’s curious, not concerned; a voyeur, not an actor; and I scent fear beneath the cloves.

He can’t save me, the fucker. If I kiss him again, I will taste his hesitation. I lick my lips for lingering flecks, and he pushes his hair back with fingers that say *hate* across the knuckles. I smile into his innocent eyes and pull on my shirt. “You’re blocking the door,” I tell him.

“What the fuck? You think you’re leaving?”

I grip his earlobe between my forefinger and thumb. He scrambles, panting mutely away from the door as I bring my quilled fingernails together.

I leave him with his new piercing bleeding softly, already cobbling the story he’ll tell about the crazy chick he made out with in the bathroom on Valentine’s Day after he tattooed her *damned*. As his story ages, we will have had sex back there.

My breasts are already flattening by the time the tattoo parlor door slams behind me, shrinking toward the twenty-first-century ideal of full and firm, but more athletic than sensual. At least I won’t be hungry when I meet Adam for dinner tonight.

I have been a fool. Ed could never have been my salvation. Just another fig. Adam, however, might be. If only tonight goes differently than my birthdays always do, if only I don’t have to leave Adam like I left Ed in the blue bathroom—blindly wanting me. They can’t help it. They all want me. I am the angel of desire.

Desire is an angel in hell.

“Lord, deliver us from demons,” Dominic said.

His two junior postdoctoral students, one depressed, one anxious, and both on high alert, squinted at him across a peeling Formica tabletop.

“Do you really think that’s appropriate?” the anxious one asked.

Dominic stretched his jaw against the damage patience was wreaking on his molars. “Professor Dysart gave the ‘Lord, Deliver Us’ speech at the APA conference last year. ‘From ancient times,’ ” Dominic recited, “ ‘when mental illness was treated with technologies as crude as drills to cast out devils, to today’s arguably equally primitive psycho-pharmaceutical attempts to alter brain chemistry, blah, blah, blah’—that one.”

Peter, still worried, whipped a notebook from his lab coat pocket and began transcribing. “I thought we recommended ‘Psychopharmacological Therapies and Posttraumatic Stress Disorders’ for the APA,” he said.

Paul shook his jowly head. “That’s too technical for TED.”

“Obviously,” Peter sneered. “It’s the Technology, *Entertainment*, and Design conference, for God’s sake. They’re not all medical doctors, much less neuroscientists. Some of them are artists. Dominic is right. ‘Lord Deliver Us’ is perfect. What was the subtitle for the PTSD speech, D?”

“Demons to Drugs.”

“Christ,” Paul said, “is there anything you don’t know off the top of your head?”

Peter continued his furious note-taking.

“I have it on the laptop.” Dominic gestured at the weathered shoulder bag on the seat beside him, but Peter scribbled on. Paul took a swallow of coffee, and Dominic surveyed the cafeteria again. It was a garish, uninteresting space, the only spot on the MIT campus he had not yet photographed. He squinted, mentally experimenting with focus and filter, and resolved to bring his camera in over spring break, just to challenge himself.

“Dysart won’t go,” he said, returning his attention to Peter and Paul. “His last flight had mechanical trouble, and he’s seventy, for Christ’s sake. Why don’t you two put in a joint travel request?”

“To speak at TED?”

“Both of us?”

Despite the union’s peppy color scheme and the energetic noise of undergraduates, it was the eagerness arcing between the two postdoctoral students that reminded Dominic how tired he was.

“You’re the senior research fellow, Dominic,” Peter said. “And the best speaker.”

“You wrote that speech,” Paul added. “You’re the one—”

“If you boys worked this little skit out ahead of time,” Dominic interrupted, “your script sucks.”

The two snorted but relaxed, only to bolt back upright again. “Hello, Professor Dysart,” they chorused.

“Gentlemen, I have exciting news.” A meaty hand landed on Dominic’s shoulder. “Peter, be a good chap and bring an old man a coffee?” Dysart handed over a crumpled bill and sat heavily beside Dominic, dropping a strategically folded newspaper before him. “Take a look at that,” he wheezed.

Madalene Wright, the article announced, had just withdrawn her funding from UCLA, the only other American university performing advanced research on brain chemistry and mental illness without pharmaceutical industry money. Dominic flashed a predatory grin and pushed the paper across the table to Paul. “Do we have a battle plan?” he asked Dysart.

Peter returned with a steaming mug and a jelly doughnut, which he placed before his idol. Dr. Dysart was not supposed to eat doughnuts. The distinguished scientist did not request them when he dispatched his underlings for coffee, nor did he send money enough to buy anything but the coffee he never touched. Without acknowledging its existence, the professor sank his yellow teeth into the forbidden offering. Dominic took the opportunity to change topics.

“We’ve just been discussing the TED conference next month. Since you’re cutting back on travel, Doc, why not send the Ps in your stead?”

“Paul and Peter?” Dysart regarded Dominic through gray barb-wire brows. “I thought you would go.”

“I’d rather not.”

“You spend too much time in the lab for such a good-looking young man. An escape to warmer climes might do you some good. Besides, I hear from Alfred in Chemical Engineering that the TED conference, to a hotshot young scientist, is like spring break to a buxom undergrad.” The professor winked lewdly. “The gratification of all your earthly desires, my boy! ”

Peter writhed in suppressed anguish, and Paul sank deeper into his ample flesh, but Dominic held his athletic body motionless, leaning back in his chair. “The advancement of knowledge is my fondest desire,” he declaimed.

Dysart and acolytes laughed. The tension eased. “Very well.” The doctor nodded, sucking his fingers for jelly. “I don’t suppose you fellows could tear yourselves away in March?”

“Professor, I—”

“I think we’d—”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Dr. O!” A petite blonde with a heart-spattered T-shirt peeking out from her hoodie waved shyly to Dominic.

“Hi, Jessica,” he said, and swallowed against the sudden, unwelcome but familiar bitter taste in his mouth.

The Ps waited just until the girl turned the corner. “Dr. O?” they sneered gleefully.

“From my last name,” Dominic explained. “O’Shaughnessy.” But the sounds and faces of MIT were fragmenting into liquid shards, flying apart slowly, as Dominic’s memory seized on an image of the pretty coed as vivid and clear as it was impossible.

“What about ‘the advancement of knowledge’ and all that, my boy?” Dysart’s voice was a distant echo.

“I said it was my fondest desire,” Dominic struggled to joke, “not my only one.”

But it was too late. Already, a memory that could not be his had captured him. He was running, stealing away from his village with that girl—a girl—on a festival day six hundred years ago. Ghita tripped, and he tumbled with her willingly into the smell of grass growing. He rolled her under him, blond against the green. She tasted like mead, and he cupped her breast, pale and still panting, spilling from an undeniably medieval kirtle. Ridiculous, for him to have medieval memories.

“*Parlan d’amore*,” he whispered. Her delicate eyes crinkled in joy, but from Ghita’s beautiful lips came Dysart’s coarse laugh.

The hallucination flickered. Dominic shoved his fingertips hard against his eyes.

“I think the message that *D.O.*”—Dysart put a heavy emphasis on Dominic’s first initial—“was trying to convey, is that he can celebrate the rites of spring without the aid of an academic conference’s bikinied bacchae.”

“I’m not interested in the spring riots,” Peter clarified earnestly. “It’s the girls.”

Dominic opened his eyes, grateful to see only ugly men again. He stood up, shaking himself, as if to shrug the delusional memories away. “Peter and Paul will do great,” he said and slung his laptop bag across his body. “I’ll email you both a copy of the speech.”

He had already turned to leave when Dysart’s phone shrilled and the professor gestured for him to wait. “My spies,” he mouthed, flipping open the slender device.

Paul and Peter exchanged a grin. Each man would have willingly sacrificed the other for the chance they now both had. Dominic held his steely focus on them. He would not return to Ghita, her skin, so richly pale, distended in black buboes. “*Acral necrosi*,” they would say now, not “the

Black Death,” with little Luciana still suckling the breathless breast. He had buried them together, mother and child.

“Confess,” Peter whispered, mistaking Dominic’s fierce scowl. “Now you want to go, don’t you?”

“God, no,” Dominic said. He rested his laptop bag on the table, impatient to fire up the machine and document the latest, spectacular failure of his clandestine pharmacopoeia. Insomnia he could have continued to tolerate, but grief-wracked delusions of a wife lost six hundred years ago indicated a complete failure of the AEDvII.2 formulation. “Besides,” he explained, catching the Ps’ puzzled stares, “there’s no way the department would agree to three of us going.”

“Dominic?” Dysart snapped his phone closed. “I’m sending you.”

“What?” Peter leapt to his feet, and even Paul unfolded himself in protest.

“Madalene Wright has accepted an invitation to the TED talks. She has registered for a number of lectures, including ours. I have a very stout grapevine, have I not?” Dysart beamed.

“Then it’s gotta be D.” Peter re-creased the newspaper, closing Wright’s artfully pickled face away from them.

“If she’s going to be there, yeah, it has to be,” Paul agreed.

“Madalene has just pulled her funding from UCLA,” Dysart reminded them. “She’ll have a few extra million just freed up to hand about if she decides she’d like to.”

Peter drilled nervous fingers on Formica. “If Dominic could persuade her to redirect even some of UCLA’s endowment to us, we might start the memory project in earnest, start to parse which neurons are involved in a given memory—”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, gentlemen.” Dysart lugged himself to standing. “Dominic, you look ghastly.”

“Sorry. I’m fine. Tired.”

But Peter was electrified. “If we can pinpoint how neurons come together to form networks, we might find the physical representations of specific memories. And when we understand memory learning and expression, we’re one step closer to memory eradication . . .”

“We’ll patent the new soma,” Paul whispered.

“We’d be hearing from Stockholm . . .”

Dr. Dysart waved the Ps silent. “You’ll go then?”

Dominic released pale lips from the vise of his teeth and nodded. He didn’t give a damn for patents or prizes, but he did care, with rigidly masked intensity, about the neuronal signatures of memories and their identification. Even the impossible, if found, can be destroyed.

“So it’s D’s quest,” Paul mumbled, when Dysart had ambled off toward the lab.

“Slay the dragon lady and bring us back the gold!” Peter gathered three empty coffee mugs and one full one.

“Give the ‘Lord Deliver Us’ speech,” Paul said to the table. “What was its subtitle?”

“Following the Chemical Footprints of Devils in the Mind,”” Dominic said, handing the licked-clean doughnut plate to Peter.

“You have one hell of a memory,” Peter grumbled. “You have no idea how lucky you are.”

“Yeah, I’m blessed with a hell of memory.” Dominic turned down the corridor to hide a bitter smile. “I guess it beats a memory of Hell.”

My flesh clings too tight around my bones, at least a dress size smaller than when I left Eddie bleeding in the blue bathroom. He wouldn’t recognize me if he walked in the door. Not that you get many punk tattooists in swank sushi joints. I have showered his smell from my scentless skin and traded in my beater-T and blue jeans for a velvet vest and silk skirt which match the restaurant’s décor—tastefully understated—although it would be difficult to conjure two words further from my true essence.

Adam, innocent darling, believes I am an account exec at one of the ad agencies downtown. It’s something I could actually do, from what I read in the bookstore careers section. Every one of these elegant and polished bodies in the restaurant anteroom has a job to eat up their time in exchange for the titles they feed to one another. I want one.

Can they sense how different I am, nestled amongst them in the stylish lobby? Their appraising eyes rank each other and compare themselves, but I am thin and expensively dressed, and it is enough. Blind to my angelic lineage and my damnation, they note the style of my shoes, not the state of my soul. Just as well. They’re six-hundred-dollar heels.

“Happy birthday!” Adam’s light touch lands on my shoulder. I stand to greet him, quickly shrinking an inch from my native height. I always forget he’s short. My muted terra-cotta lips

yield to his adoring kiss, my teeth's sharp edges neatly tucked away. I need nothing from him after my inky snack. He steps behind me, forming a warm mantle of love against my back and shoulders in the packed lobby's electric loneliness. I want to wrap my pulseless shell in the human noise and heat of his heart and lungs. I want to drill my unbreakable angel nails into this moment and refuse to let it slip. I would drain time and swallow it to keep the two of us standing thus, my body inside the protective cloak of his arms and love. It is enough to hope.

I steady myself against the scent of his wanting me, and touch the fragile answering ache of my own desire. Not for him, not for his body, not even his blood, but for his mortality and love. If I could turn in his arms and tell him every poisoned thing I am, and still smell desire, not rank fear—if he could see and love me—could I slip through him, out of human flesh and time, back to angelic wings and freedom? This is my threadbare hope.

Every vampire is a fallen angel of desire, and we nourish our deathless beauty on what we fleetingly inspire in mortals who live but briefly. But just as I would break my teeth on Adam if he did not want or fear me, he must see through the desires I create and those I embody, in order to taste my truth and free me. But desire, like humanity, is quick to breed and quick to die, and accustomed to do both with closed eyes.

“You look incredible.” Adam's lips brush my ear. He sounds excited, maybe nervous. Is there a ring in his pocket? Has he called ahead and planned something humiliating with a waiter? His capable hands squeeze my elbow. I look at my expensive shoes. Red tears bite my eyes.

“Adam?” The hostess is a luscious thing in green velvet.

“Right here.” He twines his fingers in mine and excuse-mes his way through the lobby. I trail him, following the hostess, winding through the lush rows of tiny tables dotted like topiary in this garden of sensory delights. The men, women, and tables are all draped in the same rich, earth-toned palette of wealth and sophistication—designer skin, exotic eyes, flesh and food in artful presentations. But my skirt is too red. It's expensive and exquisitely detailed, but blood-colored, and draws glances. I am forever tripping over the human thread between eye-catching and obscene. I hate every woman I pass.

Adam beams across our table. “How was your day?”

“I got a tattoo,” I tell him.

“Very funny. How was work?”

I only want to study his strong jaw and wide cheekbones, the way his blond hair falls into his earnest eyes—mortal beauty is so moving—but Adam’s end-of-day reunion ritual dictates we confess our grievances using the form of the employees’ creed. I learned the contemporary version easily, two variations on the theme of “my betters are worse than me.”

I elect to berate The Client, the mysterious entity who pays our salaries and thus, in a market economy, is our superior and therefore, in American mythology, our inferior. Adam recites his day in the Idiot Boss variation, but I barely hear for feasting my eyes on his face, and hoping. The waitress brings glistening jewels of fish on tiny rice couches and handleless clay mugs of tea. Adam orders wine. Not a glass each, but a bottle. Reckless, for him.

“Olivia.” He grasps the stem, but does not drink. “I have something I need to ask you.” He toys with the fine rim. “I know we haven’t known each other that long, in the grand scheme of things.”

The scheme is infinitely grander than he can comprehend. And he doesn’t know me at all. One man once, a few hundred years ago, almost did, but I could not sustain even that for long. Poor Vlad, I’m not sure even he ever fully believed me.

“I think I fell in love with you the first time I saw you,” he says. But has he fallen far enough? Too deep to scale the sheer wall of his desire? If I can show him everything I am—wingscars and quills—and he can stay fallen with his fallen angel, then I might finally be free. But I’ve screwed this up every time since the fall of man. I must watch my step.

“I love everything about you, the way you look, your eyes, your laugh . . .”

I have to tell Adam now, before he proposes, or the loophole will dissolve. If my body had scent like a mortal's, I would smell wet fear.

"I love that you think my jokes are funny, and that you care how my day went."

In his infant-blue eyes, I see naked hunger glint like light off glass. He wants me, truly and deeply. He wants me, and his desire creeps through my body like food. I could sustain myself on such hunger, surely? Fill myself up with his need? It isn't love, but it is power. Almost as sweet.

"I want you to know"—Adam leans forward, his voice a husky whisper in the crowded restaurant—"I totally respect your intention to save yourself for marriage." His eyes, darting to the adjacent tables, give the lie to his professed respect. "I would never put any pressure on you to do something you weren't comfortable with."

I'm not comfortable with the close-spaced tables, with the red of my skirt, or the briny smell of Adam's excitement. The waitress brings more small plates—shimmering Szechwan pork ribs on curly lettuce leaves—and takes the rest away.

"Olivia, I want to wake up every morning and see your heavenly face beside me. I want to come home every night to find you there." His fingers convulse around the glass and release it. His hand disappears beneath the table, reaching toward his coat pocket. He is shifting in his chair. Will he go down on one knee here, where there is barely space to stand between the tables? The ridiculous, antiquated, public gesture will knock something over. It will ruin my chance.

"Adam, wait a minute—"

"No, don't make me stop. There's something I need to say." His mouth, anticipating, is delicious. I hate to shove truth into it, but he must taste before he speaks.

“Just a minute, Adam. Please.”

“I love you, Olivia. I want us to be together.” He is still fumbling, still reaching.

“We can never be together.” I say. “Not the way you mean it.”

“Why not?” His easy smile clouds over.

“I can’t have sex,” I whisper.

“You’re just frightened.” But he takes his hand from its pocket—empty. “It’s because you’re innocent.”

“I’m anything but innocent. I’m bad—wicked.”

“Honey, don’t say that.” He reaches for my hand and strokes it. “You’re not wicked; you’re everything I’ve ever wanted in a woman.”

As if those two things were ever mutually exclusive.

“I don’t understand why you don’t have more confidence. Look at you, you’ve got it all: a great body, great job, a great guy . . .” He makes a funny little gesture toward himself, the rational man comforting the emotional female.

“I’m cursed,” I tell him, “ruined, destroyed . . .”

“Don’t be silly, Olivia. You’re a beautiful woman.”

“I’m not! I’m not a woman at all. I . . .”

Oh, crap.

The terror rises acrid and fast. I hear horror shrieking in his mind the single word *transvestite*.

Fuck, men are stupid. “No, Adam, stop. Adam, look at me! You know that’s not what I mean.” His heart thunders blood through him. I have to stop the panic.

“Adam, I-I’m a vampire.”

Adam is blank. He gazes, unseeing, into his plate where his forgotten food is cooling. It will be thrown away untouched. “Why do I always fall for the crazy girls?” he mutters to his ribs.

His wine glass reflects an inverted table, a reverse Olivia, an upside-down world in its yellow-white orb. “God, there must be something wrong with me. I thought you were different. You’re so pretty, so classically beautiful, I thought . . . Is this an eating disorder thing?”

“Adam—”

“You’re not a vampire. That’s stupid. I’ve never even had a hickey from you. If anything, you avoid my neck.”

“I don’t have to feed that way. I can get everything I need just kissing you. My teeth have quills—my nails, too—tiny, sharp, hollow spines that you don’t even feel when they harvest—”

“Do you mean you’ve already—”

Bad idea to go into feeding practices right away.

“We’re angels, actually,” I scramble, hoping he’ll find some beauty in the lineage. “All vampires are—fallen angels.” I should shut up now. But the knot of disgust between his brows is deepening, and I want to keep talking until it unties. “Our parents were expelled from Heaven for something horrendous, and . . .”

“What?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“No, damn it, what are you saying? Can you please stop being crazy for just one minute and let me think this through? Of course you’re not a vampire.”

“Adam, shhh!”

“You’re not an angel either. I just can’t accept this.”

He can’t. Acceptance requires despair, and Adam isn’t the despairing sort. It’s a feature that attracted me to him, perversely—his dogged confidence.

“I loved you . . .”

“Adam, you can’t love what you don’t know.”

“I know you!” His voice climbs too loud.

“No,” I whisper, raging. It is, after all, all I’ve ever wanted. And all I have always been denied.
“You don’t know me!”

“Bullshit. Tell me something about you I don’t know.”

“Do you know what would happen if I picked up a knife and opened my arm with it?” I lean forward, trying to anchor his wheeling eyes to mine. “It wouldn’t hurt. I can’t feel.” I am reckless with disappointment. “Before an ambulance could get here, the bleeding would stop and the opening would start to close. I would heal completely in less than ten minutes.”

“That’s disgusting!”

Why do moderns respond to miracles this way?

“I can’t have sex. I can’t die,” I dive on. “I don’t cast a shadow, not that you ever noticed. And when I’m alone, I can’t see myself in mirrors. I have no idea what I look like without someone else’s eyes on me.”

It isn’t working. I’m scrambling down the precipice, but his grip is slipping and my eagerness to reach him showers rocks on his upturned face.

I leave him sitting there. I have seen hope's self-immolation too many times to sift through Adam's ashes.

Eden Sushi occupies the last building on the block, and I disappear around the corner as Adam explodes through the restaurant doors. I strike unbreakable angelic nails into the mortar and scale the bricks' rough face on talons and heels.

"Olivia! Come back here!" Adam yells into the night, blond and vulnerable beneath me, "I want to talk to you."

Shout yourself hoarse calling for your angel, but don't lift up your eyes to see.

"Olivia! Where are you?"

My skirt billows on the black breeze, the proud, scarlet flag of tattered desire. I step back from the roof edge and from hope, listening for the pulse of my pale city beneath its ugly electric skin. But I can only hear my sisters' howling hunger.

"Come on, Michael!" Adam pleads with the bartender who followed us out to say we're no longer welcome within. "I won't make a scene. Dude, you know me!"

But I am already gone.

I should go to my sisters, but not tonight. Tonight, I will be the bogeyman, a thing half seen, the sudden shiver crawling, ranging fast and silent through your night, my glorious daybreak. Tonight, I will hunt with Adam's rage on ruined shoes, and I will feed full-tooth.

Desire denied consumes.

Dominic frowned at the smudgy ovals his wet socks left on the sparkling kitchen floor, and listened. No sound came from his mercifully deserted town house. Margery must have finished her cleaning and left while he was still out running. Dominic smiled. He'd done an extra five kilometers in that exact hope. And in advance atonement for the icy slices of porcine heaven he unpeeled and dropped into an ancient cast-iron fry pan. High cholesterol ran on his dad's side, making six fat strips of bacon contraindicated as an afternoon snack, but Dominic prodded his indulgence with a fork and grinned. He'd end up like Dysart if he wasn't careful—hand-fed death in small bites by overeager postdocs.

He inhaled deeply, waiting on the knot that the smell of tree smoke and plenty always untied in him. Anger let go in his chest, and he leaned against the spotless countertop to stretch his calf muscles. The bacon's smell was working, and that mattered more than understanding why this scent always carried him back to a wide-hipped woman by a massive wood stove. He smiled at the image of her, back turned, singing to herself while he, four years old—five maybe—sat at a flour-sprinkled table with hot rolls in an old pan, waiting for breakfast, dressed for church.

The familiar clatter of his housekeeper descending the stairs jostled him from his scent-dream. Dominic bowed his head. She had not left after all. "Dr. D?" Margery yodeled. "You makin' bacon again?" Dominic grasped an ankle to stretch out his quads, and nodded to the wild-haired woman standing, capable hands on ample hips, in the doorway of his kitchen while his two cats, Hubel and Weisel, circled her ankles.

"Honestly," Margery pronounced, "I don't know why you won't use a treadmill on a day like this. You're soaked through. I'll tend the bacon, you sit down. Or go shower. I'll have those rashers and some nice eggs with toast ready by the time you're cleaned up."

"Sit down yourself, Mrs. L. There's enough here for both of us."

Margery regarded him through narrowed eyes while the kitties went straight to their dishes. "Things bad at the lab today?"

“No actually, it was a good day.”

On his twenty-first birthday, Dominic sold a stash of Civil War- era gold, paid off his parents’ mortgage, and bought this modest town house for cash. Margery, excessively well-paid to come in and clean once a week, represented the singular exception to Dominic’s six subsequent years of monklike austerity.

“I’m going to California next month,” he said.

“And you’re not happy about that?”

“Not particularly, no.”

“That explains it.” Margery nodded her red ringlets.

“Explains what?”

His housekeeper took her usual seat at the little kitchen table, still nodding her head. Dominic refilled the cats’ water. “You only make bacon when you’re upset,” she said. “Otherwise it’s those dreadful boil-in-the-bag dinners.”

It was true. To deliberately trigger a memory-like seizure for the warmth and serenity it brought was stupid, but hardly the riskiest game Dominic played with his bizarre affliction. He’d done it before, trying to rule out temporal lobe epilepsies, but they generated no abnormal electrical activity. In the EEGs and fMRIs, his brain lit up exactly the same as when he remembered first grade.

“I wish you’d let me cook for you.” Margery went on, propping her feet up on Dominic’s chair. “I’ve got plenty of time on my day here. You barely move things one week to the next. I could whip up a few meals for you. They’d cook while I clean, and you’d have a hot dinner waiting when you come home, with more in the freezer for the week ahead.”

Dominic drained the bacon fat meticulously into the emptied cat food tin he fished from the trash. “I pay you for the day, Mrs. L. You could just leave when you’re done. You don’t need to stay until I get home.”

“You say that every week, but I hate to think of you coming back to an empty house.”

“Really, I don’t mind.”

“You say that every week, too. But I have the time. Or I could start tidying the basement?”

“No.” Dominic put two more pieces of bread in the toaster. “No. Thank you.”

“It just seemed a shame to leave you here alone, today being Valentine’s and all.”

“Is it? Oh yeah, I saw Ghita in the student union. She had hearts all over her shirt . . .” Tension coiled again between his teeth and ears. “No. That’s not right. What’s her name? Jessica. I saw Jessica.”

“Well, I’m sure it’s hard to keep students straight in your mind. You’ve got so many in those introductory psychology classes.”

Dominic cut with more force than strictly necessary into a tomato. He had explained to Margery too many times that he didn't teach psychology, just the neuroanatomy portion of an interdisciplinary psych course.

"So, no special plans for tonight, Doctor?"

"Not unless you consider sharing a perfect BLT with the best housekeeper in Cambridge special?" Dominic winked and put the plates on the table. "Coke or Guinness, Mrs. L?"

Margery blushed an alarming pink beneath her dyed-orange hair. "Oh, beer, I think, don't you?"

"Absolutely."

Dominic sank his teeth through the cool layers of bread, lettuce, and tomato to the brown, hot crackle of bacon. If Margery had left while he was out running, as he'd asked her to, he would have eaten his bacon from a bare fork by the stove, or thrown it out—it was really all about the smell—but either would have earned him a proper meal cooked from scratch if she had seen him.

"I could run out and pick us up a bottle of wine for dinner?" Her normal color had still not returned. Dominic considered the possibility of menopause, but Margery was only a few years older than he.

"I wouldn't know what to pair with bacon," he grinned.

"Dominic, this isn't dinner, surely?"

"I have a lot of work to do . . ."

“And you’re planning to gobble this up and go back down to whatever it is you do in that awful basement of yours, aren’t you?” Dominic glanced toward the locked door. “On Valentine’s Day! I swear, sometimes I think you keep your heart down there.”

Dominic laughed. “Now Mrs. L, you know you’re my only love.” She flushed again, and Dominic carried both their empty plates to the sink.

“Your heel’s bleeding.”

Dominic craned his neck over a shoulder to see the brilliant red staining his white running socks.

“I’ll get you that calendula I bought.”

“I’m not sure it works,” Dominic rinsed the plates. “Wish I had a blister on my other foot, too, for a control.” Margery shook her head, but allowed Dominic to steer her to the front door and help her into her winter coat. “The house looks wonderful, Margery. Thank you.”

“Well it’s not hard to keep it clean when you don’t seem to use but the bed, the bathroom, and the microwave.”

“How can you say that after my gourmet masterpiece tonight?”

“I’m just saying you could use a woman around, is all.”

“Are you ever bothered by night sweats, Mrs. L?”

Margery shot him a puzzled glance. “No. Why?”

“Nothing. Just wondering.” Dominic’s jaw tightened uncomfortably. “Good night, Margery.”

From the correct side of his front door at last, Margery’s bright unblinking eyes studied him. “You just can’t wait to get back to your work, can you?”

“Is it so crazy that I enjoy what I do?”

“It’ll *make* you crazy.” Margery turned away and cautiously climbed down the town house’s icy front steps, grumbling, “Staying in every night, denying yourself all life’s pleasures, no dinner, no love . . .”

“Drive carefully,” Dominic called after her. Then he locked the door, shrugged off his coat, and trotted down the basement stairs. Margery had it exactly backwards. Dominic’s irregular hours had nothing to do with self-denial, and everything to do with love. He walked briskly through his small darkroom and unlocked the door in its back wall. To a curious man, every mystery was a challenge, every puzzle was a dare. Dominic worked all night because he relished the contest.

Because he loved to win.

Whether he was crazy or not was a different question. And the hunt for its answer was more than his passion or his work; it was a pitched battle to the death. Dominic slid into the worn chair behind his microscope and booted up his laptop. His crusade against the mysteries of the true final frontier—the human brain—had made his body a secret battlefield. And no less than Nature itself, or God, as his opponent.

WHAT YOU HUNT

As human morality trended away from slavery and caste, a few vampires began to question our hunting practices. Modern forensic science persuaded more of us that it was too dangerous to feed full-tooth from strangers. Thus Sylvia, our Irish sister, founded a series of clubs to protect us—the beautiful, incestuous children of angels thrown from Heaven—from a similar expulsion from the world of men. The Quarries offer ethical consumerism and identity protection in exchange for eight thousand dollars and our once-potent solitude. I wonder what we'll find to fear next.

I wash up on Manhattan's most exclusive doorstep before twilight on Saint Patrick's Day, beneath a snot-colored sky. The New York Quarry is introducing a new redhead in honor of the occasion, but after a month of hunting rogue, I don't give a fig for novelty. I have come here to play it safe. I am weary, and seeking a familiar sin.

I slip the small brass key around my wrist into the club's blood-red door whose matte black letters absorb all the sparkle of the city's light. The door swings silently inward, and I step into a small reception room. It is comforting, at least, to be out of the electricity again.

A young man stands behind a desk bathed in unsteady candlelight. "Welcome," he whispers, and with reverent hands presents a velvet-lined box to me. I take the ring from it and slip it over my right thumb. I turn its jewel to face him. He tenses, watching the band spin. The swirl of my damnation, like smoke in a bottle, clouds the red stone black. Why must our most basic rites be embroidered thus? Why can't I still draw a curved line in the dust and be known?

The boy milks the retractable spike into a silver vial and wipes away the excess with a Kleenex. I am not meant to see him slip the tissue into the pocket of his tailored coat. "Okay, then." He smiles too brightly. "The Quarry debuts a fresh fig at midnight, so in addition to the standard agreement, there's a proviso page to sign, okay?"

He smells like the outside, like grass, or dill, fresh and green, with a deep masculine red beneath, the too-cheerful smell of blood and fucking. I hate him and his sunshine smells in my night city.

He disappears behind his desk, and pops back up holding several printed pages, which he tidies and stacks before me. He twists his head at an unhealthy angle to read aloud the page facing me.

“While there is no additional fee for freshness”—I could help his neck to twist around a bit farther; vertebrae break quietly—“society members are reminded that evasion skills are learned over time.” He holds out a black fountain pen. “Initial please.”

I inscribe an ornate *O* where he points.

“I understand that there are initiate connoisseurs,” he whispers, “but for what you pay, I’m sure you want at least an hour of pursuit to work up an appetite.” He leans over the desk with a conspiratorial wink, and my fingers twitch to snatch the flicking lashes and rip. “No guarantees with the new recruits! Last month, Evelyn caught a debut male in ten minutes.” He shakes his head sadly. “That one didn’t return.”

I should go see Evelyn. Maybe she could cheer me.

He turns over another page of small type and blank lines. “This document allows us to auto-deduct the eight thousand dollars per hunt from the credit card you have on file, plus any fines that you incur. Initial please. Thank you.”

Another piece of paper defiled.

“This is the standard guarantee of disease- and drug-free blood, initial please, thank you. These are your restrictions, initial by each line please. To take no more than two quarts per fig per hunt, thank you. To leave no marks beyond a maximum of three sets of punctures, thank you. And to call the Quarry Recovery Line within an hour of first draw, thank you. Here’s a card with the Recovery Hotline phone number.” I take the card.

Modernity: Abandon all choice, ye who enter here. I push the door open and step inside.

The Quarry's lounge is decorated like an old-world bordello, deliberately ironic but genuinely antique. Flocked crimson wallpaper and polished brass diffuse and glow in the flickering light of wall-mounted gas sconces. All the human smells are gone. Soon it will teem with the Undead, but it's early still. I'm the only one.

Amidst the Victoriana, in the center of the lounge, lush, backless velvet sofas ring a huge, sleek, one-way glass aquarium. Behind its soundproof glass, six naked men and women await their hunters. But I see only the delectable Latina woman inches away. I push my marble fingers against the cool, slick glass. "Hola, Maria." She can't hear me.

I force myself to see the others in the covert. Opposite Maria, the new girl is easy to spot, rabbit soft, hair like a dying fire. She is the only one trying to conceal her body, hopelessly vulnerable. I walk around the covert to where she sits, trailing lifeless fingertips against the cold glass.

She's terrified, but even the veterans like Maria are nervous every time. They never know who hunts them, and some of us like to play with our food, drawing out the pursuit as long as we can, or amusing ourselves with the unconscious shell, tasting the cooling body, the pliant muscles and unresisting apertures, the smells still clinging, the vigor of having fed building in us.

I ring for the quarrymaster.

"Get me Maria," I tell him.

She is not redemption. I only drink her fear. But it is familiar, almost the same as love.

As my Maria is summoned and descends, I watch a powerfully endowed, muscular younger man leaning back in his chair with his deep-set eyes closed. A Rubenesque raven girl massages his meaty shoulders. Her full, red-tipped breasts roll rhythmically with her strokes. His hands curl loosely on his corded thighs, making no attempt to cover his long, exposed, but flaccid sex. Her

fist-size nipples spiral hypnotically, and I wonder what it would take to make him hard. Maybe he would rather be hunted than massaged. Some desires require that.

The quarrymaster returns to say that Maria is dressed and ready. I follow him into the pen. Only its thin walls separate her mortal body from mine now. She waits, delicate chin resting in a cradle inches away. The bar slides back revealing only her green eyes. She does not blink. Her eyes fix deep in me, locating her within. I cannot fail to find her now. The window slides shut from the other side. Someone tells her “Go!” And she is gone.

The farther she can run before I follow, the longer the hunt will last; but I’m restless, and the quarrymaster smells of fried chicken and fear. I circle the building scenting for the exit she used. I sense her eyes again as I pick up her trail and follow it, holding myself to a walk. I am hungry.

The Quarry is on the edge of the restaurant district, and she’s gone deeper in, mingling with the club-goers and first dates, scenting sex and anxiety. She’s learning. I pass the bar where I cornered her last time. She had hidden in the back, near the kitchen, trying to mask her fear-scent in the smells of food. Tonight, she has gone toward the busier streets. But she misunderstands; it’s not an olfactory scent we take when the bar slides back between our eyes.

Hunger heightens my angelic senses, and I isolate her trail amongst the hunters who seek only a human connection, flavored with a longing she does not possess. I follow, trying to shorten my powerful stride through my growing anticipation and rage. Adam will be among these throngs tonight.

The entertainment district ends abruptly at an elevated highway, despite repeated civic attempts to reclaim the darkness on the other side. Car exhaust and dirt on the ascendancy, blood and anticipation declining. *Maria, where are you?* The rules require that she stay on foot. I reach out for a trace of her. I’ve overshot, and retreat.

I track her to an all-night service station. She’s gone inside and vanished? *No*. Here’s a trace, terror masked in gasoline, moving north. She’s taking risks. A human woman walking alone under the overpass at night tempts devils who have signed no contract. I will kill anyone I find threatening her. I almost run, but stop myself, like choking back a laugh.

She's alone. I see her now, walking briskly north. She, too, has learned not to run. I shorten the space between us too soon, pressing down need and anger. Shall I let her hear me? *No*.

She turns, sensing the shadows moving. She's wearing a mechanic's greasy coveralls. Clever girl. But her tender heart rate is rising. Now she knows it's me. She struggles not to run, looking hard over her shoulder. Does she hope for a different ending? Does the Quarry hint that the hour we have to hunt them is a limit on us, a chance of escape for our prey? How could she believe that? Could she try so valiantly if she did not?

Disciplining my strength into grace, I shadow her beneath the overpass. I'm almost touching her, breathing the slippery smell of her fear. But the thrumming beat of her, visible through the warm flesh of her throat, summons me. My pulseless fingers reach out for the hammering vein and feel it pound swifter against them. She makes a strange noise and runs.

I watch her strong body straining forward for as long as I can, before I slide in behind her. Magnificent, striding flight, her legs stretch, and mine shadow. I rein myself back as her endurance fails. Her blazing lungs and her tearing heart echo through me. I could so easily overtake her, drive my teeth into her now, but she will exhaust herself soon and have to stop. And then . . .

Then I will take her. Let her run until she no longer can.

But she's very fit and can't bring herself to surrender, so I touch her again, circling a fragile wrist, giving her a focus for her fear. She flails, and I step behind her, pulling her against me. She can't breathe from running. Fear spikes, mindless struggles, held to my still body. My lips graze the place of first puncture, across the last hunt's wounds healed to bare bruises; and I taste her with my tongue. She's not allowed to scream, but can't throttle the half cry. She fights to control the impulse, which would end her career with us, even as I whisper to her.

The cars fly over us rhythmically carrying their own light, but only their shadows spread beyond the highway, down the concrete, to me. I transfer Maria's wrists to one hand and glide the other across her hip bone, pressing into the softness it encircles. Her breasts are small, tapering into her

chest below a collarbone that I can't see without wanting to snap and suck. My fingers press hard into it, not to bruise, no, I can't leave even a finger-mark in the flesh there, the castrating bastards of the Quarry all be damned for their godless fear and mortal caution.

She's motionless against me now, except for the ragged breathing. Dragged from collarbone to jaw, my cold fingers finally tip her chin up. She shudders, knowing. My lips open against yielding flesh. My mouth stretches even wider, and I allow my tongue to stroke her pulsing skin again. A warm release, deep in the bones of my jaw, presses the sharper teeth through, lengthening as my lips and tongue work until, at full extension and aching hollow, my feeding teeth catch against her. I force myself through a single ragged breath, pressing my lower lip hard against her human warmth. Then I flex, pulling my mouth away. My upper lip curls, my jaws unhinge, and I strike. I pierce, and sink into her full-tooth. The blood strikes the back of my throat in spasmodic cardiac bursts until I can pull and swallow, draw her into me. Maria is rigid, locked in pain, or horror, or ecstasy. But she will soften.

Beneath the freeway, time groans and gives way. My throat is slippery with the distortion of seconds into years, and I pull myself from the rising blood dreams to turn her toward me. Her face is extraordinary, pale stealing the flush of her running. Her swimming eyes lose focus, meet mine. I shouldn't, but I let her look, cradling her head with my warming fingers, holding her against me. She gives the weight of her body into my hands. Below my lips, her scent is fading, heart slowing.

I strike again. My mind deepens and I drink the flood of images and moments that aren't mine across my tongue. Her mother—black hair, outdated clothes, a lover, a wasteland, a child. The sweet blood dreams. I drink her, am her. I am open to the whole thrum of thought and life and desire, of things made and things dreamed, of each person unique, each droplet alone in its current. And none of them mine.

Dominic pierced the hotel's cocoon of wealth reluctantly. Any place, temple or tearoom, where the rituals of rank and riches were strictly observed brought out an ancient, impudent impulse in him. He wanted to take off his shirt and stand on the furniture. He wanted to run. On the pillowy hotel lobby carpet, getting his bearings, Dominic stood full Bengali despite his stylish jacket.

His rogue imagination was swift to provide a rich contextual history behind physical sensations as simple as lushness underfoot, but he had learned not to challenge these unwelcome fantasies

too closely. He was, in some indisputable way, tiger hunting. He shifted his laptop bag to his left shoulder and began to track silently across the luxurious rug toward the restaurant, but his elbow was immediately captured.

“Dr. O’Shaughnessy, I’m Megan, Ms. Wright’s personal secretary. Thank you for coming.”

“My pleasure, Megan. Did I speak with you on the phone?”

“No, that was Tibby.”

Brisk, blond, and competent, Megan steered Dominic away from the restaurant where he had been asked to meet Madalene Wright, and down a broad flight of marble stairs. “I’m Ms. Wright’s personal secretary. Tibby is the foundation’s. Ms. Wright heard you speak today at the conference. I believe she has some questions for you.”

Megan brought Dominic to a wary halt before an unmarked but highly polished wooden door. “Are you surprised to hear that?” she asked, and rapped at the door.

“I was surprised to hear from Ms. Wright at all. She has a reputation for being more difficult to meet with than the Wizard of Oz.” Dominic tugged the cuff of his jacket self-consciously. Megan’s slender hand had pulled it up enough to reveal the tattoo that bore an embarrassing testament to his tumultuous adolescence.

“I’ll let Ms. Wright know you’re here.” Megan turned fluidly toward the equally stunning woman who had opened the door. “Lucy, will you show Dr. O’Shaughnessy to Ms. Wright’s table?”

“With pleasure.”

Dominic's elbow was transferred from one silky hand to another, and Lucy escorted him deeper into the belly of San Francisco's most exclusive dining room. He felt, with every cushioned step, less like a predator and more like prey.

Dominic had been seated only moments when Ms. Wright, elegant and ageless, swept into the dining room in a crimson dress, flanked by her two vestal secretaries, and trailed by a cantankerous-looking man a few years younger than himself. Dominic rose, grateful that the fabled Ms. Wright triggered nothing in him. He grinned too broadly at the grande dame out of sheer relief.

"Dr. O'Shaughnessy, how very nice to meet you."

"Ms. Wright, I am honored. Call me Dominic, please."

For once, Dominic's aberrant knowledge of historic minutia proved useful. He did not extend his hand and recognized the flicker of approval in the regal face across from him. Nor did he take his seat again until she, smiling now, invited him to.

"This is my son, Harold." Madalene nodded toward the hulk of resentment settling itself into a chair. "Harold, unfortunately, did not hear you speak this afternoon, but I very much enjoyed your lecture." Madalene ignored the flurry of radiating activity as secretaries and waiters, sommeliers and servants poured and fetched. She fixed her keen gaze on Dominic. "So, there's been a changing of the guard at MIT? My old acquaintance Dysart stays home and sends forth his brave young Turks. Need I fear for his health or his dedication?"

"An old general knows the value of young blood," Dominic replied.

Tibby's mouth contracted as though her teeth had turned to salt. Megan transmitted a subtle frown, but Dominic caught the flicker of a smile in the glittering eyes of their mistress. "I thought I caught a whiff of something," she said. "So tell me, Dominic, are you really as good as the journals say?"

“You read the *Lancet* article?”

“I have more than a passing interest in neuropsychiatry, and I try to keep abreast of developments in your field. I fund quite a lot of them.”

“I am well acquainted with your generosity.”

“You are not.”

“Then I should like to be.”

Tibby blanched.

Madalene arched a sculpted brow. “My, you are quite the young tiger, aren’t you?”

“My mother is a businesswoman, Dominic.” The lumpish son heaved himself forward to interrupt. “She invests our foundation’s money in promising enterprises that are likely to win big.”

“I was under the impression that the Wright Foundation took advantage of its unique position as a private fund to support the kind of radical research that makes corporate sponsorship gun-shy,” Dominic replied. “You have a reputation for poaching the big ideas that hover on the outskirts of mainstream science.”

“So you admit that the mainstream takes exception to Dysart’s work?” Harold smirked.

“I’ll admit it’s exceptional.”

Watching the junior Wright’s face deflate, Dominic was reminded of the antique medical notion of the four humors. Presented with such a perfect example of an excess of bile, Dominic suppressed an impulse to inquire after the younger man’s spleen.

“Are you hungry, Dominic?” Behind her elegant, erect back, Madalene’s matching secretaries discreetly shook their manicured heads no at Dominic with a fearful symmetry.

“Very.”

“Ah.” Ms. Wright paused, unperturbed. “Please order something.”

A waiter materialized from the staff orbiting Ms. Wright like bees drawn to the golden pollen of wealth. He hovered, waiting for a command he could obey, but Ms. Wright’s menu remained untouched. “At a certain age, women’s bodies lose the ability to metabolize food at all and convert it directly into thigh,” she informed Dominic. “I am too old to eat.”

“Ms. Wright, I find myself in an unenviable position,” Dominic confessed. “I’m afraid that if I don’t eat something, I shall be very poor company, too addled by hunger to think clearly or answer your questions accurately. You will be forced to form an impression of me as a well-mannered young fool. On the other hand, I’m the son of a southern lady who raised me to eat with good manners or starve—Sparta, Georgia’s ‘with your shield or upon it’—so I cannot order if you do not intend to eat.”

Madalene’s laughter surprised everyone but Harold, who clearly ate whatever he wanted whenever he wanted, metabolism be damned.

“My mother never takes dinner,” he said, enjoying Dominic’s predicament, while his mother’s attendant bevy swarmed uneasily.

“Do you take tea, Ms. Wright?”

“That sounds lovely.”

“Tea, please,” Dominic said.

“With”—Ms. Wright inclined her precision coif slightly toward the waiter’s napkined forearm—“perhaps some of those nice little quiche and a few finger sandwiches?” She smiled frankly at Dominic, the first authentic expression he had seen on her expensive face. “Mustn’t disobey Mother?”

“Never.” Dominic returned the smile and took a risk. “Tell me what kind of work you’re interested in supporting, Ms. Wright,” he asked bluntly. The doyen across from him enjoyed toying with her food, but his tea and sandwiches would be arriving soon on starched white waves, and Dominic wanted time to digest both food and information.

“My foundation supports innovation,” Ms. Wright said. “Your lecture today suggested the possibility of a psychiatric cosmetic surgery. If I understood correctly—and you may correct me if I did not”—Dominic nodded polite assent—“you’re postulating a technology to identify the locations of specific thoughts or memories, with the ultimate goal of disrupting only those targeted neurons to functionally erase the memory.”

“We believe that memory is basically a change in synaptic strength or organization,” Dominic explained. “It’s a genetic adaptation with enormous benefits to creatures needing to recall precisely where they stumbled across a den of tigers, or a poisonous snake. But it’s a lot less helpful against contemporary dangers.”

“Hence PTSD.” Madalene nodded.

Dominic watched the tea things land with profound gratitude. “The brain can’t tell the difference between the memory of an old trauma and a fresh instance of a recurrent one,” he said. “The pathway is reinforced every time an event is relived in imagination or experience, but we’re learning to identify the memory trace—the specific grouping of neurons that represent a memory—and we’re finding these traces aren’t simply the environments in which a memory is formed, but actually hold the memory itself.”

“That’s fascinating, Dr. O’Shaughnessy.”

Madalene Wright did not look fascinated. Dominic poured himself a deliberate cup of tea, playing for time. Something she had heard in his morning lecture had intrigued her enough to summon him to a hotel they didn’t share for a meal she didn’t eat. What did she want?

“We’ve found beta-blockers which, if given within a few hours of the inciting traumatic event, can almost eliminate the risk of PTSD,” Dominic said. “I could imagine similar therapies for phobia, monomania, and OCD.” Not a flicker of interest from across the table. Ms. Wright sat, demure hands in her lap, expressionless.

“Can you foresee a benefit for delusional patients?” she asked.

Dominic’s body’s pulsed an adrenal alert. He glanced at the old lady’s son. Young Harold rolled his piggy eyes in weary disgust and tucked his chin into folds of neck. He had heard this before. Dominic relaxed and ate a finger sandwich.

“Delusion is different from memory,” he noted neutrally.

“But would a delusion or a false memory create a similar memory trace?” Ms. Wright leaned forward until the table pressed into her silk-clad arms. She reminded Dominic of a puppet, the

way her upright body leaned and turned without ever releasing her hands from their place beneath the table.

“Delusions are thought disorders, but there’s certainly a larger confabulatory component to memory than courtroom lawyers would like us to know about.” Dominic grasped for levity but missed. “And we remember the past and imagine the future from subsystems of the same core network.”

Ms. Wright’s wealth and influence were massive. She leaned her tailored torso against the table, and the gravity of her power inexorably drew Dominic toward her, accreting his intellectual prowess and scientific skill to her private purpose. Eager to capitalize on this first sign of interest, Dominic dug into his private research for an illustration, and whether low blood sugar, the adrenal burst of grant money slipping away, or the manifest failure of his endocannabinoid experiment was to blame, made the only reckless mistake of his logical, calculated adult life.

“Now this isn’t neuroscience, just psychiatry, but let’s take, for example, an outgoing, imaginative child who believes in monsters,” Dominic extemporized. “Maybe this girl is involved in a traumatic car accident. Her parents are killed, and she is thrown from the car.” Now he had Madalene riveted. “The child recovers physically, but the emotional pain is so severe that she begins to dissociate. She might pretend to be incapable of suffering.” Madalene nodded encouragement. “The girl might start to believe she’s a monster and responsible, somehow, for the death of her parents.”

Madalene was pale, and even dull Harold looked alert. Dominic’s rouge imagination stretched itself. “The little girl, guilty and frightened, remembers being thrown from the car and the taste of blood, and she imagines herself a powerful, flying, insensate monster.”

“A vampire . . .” Madalene whispered.

“Sure,” Dominic took the suggestion readily. “This confabulation, tied to a trauma-related identity disruption, could become so foundational to her self-image that she might lose her ability to taste food. She starts sleeping in a coffin, develops a phobia of mirrors or crosses or wooden stakes, and becomes immune to physical pain, all in service to this explanatory story that helped her escape intolerable suffering as a child.”

“That’s nuts.” Harold collapsed back into his cushioned chair. “Immune to physical pain? Bullshit.”

“Actually, pain insensitivity in patients with psychosis isn’t unusual.” Dominic dissected a miniature quiche, sheltering in the formal, clinical language of his work like a eunuch in a power suit. He was rattled. What was the cost, he wondered, of having fallen within Madalene Wright’s heady orbit, her public event horizon?

“In fact,” he lectured Harold, “schizophrenic patients have died from a common side effect of clozapine without ever complaining of pain from the constipation that killed them.”

The fat man shuddered, and Madalene’s hovering assistant flock seemed to sink, their wings weighted by such unspeakable language.

“Schizophrenics can hear things that aren’t there, but can’t feel things that are,” Ms. Wright quipped.

“Something like that.” Dominic returned her intelligent smile. He could not tell how old she was. Her lineless face, the territory of age, from which all landmarks had been removed, was taut with surgery and glistened with unguents.

“I would like to speak privately with Dr. O’Shaughnessy.”

To cover the turbulence this announcement caused in her support staff field, Ms. Wright sacrificed a secret. She reached a jeweled hand across the table and poured herself a cup of tea. Dominic repaid the confidence by looking away. Her hands would betray her age. He did not even steal a glance.

When the lumbering son, the secretaries, the waiters, and their minions had all dissolved, Madalene leaned toward Dominic again, eyes twinkling. “You’ll have to excuse Harry. He has what I call ‘chauffeured child syndrome.’ ”

“He’s been driven all his life?”

“That is correct. He has no drive of his own at all.” Madalene made a subtle beckoning gesture toward the back of the dining room. “While you, I hear, walked to our little rendezvous.”

“The convention hotel is just on the other side of the hill,” Dominic shrugged. A waiter materialized beside them.

“Bring me your best Syrah and whatever Chef Humm feels Dr. O’Shaughnessy might enjoy with it.” The waiter vanished. “We’re alone, Dominic. No need to stand on formality. I’m sure your mother would say exactly the same as I.”

“My mother,” Dominic said with complete sincerity, “has never said anything remotely similar to anything you’ve said tonight, Ms. Wright.”

“Call me Madalene.”

She acknowledged the arrival of the sommelier, whose experienced hands trembled with the honor of serving such a bottle to such a patron. His private ecstasy shone undarkened by the cloud Dominic had conjured of everything unspoken between a parent and a child. Madalene savored a sip.

“For such an energetic and ambitious young man, you have extraordinary tact. I can see why Dysart dispatched you in his stead.”

“I wasn’t aware that you and the professor knew one another.”

“I know him as one knows anyone to whom one entrusts a significant sum.”

The woman seated across from him had the kind of money that could open almost any door and discover any secret. Dominic reached for his wine, but stopped himself. He would not betray his discomfiture, despite a mouth of sand and stone. He was well trained against acting on impulse. Reason and science revealed the correct path, not instinct. He needed to think.

Madalene’s expensive face gave nothing away. “Let us just say there are questions I would be interested to hear you address,” she said. “But this is not the time.” She raised her glass. “To the present,” she toasted. Dominic gratefully mirrored the gesture and drank.

“Herb-roasted Saddle of Elysian Fields Farm Lamb with Gnocchi à la *Parisienn*e,” murmured the starched gentleman who appeared on Dominic’s left. For a moment, the underpinnings of Dominic’s world loosened. Whispered descriptions and artfully arranged plates swirled and eddied. When the human tide receded, Dominic glanced up at Madalene again.

“You have quite a feast there, Dominic. May I suggest that you dig in?”

Dominic happily complied.

“I am prepared to write six- and seven-digit checks beginning tonight and proceeding indefinitely, if you can convince me that your research is applicable to my needs.”

Dominic glanced up, but returned his gaze to his lamb at once.

“Don’t misunderstand me.” Madalene continued, “I am interested in the public weal, but I have a very specific personal interest in your work as well. A very private personal interest. Do you understand?”

Dominic rested his knife on his plate’s edge. He met Madalene’s piercing eyes and nodded.

“I suspect you have some skill with secrets?” Although pronounced like a question, Dominic recognized the threat.

“You have already complimented my tact.” He reclaimed his utensils meticulously and began to eat.

“Let us return, for a moment, to your illustrative example of the unfortunate child who is thrown from a car and subsequently cherishes the delusion that she is a vampire. Could you, conceivably, surgically or medically remove that memory?”

“Theoretically, in time, if we’re right. If a memory is made with a specific network of neurons, and we can parse out which neurons are involved in a given memory, and selectively delete those specific neurons, then yes, we’re talking about memory erasure.”

“And if you were able to pinpoint and remove the memory of the accident, would that destroy the vampire delusion?”

Why did Madalene keep returning to his ludicrous vampire example? *Way to go, D. Couldn’t have used alien abductions or dead presidents, could you?*

“Ms. Wright, I think I chose a poor example.”

“And I think you chose an uncanny one. What do you know about Renfield’s Syndrome, Dominic?”

Dominic registered the familiar constellation of sensations that indicated activation of the sympathoadrenal system’s four Fs: fright, flight, fight, and sex, the old neuroscience joke went. She had lured him with his department’s financial future and snared him with his personal past. Rage pricked Dominic, but he ruthlessly suppressed it. “Why do you ask?” he said with brutal neutrality.

They eyed each other, the tea twisting in his stomach. Dominic felt his center of gravity drop, his weight collapsing in on itself, as his mind prepared for combat.

“Empty your mind, be formless, be shapeless,” a nasal whisper hummed below the conscious level of thought. “The hands do not leave the heart. The elbows do not leave the ribs.”

“My goddaughter is ill.” Ms. Wright interrupted the instructions Dominic dully realized had been thought in the Yueh dialect of Mandarin. “A few years ago, I moved her to New York to be with me. Now she spends all her time, and a good deal of my money, in the city’s goth bars and boutiques.”

Dominic relaxed. This wasn’t about him, only another of his bizarre coincidences. A warm relief bathed him. He took another sip of wine.

“At the moment,” Madalene continued, “the tabloids are treating it like a fashion statement and a novelty. They’re having quite a lot of fun with the ‘virgin vamp.’ But I’ve spoken to her, and I’m afraid it’s quite a bit more serious than lifestyle. She believes she *is* a vampire.”

Madalene shuddered imperceptibly. Dominic picked up his knife again to spare her the discomfort of being observed. His appetite had recovered from the terror that had momentarily killed it. His body was still a young man’s.

“She, of course, doesn’t recognize this as a delusion. I’ve tried to convince her to seek help, but she’s not interested. She’s convinced that she was born this way—a sanguinarius she calls herself!

“I need you to learn as much as you can about this sort of delusional thinking and use all your research and science to develop a treatment. I’m happy to support whatever additional research MIT wants to pursue simultaneously in order keep the vampire component invisible to the media, but Dominic, I can’t run the risk of dying while my only two heirs are both insane.”

Dominic drained his glass. Poor Madalene, it must be terrible to lose a child to madness. He had, at least, spared his mother that.

“And her parents?”

“They died some time back. I adopted her to solve inheritance difficulties. I would like to write two checks tonight, Dominic.” Madalene was more beautiful as a suffering mother than she had been all night, through her various incarnations as aging socialite and influential power broker. “I would like to underwrite Dysart’s new Brain and Memory Lab, and I would like to fund some fieldwork. We must start with clinical and laboratory studies right away.

“You will need research subjects, but you cannot recruit in New York or Boston. Any hint that my money is at work in that subculture would risk undoing the progress I’ve made reestablishing a relationship with the child. There are one hundred and thirty-eight so-called vampire covens in the states, and only twelve in Western Europe, so I think the UK might be the best place to acquire test subjects for our purposes. You would have to contend with a language barrier anywhere else. Or do you speak French?”

“Yes, but Madalene, I’m not a sociologist. I’m not even a trained clinical psychiatrist. I’m a researcher, a scientist. I work with brain chemistry, neurons—the tiniest parts of people. I would be a terrible choice for fieldwork.”

“And yet you are my choice.”

A soundless beauty surfaced to refill his wine glass, and retreated into the dark periphery of the dining room. Could it be that his recent experimentation with dopamine reuptake had raised his monoamine oxidase levels enough to decrease risk-aversion? He was stronger now than when he first dropped out of school at eighteen to chase memories he thought he had of an ancestral home, but was he actually considering, for Christ's sake, re-exposure to Ireland's insanity and hell?

"London has six covens, the highest concentration of such places."

"Ireland might be better," Dominic said softly. If he could study the institution and its inhabitants clinically and dispassionately, if he could stay sane in that insane place, then he would know—and perhaps, for the first time since he turned thirteen, *really* know—that he was not ill. That he would not be a danger to anyone he loved.

"I have people in Dublin," Madalene said.

"The place I'm considering is not in Dublin," Dominic answered. "And it would require me to check myself into the asylum of an eccentric, aging billionaire. As a patient."

"An asylum?" Madalene smiled. "That's a very old-fashioned word."

"It's an old-fashioned place. The hotel—that's what he calls the place, 'the Hotel of the Damned'—is literally underground, and everyone is required to profess some sort of terrible ancient curse to gain admittance. I'm not at all certain I could even get in there again."

Madalene was too skillful to show surprise, but her momentary silence betrayed her. "This is very interesting. You're already familiar with a remote society of vampires so well hidden even I have not learned of its existence?"

Divining that he wouldn't eat again that night, a legion of waiters swept plates, glasses, and crumbs from the table. In the few seconds it took them to return the pristine tablecloth to an unbloodied battlefield between him and a woman who unbalanced him like nobody since his last visit to Ireland, a cold, sober certainty seized Dominic. No amount of expensive wine or false fund-raising confidence could shield him from the full biochemical cascade preparing him to fight or run away.

"Not all the residents are vampires," he said. "And my association with the hotel is years out of date. It may have closed. I haven't kept in touch—"

"Dr. O'Shaughnessy, you're prevaricating. It's decided. Dysart will get his new laboratory, international press, and a chance to make a significant difference in the lives of others. I will rest more easily knowing that everything in my power is being done to help a child who is like a daughter to me, and you, Dominic, will have landed a tremendous fund-raising coup. Don't think that won't be a factor when you apply for tenure." Madalene held his eyes and took a deliberate drink from her glass. "I'm curious," she said. "What 'terrible ancient curse' did you invent to gain admittance?"

"I cobbled reincarnation to the Prometheus story, except my progenitor stole not fire, but pattern recognition."

Madalene laughed, a pleasant, honest sound. "Dominic"—she shook her elegant head—"ever the scientist."

"I guess so. I claimed to be from a race of titans who gave humanity the ability to see the kind of patterns that make constellations out of stars. The recognition that showed us that all living things die, and, if we are alive, we will surely die."

Madalene's smile wavered.

"So as punishment for introducing mortals to their mortality, my race lives and dies and is reincarnated lifetime after lifetime. At adolescence the memories of all our past lives wake up

and we start experiencing the horror of the never-ending cycles of living and dying, of loving and losing, keeping forever, lifetime after lifetime, the memory of every lost love, every past death.”

Madalene looked at Dominic from eyes that could see into horror. “And now you are going back for me.”

“Let me make myself clear, Ms. Wright . . .” Dominic’s fingers reached for the strap of his shoulder bag beneath the table.

“Let me be clearer, Dominic.” Madalene’s keen eyes shot into the dark reaches of the room and returned to hold his. “I have told two people about my predicament—my personal psychiatrist and you,” she said. “I have no intention of telling another soul. You must go back to Ireland. It is the only way that I can keep my secrets”—Madalene Wright stood—“and that you, dear boy, may do the same.”

Madalene’s tribe of aides materialized around her. Tibby, slipping her fingers into the hollow of Dominic’s elbow propelled him behind the exiting retinue. At the very spot where Megan had picked him up, Tibby released him.

“Here’s my card, Dr. O’Shaughnessy.” The pretty foundation secretary smiled, but when Dominic couldn’t make his fingers take the paper rectangle, she slipped it into his jacket pocket. “Ms. Wright departs in the morning. You can call me anytime between now and nine tomorrow morning. I’m very glad you’ve signed on to help the Wright Foundation.”

“I haven’t signed anything.”

The girl smiled indulgently. “Are you always so literal, Doctor?”

3

SAUCE TO MEAT

With their painted-on pentagrams and plastic skulls, these vampire metal bars still mirror the introverted nature of the genuine beast. Elaborately dressed, artfully constructed presentations of personality, every one of us here eats alone. Vampires are inherently solitary creatures.

“Everyone you don’t love tastes the same,” I complain to Evelyn.

Maria will have been picked up from beneath the overpass by now and taken back to the Quarry’s recovery lab for an infusion and a snack. I’ve come to one of the city’s darker bars for much the same, hoping to lose the fresh pain of isolation in the familiar curse of family.

“Subtext is flavor,” Evie says and yawns. She slips her arm through mine, cuddling on the nightclub’s wretched sofa in a grotesque of sisterly affection. Bold glances cling to her every movement, but courage extends no further. No one meets our eyes or approaches. Every vampire is an exhibitionist, but between the Internet and reality TV, voyeurs are increasingly absorbed in other fare. When money and time are inexhaustible, attention is the only commodity left. I’ll trade my vain sister a little of mine so she’ll owe it to me to listen to my new despair.

“We’re cursed, my darling,” she purrs against my shoulder, tempting our unsubtle onlookers with glimmers of vampire lesbian kitsch. “We can never get what we want.” Her hand runs over the hills of my lap. “Our daddy told us no.” She thrusts her lower lip into an alluring pout and scans the club’s front room.

It’s red as a new bruise, and crammed with kids burning time and tobacco, waiting for the band my pale blond sister, and now I, the raven, have come to see. “If Adam could have loved me after I told him the truth, if I had showed him the wingscars, told him the curse ...”

“Why isn’t it enough that he wanted you?”

“He didn’t want me,” I tell her. “He couldn’t even see me.”

“He saw the outlines of you; that’s enough for men. They fill in the rest with their own desires.” Evelyn waggles her fingers at a skinny tattooed kid across the room. A chain runs from his thick wrist to a choker-mounted D-ring worn by one of the club’s few mortal females. “He wants me,” Evie whispers to me. “He wants to possess me. Don’t you just love that?” She giggles. “I love being wanted. I love the joke. I am desire. They all want me. But I’m the one who takes them.” Evelyn’s laugh is shockingly carefree in a room heavy with shouldered darkness. “I drink them in, possess them, and they never know it, drunk on their hunger and their dreams of possession. What fools.”

“You hate them,” I say.

“They’re so blind and their desires are so strong—of course I hate them. Don’t you?”

“No.”

“Well, you should.” Evelyn flips her hair back from her bare shoulders. “It makes it easier to kill them.”

“I don’t kill.”

“Ever? Really? I thought that devil had claimed all my sisters.” Evelyn pats my black latex leg again. “Cheer up. Maybe tonight’s your lucky night. You look primed for it.”

She cocks her head and listens to the protracted shouts from the far room. “That’s the end of their set, the bastards. I’m glad they’re done. The next band is worth seeing though. I’m hunting their singer.” I can barely hear my sister, but Evelyn isn’t talking to me, just telling tonight’s

events on time's black rosary beads. Evie has never visited the Quarry. She's poacher to her blighted core.

Her lips touch my neck, just below the ear. "Why do you suffer so much in search of your loophole," she whispers, "when it may not exist at all?" Her fingers are in my hair. Her voice is in my head. *Why do you think you can trick God out of the curse he put on us all?* she psycasts into my mind.

"I only want impossible things," I whisper back to her inclined ear.

"What you need is a drink." Evelyn springs up and pulls me to standing without making space for me. Our marble bodies come together hard, and she closes her lips on mine in a deep display kiss for her no-longer discreetly peeking audience.

But she kisses me almost gently. She does it for them, the gawkers, but she keeps her feeding teeth sheathed. Although our secret edges are so keen only the quills of our sisters can hone them, she does not use me for this now. It is the most generous thing she has offered. I take it.

"Now," she whispers, "let's get you that drink."

My skin crawls with the eyes creeping over it, but Evelyn tugs me deeper into the ocean of black-clad, kohl-rimmed, multiple-pierced, barely suppressed rage. Two boys lean their narrow backs against the fetid corridor that links the cramped front room to the packed performance pit and platform. The boys' delicate wrists are bare of the paper bracelets that mine sport to show I am of age to buy alcohol. *Yeah, twenty-one and some zeros.*

In the corridor between the red room and the stage space, smoke-stained mirrors reflect us—blurred amalgams of the desires pinned to us. Our white skin glows weirdly in the hallway's electric black lights. Evie winks at one of the boys. He looks left, then right, to see who the tall, large-breasted (ah, even larger-breasted) woman is looking at. Nonplussed, he frowns at her and points at himself. Evie licks her lips. He elbows his scrawny friend. His knees look unstable.

Still holding my hand, Evie approaches the boys. The club won't admit kids under eighteen—this could be their first time. He straightens up, wipes his white hands on his filthy jeans, and glances around and back at the stunning women advancing. Even reshaped by his desire, Evie is taller than the boy. She releases my hand to slide her long fingers up his skinny face, depositing me before his dumbstruck friend.

He stares at me, and then at Evie, and does not blink. Evie closes her mouth to nibble at the boy's virgin lips in soft, sucking kisses, while his friend just gapes before me. They are both immobilized. Evie runs her hands down her fig's narrow shoulders to take his work-roughened hands. She carries them by their wrists to her high, swollen breasts. It connects a wire to a battery. His hands, mouth, and body convulse to wild activity. He gropes her breasts, presses his gangly body against hers, and thrusts his tongue into her mouth.

Across from me, his wide-eyed friend manages to produce, "Urm. Hi?"

I can smell the cheap meat his mother feeds him. The hinges of Evie's jaw stretch. The razor edge is out; she is feeding.

"I, ah . . ." The boy makes an awkward gesture toward Evelyn. "I like your friend."

My sinuous sister is twined around the boy, her gray eyes closed. I watch her swallow. "She likes yours," I say.

The oils of hamburger and crispy fish glisten blue over acne boils, and in his lank hair, but under it, his blood, a delicate hammer where vein crosses bone, pulses sweet and virginal. "What's your name?" I ask him.

"Jake. Jacob."

To a man-child already schooled in the indignity and dearth of dating and possession amongst the disposed, sexy older women who appear out of nowhere to proposition him must seem like a godsend. So I ask, “Do you believe in God?”

The unfortunate gapes and stammers. Finally he shakes his head mutely, no.

Why would he? God doesn’t really send women like me.

He really doesn’t.

“You’re not going to . . . ?” Jake shrugs toward his ravenous friend wound over Evie’s sculpted form.

“No.”

He had not hoped, but still, I can almost hear the door shut within him. He looks—not crushed, not even disappointed. He looks like a condemned man who hears the prison gate slam—unwelcome, inevitable. I step against his gently shaking body and touch my flawless cheek against his ruined one. “Did you think I was your loophole?” I whisper.

His brown eyes are sunken from poor nutrition, and desperate out of both habit and need, but in their darkness I see hope glint. I am his way out. He nods. His coarse, cautious hands touch my slender waist. Deep in my gums, my feeding quills throb.

Evelyn’s fingers snake through mine. She shakes out her blond hair and unpeels the hungry child from her body.

“See?” she says, pulling me from Jacob, “don’t you feel better after a drink?”

Evelyn has impeccable timing.

She leads me away from the two lost boys into the stage hall at the moment the crowd erupts in a thundering roar. It is answered from the darkened stage by a bass drum concussion. Again, and then again. The pounding pummels me. Speakers stacked high as bell towers force rhythm against my blasted chest and up through the soles of my feet. I close my eyes and pretend it is a native pulse, not the kick drum, beating my ribs. We are pulled forward with the screaming surge driving toward the stage.

The singer, perched on a speaker bulwark, stretches his arms over the crowd, whose inarticulate howls he goads on like Hell's cheerleader. "Make some fucking noise!" he screams. They bawl back at him, mouths splayed, fingers raised in devil's horns or clenched into fists. They punch or prod at the stage. The singer shouts back, "Louder!"

In pockets around us, the bizarre ritual of mosh pits opens the crowd in rings of stylized violence. Shaved, pierced, sweat-drenched, and suddenly shirtless men barrel their way to the perimeter. They stand, forming the circle, arms crossed over chests, preening biceps, waiting their turn within.

I study the man my sister hunts. His unnatural voice claws my bones like memory, alternately a shrill shriek and base growl, but it won't change the shape of anything. Maybe no voice still can. I close my eyes to feel it grate. He might well nurse a demon seed within him. He knows he is not innocent, but for all his accessories, I know he is not evil. He is, at worst, a minor imp.

In the press of people and the stifle of desire, rage squeezes. The sounds and pressures rake my marrow, scratching Adam's sincerity and faith to bleeding inside me. Evie is right. I am primed to kill. My faith in loopholes is only a poorly buried attempt at supernatural sleight of hand. I had cloaked Adam in my hope, but men no longer wrestle angels, and the cheap magician's cape falls to the dust. No man will ever know me, actually and biblically. God never blinks.

I turn to leave, but Evelyn is snaking through the mass again, leading me deeper against the pulse of sound. We stop behind a man whose colossal height eclipses the singer and invites fights.

Bodies surge stage-ward and drive Evelyn against his massive back. He turns, fists balled. His black scowl reveals a true demonic lineage, but when he finds only a lithe blonde rippling under leather, the grimace vanishes. Evelyn has scented fresh prey.

Eternity is forever, but humanity is infinitely fresh. Made and remade new, each life born unique. Every mortal heart, even the hard and broken ones, beat blessed, while my immortal hope lies dirty underfoot in the spilled beer and roach ends. The concert is over.

Wait, Evelyn psycasts, seeing me turn to go. She dangles from the blunt elbow of her muscle-bound fig.

I will wait with you, my sister, I reply, *and we will feed together. Eternity drinks the moment.*

Evelyn rolls her gunmetal eyes. *Rock on Nosferatu*, she psycasts back at me. “The singer will send somebody out to find us and bring us backstage,” she shouts, too squeamish to risk contamination from my black mood by further touching my mind. She gestures toward the unsmiling immobile force beside her. “I’m taking Thor here, and I need you to come keep the singer occupied until I’m done with this one, okay?”

Without pleasure, Sister, I stubbornly push into her mind.

Evelyn grins and shrugs. “It’s this or go mad from boredom.”

Can we go mad? I ask, but a pudgy troll-like man with a lanyard is approaching.

“We’re angels, my darling, perfect in every way. Madness is unattractive. Smile!”

She inclines her perfect head and whispers to the roadie. His squinty eyes dart to the towering column of compressed rage who wears my sister on his elbow like a hoop from a pierced lobe. The pig-troll shrugs. If the gorgeous blonde he was sent to fetch wants to bring that bruiser with her, who is he to stand in her way? He is not made for courage or independent thought.

I am, but I follow Evelyn anyway, across the sticky floor, through a locked door, and down a fire escape to two buses parked behind the club. The troll, with unbreedlike flourish, taps a secret knock on the first bus. The glass and metal doors fold back and Evelyn, Goliath, and I step into the band's enclosed ecosystem.

Between the low-hanging canopy of smoke and the undergrowth of cigarette butts and Doritos, half a dozen sweaty and exhausted men lean like fallen trees against parallel rows of upholstered benches. The singer wears synthetic fangs and a silver ring in his nose, but he is beautiful, with eyes that dip gracefully downward at the nose. A black fae sprite more than demon, I decide. He extends his tongue and waggles it in greeting.

Evelyn reaches into her pocket and extracts a silver flask.

“Absinthe, fellows?”

She is greeted with a cheer that even I join. This once-illegal, herbal liquor offers vampires our only intoxication and suddenly, terribly, I want to lose myself in its licorice caress. Anticipation bites the back of my throat. How had Evie secreted her antique flask past the metal detectors at the entrance? I don't care. I only want to taste it in their blood.

Evelyn produces slotted silver spoons from her thigh-high boots and the full theater of the vampire's intoxicant unfurls. The bassist finds glasses, but the timid drummer, unwilling to partake of something so storied and so strange, retreats to the second bus.

We balance diamond-shaped sugar blocks on the holes of flat-bladed spoons and trickle water over them until the absinthe louches, a pale, milky green. Evie raises her cup to me, the brass

key, which hangs by a hair-fine cord from her wrist, clinks against the glass. We drink, but it is wasted on us. *Not yet, not this way.*

The secret rhythm bangs against the bus doors again. “Anyone want to go eat?”

Evelyn and I exchange a secret smile. *Yes, thank you.* But inside the bus, men are standing and moving. The pairings are obvious: me with the singer, Evelyn with the behemoth. The remaining band and crew, amid jeers and punches, exit for the all-night diner.

Evelyn doesn’t know about my month of rogue hunts, or she might not trust me so. She pours another glass for the singer I am meant to toy with until she wants to feed, and one for me, but not for herself or the hulking man next to her.

His heavy brows collide with confusion. “Hey—” he begins, but Evie turns on the narrow sofa wedged lengthwise into the bus, and kisses him hard, jaw flexing. He pulls away, hands on her small shoulders, all the lines of his harsh face replaced by a bruised look of wonder. Then the hunger catches him and the deep lines hatchet his face again. His strong body twists her under him, clapping her against his powerful chest, kissing her with force and rage and terrible need. Evelyn pulls at his shirt and he sits back to shrug it off. He begins to say something, to make a confession, to ask her name, but she pulls her own shirt over her head and he is lost again at the sight.

“Poor bastard,” the singer says. His beautiful sapphire eyes run over Evelyn, bare-breasted and mauled. “She’s going to eat him alive.”

I can’t help smiling. “You have no idea.”

“So,” he asks me, eyes still on my delicious sister, “who the hell are you?”

“I am the eternally damned.” I grace him with a benign smile. “Mine is a tortured soul, cursed by God through my immortal parents for a grave sin on their part.”

“Cheerio!” he toasts, handing me my glass and raising his to it. “What did ol’ mum-n-dad do to the Godman?”

“They seduced him.”

I have all his attention now.

“A kinky trinity?”

“Indeed.” I nod gravely, although the smile tugs hard.

The singer snorts. “Yeah, that father-son-and-ghost thing never struck me as the model of mental health!”

At this, I laugh outright. “The original family values!” “Tossed out of Eden, were you?”

“I have been denied any direct union with my God.”

“Bastard,” he says.

From the sofa, my sister cries out her impatience with her consort’s attention to her breasts, and drags his hungry mouth back to her own.

The singer takes my limp hand. In mockery of a courtly gesture I had not realized I missed, he brushes my white knuckles with soft lips. He meets my eyes, running a pink tongue across his perfect teeth. “Mmmm,” he murmurs, “brimstone.”

Vampires have no scent and no taste to our bodies, but this makes me giggle anyway.

“And will you taste of fire?” I whisper. My deep feeding teeth pulse, and I turn his hand in mine to take the tips his fingers in my scarlet mouth.

“I taste like sin,” he growls with the deep voice he sings in.

He tastes human, salt sweat and blood. I run my tongue over his rounded fingers, flicking at the callused places, hard from guitar strings. But the razors break through and, without fully intending it, I pierce the delicate web between his index and middle finger. He flinches, but I can’t help the reflex to suck hard where I taste blood. He yanks his hand away.

“You don’t like to be bitten?” I am wide-eyed innocence.

“I will give you my throat, Lady, if you will give me yours.”

It is a game for him, but he plays it well.

I pull my black hair away from my neck and raise my chin. The white length of my angelic throat shines exposed for him, and he bows his black-and-blue dreadlocks over my marble flesh. His kisses are surprisingly tender and deep, and utterly sincere. I let him kiss my neck, open the brass buttons of my velvet vest, and claim my swollen breasts in his hungry hands.

Then I kiss him.

He smells of liquor and desire, and I struggle to savor only his human kiss. His lips, warm and eager, close over mine, grow bolder, probe deeper until, with a little shudder, my drinking quills erupt. Now, as I kiss him, and as he kisses me harder and deeper back, microscopic serrations slit his lips and tongue. The clean green of absinthe clings in his mouth, and I suck at it for the wormwood and the iron, the mingled herbal and metallic threads in blood.

Biting deeper into his absinthe-numb lips, I lose any knowledge of where his agile hands travel over my less-sensate body. There is only his mouth. Then only his pulse, dragging time slower. The blood dreams begin to trickle, swift peeks of memory, not deep, because I do not strike into him full-tooth, but fascinating glimpses—audiences and guitars. His rich taste is tainted with a welter of forbidden flavors and ideas, and I draw deeply from his mouth, craving the red strength, seeking the green high.

A masculine strangling noise tears my attention. Evelyn's fig is ashen. Some primal fear has awakened him, stretched prone beneath her, tiny puncture marks on his thick throat. Evelyn slides her nimble hand between his legs, and works her strong fingers over his cock in rhythm with her mouth sucking his again. The fallen colossus groans and pushes his hips against the wringing fingers. Evelyn has taken quite a lot from her first fig. She will want mine soon.

The singer turns my face back to him, away from my feasting sister.

“Where were we?”

“We were comparing our damnations,” I say.

He nods. “My damnation is darkest when I am not angry or afraid, when I cannot feel God damning or the devils tempting. Then, I am only pain.” Despite the flippant delivery, it is the first pure truth he has spoken.

I owe him the same. “Mine is darkest now,” I say and meet his kiss. I taste fear. And absinthe. It climbs inside me, an emerald velvet unbalance of delectation. I close my eyes and taste floating, am lifted, needed. He pulls me closer, and I see acutely—only tinted green—the magic of desire. I ride the wave of his lush hunger, rising verdant and new, pressing up within me. What is the taste beneath the absinthe? Beneath the fear? Kiss deeper. Kiss of death. Kiss of blessing. Tastes of love.

“Ollie, sweetheart, didn’t you need to be going?”

The singer and I blink at Evie, sitting flushed but composed, beside the pale and barely breathing giant. “Some people have a bad reaction to absinthe.” She shrugs and gives the singer a slow smile.

“We’re busy,” he says.

Evie’s eyes flash from the singer’s to mine and back. If vampires could have strokes, Evie would seize up and fall over. Does he deny her? Does he want only me?

Without his desire or fear, Evie cannot feed from him. It would break her teeth to try. But I know she will kill him barehanded before she’d leave him with me, so I stand.

Let’s go, I psycast. She will not feed from him. Not this night. Stunned, but already well-fed, she gathers her things. I turn my back and bite deeply into my lower lip to fill my mouth with blood. Over my shoulder, I wink at my satiated sister, and turn to my starving man.

Our mouths meet a final time in a communion of stained souls. He swallows what he cannot taste, kissing hungrily, trying to ask me to stay, knowing I am gone. His lips are slippery with my ichor. Tomorrow, he will blame the absinthe for his omnipotence and strength, the heightened smells and taste, the penetrating insight and angelic health. Evelyn’s fig will blame the same for leaving him drained and weak, tired, ill, and more than damned.

4

INTO THE FIRE

In my midnight midtown apartment, the demon of despair regards me in the red wink of my answering machine. Adam called again while I was out. I watch the diabolical electric blinking. Modernity is keen to alert us to what we've missed: calls, turns, TV programs. The city is ablaze with missed connections. I pull the blackout drapes closed against mine: Maria, Evie, Adam . . .

The death that comes with each new day, the pulseless, breathless sleep of angels has shuttered my race in the sexless bed of coffins out of simple convenience. But shadow can always be found or made. This is not true of light. Darkness clings in the corners and insides of things, but with blackout drapes and a little planning, the modern vampire can make her entire home a tomb. Handy that. Since 1962, I have kept my stone coffin, with my shadow and my wings, at home in Ireland.

I meet the answering machine's small, steady stare. "What do you do when God tells you no?" I ask. But it doesn't answer me, so I undress for bed. We are all pitch-black in the belly and the lungs; light reaches no deeper in than our closed mouths and eyes. The blackness without and the night within, barred only by flesh, longs to merge, fold on fold, into itself, touching both sides of my senseless skin. No other light, no other thought reaches me, and the green blush of tonight's absinthe is swallowed by blinking, red-eyed despair. Who am I to deny that demon's desire?

Without my loophole, without even its quest to scaffold thought, and unable to escape even into tumbling madness, I must still fall. It's who I am. All I have left is my truth. I liked the taste of it in my mouth tonight. I want to go home.

"I'm going home," I tell the unblinking red bulb.

Home is where you always tell the truth, even with your lies.

“Damn!” The water bath had just reached a hundred degrees, but the pounding on Dominic’s back door continued. He took a deep breath to calm himself, inhaling the familiar, pungent scent of developer and bleach. It was Paul, he was certain. The dogged postdoc would keep up the steady tattoo of fist-on-wood until Dominic came to the door. He looked balefully at the precise, ordered rows of tanks in his sink line, grunted, and marched up the basement stairs.

“Hey, D.”

“Hello, Paul.”

“Your car was in the drive, so I knew you were home.”

“I could have been out running.”

“You would have come back eventually.”

Dominic regarded the lumpy man whose bulk filled his back door. “Come in,” he said. “I was working downstairs.”

Paul walked across Mrs. Lovett’s clean floor in muddy boots, took a beer from the fridge, and squinted at Dominic. “In your darkroom?”

Dominic nodded.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen your darkroom.”

“Not much to see,” Dominic smiled briefly. “What with it being dark and all.”

“Built it yourself, I bet?”

Dominic nodded again. “It really wasn’t too hard. Little bit of duct tape, some black silicone caulk. It was a fun project.”

“Can I see?”

“It’s not that much to look at, Paul. Have another beer.”

“But I’ve interrupted you. You can finish whatever you’re working on”—Paul popped the top off another Newcastle—“we could hang out.”

Dominic watched Weisel wind around Paul’s ankles. Even though he shared a back fence with Paul, the two neuroscientists never “hung out.” The sullen man appeared at Dominic’s back door several times a semester with a concern he would worry like a chew toy, growling and slobbering, but for the most part, they saw more than enough of each other in the lab. Dominic got himself a beer and allowed Paul, Weisel, and finally Hubel to follow him downstairs.

“Your basement is backwards,” Paul observed, squeezing himself through the darkroom’s narrow door. “The furnace is out there on its own, and the rest of the space is walled in.”

Dominic laughed and moved a large trash can full of rejected prints, film ends, and empty chemical packets outside the darkroom door. He pushed the stool from its place in front of the enlarger into the trash can’s empty spot, and Paul plopped down on it while the cats curled up before the metallic warmth of the exposed furnace.

In the brown shadows of the safelight, Dominic rechecked the water bath temperature and began loading film onto reels. He loved the smells and rituals of processing, the precise gestures and times, the slow discovery of what was hidden, but the darkroom itself was just a false front. Dominic refused to glance at the door in the back wall that led to his private lab. That, he wouldn't show even to the cats.

Paul surveyed the darkroom's interior—a study in utility over aesthetics. The small space was not drywalled, and blue electrical boxes capped with timers, dimmers, and switches clung to the bare studs like snails. Wires, tubing, and PVC pipe ran precisely, but exposed.

“Have you had this place inspected?” Paul asked.

Dominic looked up from his reels and spindle rods. “Nope. I’m sure I’ve violated city codes all over the place. But I figure I know a thing or two about electrons. It’s safe.”

“It doesn’t look it.”

“Paul, I know you’re not here out of concern for my safety.”

“No. That’s true.” Paul studied his feet. “I hear you’re going to be gone all of next month.”

“Yup. I fly out on April first. I don’t think that should be allowed.”

“Because you just landed five million from the Wright foundation, or because you want to be a part of setting up the new lab?”

“Because it’s April Fool’s Day.”

“Oh.”

Dominic chuckled and set a timer. He placed his film into the first tank with precise, familiar movements. He would need to agitate it every few seconds, but he fixed Paul with a hard stare. Time to make the fat man ’fess up. “Why do you ask?”

Paul fidgeted. “I just thought . . . It just doesn’t seem like you, to be away from here for a whole month. And Dysart hinted you might be going far?”

Dominic turned back to the film.

“Like Europe? Maybe Ireland?” Paul’s irritating adolescent habit of curling his inflection up midsentence got more pronounced when he impressed himself with his own cleverness.

Dominic kept his eyes on the clock, counting off the resting and agitating time, waiting for the information to spill out of the man perched on his stool like pudding on a lollipop stick.

“Ireland is where Trinity is,” Paul observed in a conversational tone so tortured Dominic was grateful neuroscience required no acting. He said nothing. Paul jerked his sagging body straight. “Oh my God, are they recruiting you? I already know they’re after Dysart. . . .”

“Are they?”

“It’s part of my job to open his mail!”

Dominic glanced over his shoulder at the fidgety man and moved his film into the bleach.

Paul executed a neat fade from frightened to affronted. “I pre-screen his correspondence for him. The faculty at Trinity’s Multisensory Cognition Lab has been trying to recruit Dysart since they got their fMRI machine. He’s considered *the* expert on fMRI localization on anatomical images, you know.”

“I know.”

“Yeah, you would.” Paul rolled his cow eyes heavenward. “But if they’ve gotten their mitts on a MEG scanner,” he pondered, “you’re the one pioneering an integrative fMRI-MEG approach— Oh God! You’re going to end up full faculty at Trinity and I’m going to spend the rest of my life counting neurons!” Paul made an anguished noise. “Is that why you’re going to Dublin?”

“I’m not.”

“But Dysart *said* you were.”

“I’ll bet he said I was going to Ireland.” Dominic transferred the film to the first wash tank and turned around to study his almost-apoplectic audience. Dominic didn’t like to lie, but Madalene had made it very clear that the primary condition of her additional grant to MIT was the secrecy of Dominic’s Irish fieldwork.

“I’m going inland,” he said.

“The country?” Paul was incredulous. “What the hell is in the country?”

“Fields?” Dominic turned his innocent back to Paul.

“You’re taking vacation?” he spluttered. “You never take vacation. And a whole month? That’s”—he groped angrily for a word that captured his anxiety and suspicion—“weird.”

Dominic moved the film into the fixer. Paul was all cortex—no primitive territorial awareness, no love of battle, but his flaccid body registered as a physical encroachment in Dominic’s private space and tweaked a limbic violence in him. Paul sat stolidly outside Dominic’s holy of holies, scheming how to position himself for the coveted Senior Researcher title in the event that Dominic accepted a nonexistent offer elsewhere. He and Peter had been out-maneuvering each other over that feather for years. Paul sat up so abruptly he slipped off the stool.

“Who’s going to pick up your classroom hours?” he asked, re-situating himself.

Dominic turned back to hide a chuckle. Paul didn’t move quickly often. It was a good thing. “I don’t know,” he said. Dysart had asked him which of the Ps he thought should take over his teaching duties for the next month. Dominic had promised to decide, but hadn’t yet. Peter was good with students, but enjoyed his office hours with the female ones just a little too much. Paul hated people.

“I bet Dysart will be deciding in the next week. Damn.” Paul mashed his doughy fingers together. “You’d let me review your lecture notes, wouldn’t you, D?”

“Sure. I’ll email them to you tonight. Or you could look them up. They’re on the department website.”

“No.” Paul clambered off the stool. “I should look those over now, before I go, if you don’t mind. You’ve got a printer, don’t you?” He was reaching for the doorknob. Dominic’s hand closed hard over the spongy wrist. “Ow!” Paul whined. “What did you do that for?”

“Sit down,” Dominic said. “I have seven more minutes in here before you can open the door.”

“I’m trapped?” Paul’s voice, abnormally high for such a large man, climbed into soprano. “I think I’m claustrophobic.”

“You’re fine,” Dominic said, lifting the film into the final wash tank. He had dodged the Ireland question, but his laptop was on the wrong side of the darkroom’s back door.

“When can I print those lecture notes?”

“You’ll have to use the website. I left my bag on campus.”

Paul gaped. “You what?”

“I left my laptop in my office.” Dominic put the film into the stabilizer and turned a blank face to Paul. “Almost done in here.”

“I have never seen you with that bag beyond arm’s reach.” The flaps of Paul’s face quivered in agitation. “What the hell is going on? You’re taking a month off. You’re forgetting your laptop. Are you sick?”

“No.”

“Mysterious trips, erratic behavior . . . You’re going to rehab!”

Dominic sighed and hung the film to dry. It wouldn’t matter what he said now. Or what he did next. When he came back from Ireland, everyone on campus, with the possible exception of Dysart, who had been told a portion of the truth by Madalene, would believe he had returned from inpatient treatment.

“Drugs or alcohol?”

“Neither,” he said draining his beer.

“Ah,” said Paul knowingly. “I bet it’s that fancy place in Tipperary.”

“You can open the door now,” Dominic said.

“It’s a long, long way to Tipperary . . .” Paul sang with a wicked grin.

“You know, for a scientist, you’re remarkably unattached to evidence,” Dominic said, leading the way upstairs. “You want another beer?”

“Sure,” Paul said, “but maybe you shouldn’t have one. I’ve heard—”

But a delicate tap at his front door rescued Dominic from further theories of the more-probable alcoholic standing before his fridge.

“God damn it!” Paul roared, then clamped a meaty hand against the rolling flesh of his face. “God damn it,” he whispered. “I’ll wager your five-million dollar grant that’s Peter at your door! Isn’t that just like him! The rumors of your vacation just came out today and already that fuckwad is over here, sniffing around for an advantage while you’re away in rehab. I don’t want him to see me.” Paul set off through the back door at a heavy scurry and squeezed through the fence into his overgrown backyard.

Dominic checked his watch. He'd missed his next dose by half an hour. He knocked a capsule from the bottle in his pocket and swallowed it as he reached the front door. He had less than a week to prepare for this trip, and he was running out of time. He was confident he could get packed, fill enough capsules, and secure his lab before then. But he was equally certain that no amount of time could ready him to face the old man and his godforsaken hotel. The thought dropped a cold iron fist of terror into his gut. Dominic swallowed hard and opened the door to begin Peter's scene in the afternoon's farce.

"I'm going to Ireland," the passenger wedged beside me grins.

You're going to Hell, I psycast, but her mortal ears can't hear me. "Yes," I say aloud, "we all are." The flight is JFK to Shannon, but the idiot traveler beside me just grins.

"You're going on business," she guesses.

"No."

"You're on vacation then! Me, too. Have you been before?"

"Once. A long time ago." I stuff my ears with iPod plugs.

This is the closest I get to penetration—art, music—the frisson shock of the perfect new. The first chords of *Undertow* twisting into me, Van Gogh's riotous blue night. I turn up the electric Stravinsky, and look down on the ocean. We are traveling into time, burning two hours for every one I endure beside this babbling, cursed child of Greece. I see them all the time, these bastard half children of stories and mortals, trapped between worlds, the genetic lineage of myth reasserting itself across the inextricable ages. Helen of Troy is born the socialite child of a partial Zeus mated to half of a swan-loving Leda, the mythic DNA in each of them dormant until they breed and damn their offspring with its expression. It would be easier for her if she understood, finally, who she is, but I can't be bothered.

“ . . . and then we may go west, Galway, Sligo . . . ” The Persephone beside me prattles on, flying east into the night. Does she think this trip out of Hell will be any different? “ . . . see Yeats country . . . ”

“Of course.”

I will hire a driver to take me inland, to Cashel, to Gaehod, and there I will stay forever.

“What’s your name?” Demeter’s daughter asks me.

“Olivia Adies,” I say and finally meet her inquisitive gaze. I could take her home to Hell as my captive wife. The bare desire in my smoldering eyes silences her at last and I look instead into the ocean under me.

From this height, the waves form black hills, motionless and dead, but I know otherwise. Distance makes a topographical map of the ocean—a snapshot of the waveforms as they stand in a moment, frozen in time. But I know how movement below—and even on—the surface, unseen at elevation, is definitive at sea. The water roils, and the waves rise or vanish. You cannot map the sea.

Years ago, I sailed across these heaving, howling waters in the soft, feminine arms of my closest-to-love, my most happy days. In my darkest night, I fly above them in push-button electricity. The ocean is unchanging as I am. And as bottomless and cold.

Thousands of gas flames springing, without intervening glass or metal fixtures, from the naked stone walls lit the vast, cavernous space with a flickering blue-orange glow and gave the impression that the rock itself was burning. Dominic would have liked to investigate, but his jetlag-eroded attention kept being torn and refocused by the sheer, enormous scale of Hell.

Beautiful, doll-like women and dark, brooding men flocked across the rich, carpeted floor, or stood sniffing the air. They spread like nightmare crows around him in the foyer and above him on the sloped balconies that spiraled inward like an inverted conch shell toward the vast empty space of L'Otel Matillide's central hall.

That the ruined stones of Cashel stood stolidly in tower and spire somewhere above them all became unthinkable to Dominic. The weight of all the earth bore down on him despite the sailing brass buttresses and ornately wrought, cantilevered platforms. He looked up. Graceful folded metal webs of glass and carpet, brass and hewn stone flew into a slowly closing dome unreachably high above him. Jetlag and low blood sugar added to a vertigo so overwhelming Dominic shut his eyes.

Just before crossing the county line into Tipperary, Dominic had stopped for the night. From his window at the bed-and-breakfast, he had looked out over the rooftops of a small, remote Irish town and marveled at the climbing vines that draped every structure in flowers. In this land, Nature aggressively reclaimed her own from any incursions by the work of merely human hands. Dominic was determined not to be so swallowed.

He drew himself up to his full height, testing his own strength, closing his fists into hard rockets of compressed anger. Already, nothing made sense. Corsets and hoopskirts swayed beside prowling latex and dog collars. There was nothing extreme or profane enough to elicit censure in this great hall of the damned. Dominic was the only ordinary, unremarkable man, eccentric in jeans and a jacket. Even so, he felt no shadow of judgment in this alien den of freedom and perversion. Normal was invisible. A hot prickle of shame snaked across the back of his neck. He was the outsider here.

He was curious about the light. It seemed to have no central source, and gave a strange, live quality to even the shadows. Dominic touched the camera pocket of his laptop bag unconsciously with fingers that itched for the F-stop dial. The light was so diffuse he could probably shoot straight up into the gigantic globe of brass-veined glass that capped the space. He wandered toward the center of the lobby, looking up, wanting to frame a shot from dead-center below the dome.

“A very different sort of laboratory for you, I believe?” The old man smiled serenely, arms outstretched in greeting, walking toward Dominic like Fate itself.

He dodged the embrace by taking an ageless hand to shake. “Hello, Gaehod,” he said stiffly.

“I must confess I am surprised to see you back so soon, Dominic. You were quite angry with me when you left nine years ago.”

“I need your help.”

“Indeed?” The old man kept both irony and surprise from his supple voice, although either would have been understandable.

Dominic’s eyes, uncomfortable being held by Gaehod’s keen gaze, scanned the hall. A vast network of corridors wound through every artery of the hotel’s Byzantine complex of madness to spill into this central meeting space, each marked with a sign above the passageway.

“Are you interested in our different branches, Dominic? I would be happy to take you on a walking tour tomorrow, once you’ve signed in and updated your vita.”

Dominic recoiled, barely masking his horror. *That damn thing.*

“I believe you’ll be impressed, my old friend,” Gaehod beamed. “We’ve made quite a few updates. There’s a computer terminal in every room now. Your eight vitae, as well as what we had of the one in progress have been scanned and put online. No need to face the scriptorium again. Your most recent incarnation date is your log-i n. You just pick a password, and jot down what you’ve been doing since you visited here last. At your leisure of course.”

“I have no intention of doing that.”

“I’ll have your diary from your last visit delivered to your room, then.”

“I won’t be checking in.”

“No, of course not.” The innkeeper gestured toward a delicate Victorian settee on the far wall. “Let’s have a seat, my friend.” Dominic followed the old man’s graceful back to a discreet sofa masked by a potted fruit tree that flourished strangely in the firelight. Here they could talk unseen. Nobody noticed Dominic, but Gaehod, in his subdued pinstripes and graying auburn hair, drew everyone’s eyes.

As the old man settled his coattails with a magician’s elegant flick and seated himself, Dominic watched tiny ball bearings in the settee’s legs spin down into channels that scored the floor. He had forgotten the bizarre ecology of Hell, where each expenditure of energy is harvested. He shuddered and plunged in. “Gaehod, I’ve come back here to study—and I believe to help—your, ah . . . the hotel’s guests?”

“My children.”

“Fine, your children. I know you believe you’re helping them with your record keeping and storytelling, diaries for the reborn, dances for the Bacchae, but I am working on more concrete ways to improve these people’s lives.

“You told me once that I would return here when my desire for truth outweighed my fear of it. I’m back. I would like to administer some standard psychiatric tests to your . . . children, and interview a few of them. I have arranged to have some detailed chemistry work-ups done, particularly on the vampires, and by incredible good luck, there’s a magneto-encephalography lab in Dublin. They are willing to let us use their fMRI machine for a half-dozen brain scans.”

“You have returned to understand the nature of your curse.” The calm old man nodded.

“I’m not damned, Gaehod. I’m ill.”

“You appear to me to be in perfect health.” The old man scanned Dominic’s athletic frame with crystal eyes that almost lingered.

“I don’t mean physically ill.”

“Are you now willing to admit a distinction between body and soul?”

Dominic suppressed a shudder, tired from travel and irritable with fear. “Actually, the connection of body and *mind* is exactly what I’m interested in. What pathologies in thought can be traced to abnormalities in brain structure . . .”

“You’re looking for the line between your physical health and your spiritual illness?”

Dominic drew a slow breath. “It’s a *mental* illness,” he said.

The confession hung between the two men like an insult, heavy in the soft and fragrant air.

“Bringing your vitae up to date may help you feel well.”

“Damn it!” Dominic sprang to his feet, his voice too loud in the underground birdcage, but the innkeeper did not move, did not startle, and the resplendent clientele decorously ignored the agitated man by the potted plants. Gaehod patted the seat beside him.

“I can’t keep a journal.” Dominic’s voice was fierce. “Certainly not here. Not for you.” Gaehod’s assigned exercise was an absolute trigger for visual and auditory seizures. He *remembered* its iterations in completely unacceptable ways. He remembered pages beneath his drying brush, scratching quill, and flowing ballpoint. He remembered its vellum and paper, hundreds of years filled with the same flat script. “It almost broke me last time.”

“You almost believed.”

“I almost snapped.”

“We are all broken, Dominic, all of us—cursed, or damned. Our fragile minds cannot span the paradox. We wish to stand out and fit in, to be unique but not alone, one with God and still ourselves.”

“I don’t believe in curses, Gaehod. Or God. I believe in reality.”

“Reality is only half the story.”

“Fine. Maybe. But I intend to work in the half that I can prove. The half that makes sense.”

“Science can prove much that does not make sense.”

“That just means we’re not done. Gaehod, let me come back and study your children. If I can find a physiological source for their feelings of damnation, maybe I can cure them. Think what it would mean to free them.”

The innkeeper's eyes pierced Dominic's for a brief but unnerving moment, in which Dominic held the fleeting conviction that nothing could be hidden. "Very well, my son. Register and update your vitae, and you may have unfettered access to every hall and quarter. I can, of course, give only my permission. Any subject you select must also give his or her own informed consent. We do not lie amongst the damned."

Gaehod froze as though summoned. His keen eyes shone eerily, and Dominic, even through his agitation, recognized the signs of the entranced. Did Gaehod have auditory hallucinations?

"There's a bed-and-breakfast just bordering the rock," Dominic interrupted. "I'll stay there, and work and study here."

A warm smile creased the old man's features. "I'm afraid it is impossible. Legends is a charming establishment—I know the innkeeper well—but you cannot work here and stay on the surface. You must sign into your room or stay in our nonresident rooms. But they will not meet your needs, I fear. Limbo is comfortable enough, but you would be unable to . . ."

Gaehod glanced toward the center of the hall. "You must excuse me," he whispered and vanished from Dominic's side.

The typical manhole cover in Cashel boasts an ornate Celtic tri-spiral bordered by knot work. I have come to loathe these ancient Irish glyphs for being such fitting symbols of modern Irish inefficiency. Surface navigation here, no matter what lies the map tells, is never a matter of intersecting roads and steep-angled turns. The only approach is oblique, a slowly closing spiraling-in on a destination.

The driver I hired to bring me from Dublin traced his country's arcane pathways with native contempt, but I feigned sleep during most of the twisting, turning drive. His youthful hunger made me itchy. The surfaces of my peasant's body prickled as they paled to match his nationalist preference for fair-skinned girls.

The eyes of men, the smiles of women crawl across my flesh like maggots. The woman on the plane smiled larvae. The driver leered worms. I told him my name was Olivia Patrick and paid him cash, slipping a fingertip along the outside of his hand. Without hunger, I sucked the nicotine and whiskey blood from beneath my unbreakable nail as I watched him drive off. He would believe he had a paper cut, if he noticed the scratch at all.

I spent what remained of the day searching the forsaken roads for the one manhole cover upon which serpents form the twisting border knots. I found it on the fourth of five lanes which terminate at the base of the towering limestone acropolis known, with typical Irish understatement, as “the rock” of Cashel.

I have returned to it now, at night, a dull matte bruise on the shimmering blackness of wet street. It does not glint or reflect. It is as invisible as the black sky, invisible as I am, standing rigorously casual nearby. I push an organic smell from the leaves that stick to the boundary of metal and asphalt with the toe of my boot. No need for expensive shoes now.

At four in the morning, the narrow streets of Cashel twine solidly silent. Certain, at last, that no one is watching me, and swiftly casual no more, I drop to my knees, shift the black metal sewer disc, and drop without a sound into the darkness. I crouch beneath, grating it—too loudly—across the asphalt. It clangs into place above my head like an inverse halo, absorbing all the light. Dark envelops me like water, touching every surface all at once. I am black as you are wet, diving into a summer lake, as suddenly and as totally immersed. Drying out takes longer.

I am less than an hour away from the old man. Underground now, I can almost sense him. I stand inside an iron pipe, metallic like blood and as cold. I touch the walls with the white tips of my fingers. Revolving, I explore the rough surfaces until I find a colder vein of silver. This I trace down the wall to where it bubbles into a spherical indentation. I grip the key I wear on my left wrist with my right hand and slot it into the crevice, pushing until my flexed wrist presses against the stone. Deep in the rock, I hear the mechanical whir of lockwork come to life. The sound radiates from the insertion point like fractures across glass. Reluctantly, I lean my scarred shoulders against the wall. It gives without a creak or whisper, easing open against the force of my senseless body pressing into it. Not much farther now.

A narrow stone pathway slopes down into a damp, subterranean darkness. I trail a hand across the rough walls, stepping down and down, looking for the dull metallic faces, eyes shrouded, blind and mute, which mark the way toward the hotel and the old man. A brass gargoyle

grimaces. His tarnished automaton's eerie face contorts in greeting. I turn left. The underground damp travels up my fingers, shivers along the bones of my arm, and worms its way into me like terror.

Will Gaehod be happy to see me after so many years? *No, I don't care.* His buried hotel is the closest thing I have to an ancestral home. He has to take me in. I will sign his fucking registry and trade him my last angelic blessing for the freedom of being fully damned. My fingers brush another contorted face whose tiny, machine teeth snap at me. I turn toward it, searching for the hidden door. My fingers crawl the surface, my cheek against the moist chill, legs braced, for the subtle flinch in the stone. I push my body against the naked, scraped rock.

Nothing shifts, and the very immobility shivers me against the implacable stone. The iciness seeps, stone to flesh, into me, in tiny quivering tendrils, melding with me, absorbing me, nerveless, hard, and creeping. I begin to shudder in frissons down my arms and up my legs until the shaking in my frame translates to the wall itself and, with a low rumbling resonance, the stone vibrates with me and dissolves. The old man might have engineered this new-style threshold just for me, but of course not. He has no way of knowing I am on my way home.

I walk the ancient tunnels now, not the temporary, shifting labyrinths of mingled path and sewer intended to misdirect and confuse the uninitiated. No, I am headed straight toward the belly of the rock, straight down, straight to him, still shivering.

The brass elevator-call button houses a glowing red fire trapped in glass. I push it without fear or hope. I have come back to surrender. Crawling, like a wounded warrior who expends his last, failing strength to drag himself from the field of battle to die in the shadow of the medic's tent, I have come home.

A single word crowns the door, but I can't read it. I memorize the Greek sigils as I wait, and step into the elevator car when the doors slide apart. My only goal, my last effort, has been to reach this place and turn myself over to the tender cruelties of my sisters and the old man who will surely be waiting for me on the other side of these elevator doors when they open.

Bright metal and firelight shine inside the elevator capsule. All four walls look the same, two glittering polished brass panels sealed with a black gasket at the center. There's nothing to push,

no buttons or dials, no speaker grille or telephone receiver. I listen instead to the machinery of the thing, gears engaging, cogs spinning. I revolve, looking for, but not finding, myself reflected, rippling golden in the gleaming surfaces. But I am being watched. It's a familiar awareness, the sense that I am being scanned, but for once without the attendant subtle shift in my shape and hair. My body is not reforming to please the eyes that touch me. I am only being seen. Seen for what I am—damned.

I am a vampire. The carriage moves imperceptibly. *I am the Undead.* I cannot sense the direction it carries me, but I know I'm moving. *I am desire without hope.* The elevator carries me, but more than that, it encases me, senses me, transports me. *I am impulse without promise.* And although nothing changes, I know that I have reached my destination. *I am instinct without life.* All four metal doors slide apart soundlessly to become four shimmering lamp posts in a lush, Victorian salon. *I am home.*

A brass capsule rose, twisting from the center of the reception hall. It corkscrewed from the earth's core, to deliver a woman onto the carpeted floor. Her black hair, sunglasses, and vinyl coat made it seem as though pale cheeks, forehead, and jaw had spiraled, disembodied, through the floor, and for a moment Dominic froze. Had full-blown hallucinations joined his repertory of dysfunction?

Gaehod swept up to the apparition, and as she bent to embrace the old man, the supernatural illusion passed. Dominic saw simply a sleek and stunning woman whose pale lips barely moved in the innkeeper's ash and auburn hair.

"She's smokin' hot, yeah?" a throaty chuckle issued from behind Dominic.

He scanned the parlor unsuccessfully.

"Down here, yo." A nicotine-stained hand waved from beneath the sofa where Dominic and Gaehod had sat. From under the drooping upholstery, a disturbingly familiar face pillowed its unshaven cheek on the carpet.

“Are you okay?” Dominic asked.

“You’re pretty fucking stupid for a medical genius, huh? Do I look okay?”

“No.” Dominic straightened and returned his attention to the slender, latex-clad woman standing with Gaehod. Sin-black hair and virginal skin, the newcomer offered such a stunning exemplum of her type that Dominic registered a grudging admiration.

“Hell’s full of gorgeous girls,” the ruined voice croaked from under the sofa. “And they’re easy, most of them. Fucked up and angry and ready to work out their insecurities on your cock, if you know how to play them.” Dominic looked down with distaste at the tumble of legs and hair rolling out from under the sofa. “But even by our standards, that girl’s awesome.”

“Do you know her?”

“Nope. Just saying. But I don’t know you either, and I thought I knew most of the fuckers registered down here.”

“I’m not staying.”

“Sure you are. Hell’s the only game going that isn’t about location.” The emaciated man fished a pair of goggles from the pocket of a filthy bathrobe and fitted them over his stringy hair. “That’s better,” he said looking up at Dominic. “So you’re a shrink, eh?”

“No,” Dominic said.

The tilting man on the ground righted himself by sticking his scrawny legs straight out in front of him, a dirty tube sock hanging on one foot, the other one bare. “You’re not a shrink, but you want to do brain scans and shit? How come?”

“Were you listening to my conversation with Gaehod?”

“You were sitting on me.”

“You were sleeping under the sofa?”

“Shit man, I don’t sleep.”

Dominic wasn’t aware of staring at the striking woman talking with Gaehod until she glanced across the room at him. He scanned everything he knew about chronobiology, but couldn’t find anything to account for the sudden spike in heart rate he suffered when their eyes met. Was it possible that beauty alone had physiological repercussions? She was extraordinary, with an eerie grace to her movements that entranced him. Then Gaehod took her black-gloved hand in his, somehow both soft and strong, and led her across the room.

Exhausted, Dominic sat on the little settee and rubbed his sleep-starved eyes. The air around Gaehod’s newest conquest had seemed to shimmer, giving her a momentary illusion of ghostly wings behind her slender back. Dominic needed to get some rest before he ended up babbling on the ground beside his new acquaintance.

“... can’t figure it out,” the rambling drunk concluded.

“Can’t figure what out?” Dominic asked, holding his focus to the collapse of a man at his feet.

“Jesus. I thought shrinks were supposed to be good listeners.”

“Shrinks are good listeners when they’re paid to be,” Dominic said. “Besides, I’m not a psychiatrist,” he clarified. “I’m a neuroscientist.”

“What’s the difference?” The pale man was tipping again.

“Neuroscience is science. It deals with objective reality. Things you can prove and test. Real things. Brains, chemicals.”

“That’s bad shit.”

“What?”

“Brain chemicals.” He nodded gravely.

Dominic decided not to argue, although the statement was absurd. The brain *was* chemicals. Chemicals and electricity and very little else.

“You wanna scan my brain?” Craning his neck over his sagging shoulder, the dissipated ruin eyed Dominic through thick bronze lenses. What flesh was visible behind his goggles, hair, and stubble was pale and bruised. Everything about him, from his poor muscle tone and slurred speech to his disheveled bathrobe and smell of gin, indicated a state of chronic physical crisis, but he was still vaguely, irritatingly familiar to Dominic. At least he triggered no taste aura and no memory-like seizure.

“Do I know you?”

“No, I’m famous. I’m Alyx—Alex with a ‘y.’ It’s just my rock star name. I can’t remember the other one.”

“Oh.” Dominic was relieved. “Are you ill?”

“Nah, just fucked. Like the rest of us.”

“What has Gaehod told you about yourself?”

The tilting head nodded.

“Did he tell you you’re damned?” Dominic pressed him.

“Just cursed.”

Dominic stifled a grunt of rage. Gaehod was a menace to the mental health of anyone he got close to: this wreck of a man on the ground beside him, that intriguing, beautiful woman he’d just led off. Moral outrage twisted in Dominic’s empty stomach.

“Gaehod has taught you to think of yourself as cursed,” he said with a calm held between gritted teeth, “but you don’t have to think of yourself that way. You can learn to challenge that kind of thinking, to interact with more compassion toward yourself.”

“Damn, so that’s neuroscience, eh?”

“Well, no.” Dominic drummed his fingers on the strap of his laptop bag in irritation. “Changing thinking habits is more the work of therapy.”

“You said you’re not a shrink.”

“I’m not. I just want you to know you don’t have to think of yourself as cursed.”

“Don’t you?”

“Think of myself as cursed? Absolutely not.”

Dominic was here to do Madalene’s research, but there was nothing saying he couldn’t do a little evangelizing on his own while he was underground. Gaehod wouldn’t like it, but if Dominic registered, there would be nothing to stop him from reaching out to people like this poor, muddled man and that captivating proto-vampire. He could study and influence. Observe and persuade.

“Damn, I can’t imagine what that would be like—to feel all squeaky clean.” Confusion played over the rock star’s lax face like shadows over mud. He hiccupped. “Must be nice. It’s not me though, I’m cursed all right. Everything looks like bullshit to me.” Alyx hugged the halves of his bathrobe closed across his emaciated chest. “I can’t believe in anything, so I got no meaning. And I can’t do shit about it. No power.”

He tightened the frayed bandanna that served as his filthy bathrobe’s makeshift belt and curled up on the floor. “The curse of modernity, Gaehod calls it. Meaninglessness and powerlessness—the ‘twin horsemen our alienated and depressed apocalypse.’ ” Alyx chuckled. “Gaehod says that if Armageddon is headed our way, it’s all going to end in a shrug. Smart fucker, that one.”

I watch the beauty in the gaslight. The damned swarm in elegant trios and couples around me chatting and laughing. Graceful brass beverage carts circulate smoothly in the floor tracks, their whirring gyros easily correcting for the shifting weight as full glasses are lifted and emptied ones returned. The perpetual movement of the damned and the machines that serve them soothes me.

“Olivia!”

I recognize the touch of the old man’s eyes from the elevator. Now they reach into mine, searching. I had drawn myself to standing tall and proud within the gilded box, but in the open space of the lobby, his clear eyes pull me, bending toward him, into the stooped embrace the healthy young bestow on the infirm aged. The momentary taste of my smoky homeland makes me close my burning eyes.

“I give up,” I whisper into his hair of fire and ash. “I’ve come back. I can’t do it. Can’t fake it. I’m ready to sign your damn registry and be home.”

Gaehod’s flawless hand, with long fingers tapering to perfect teardrop-shaped matte gold nails, takes my arm. He’s speaking softly to me, but my attention wanders over the eddying beauty of the hall. But a dam of stillness in its unending stream arrests my lazy survey. A solitary man stands across the lobby from me. He’s tall, and so still amidst the commotion that I suffer a momentary vertigo. Eyes, blue as a gas flame, in the tangled heat of a redhead’s complexion—purple, russet, pure pale white—meet mine. I taste, for the first time since I mated the devil with the blinking red eye, the shiver of hunger.

“Who is that man?” I ask Gaehod as he steers me through reception.

“One of the Reborn.”

“What’s his name?”

“He has not registered. But come and see me tomorrow for tea. Perhaps I will be able to tell you more then.”

Gaehod’s graceful hand holds open the arched door of the Registry Turret and I step alone into its small, circular reach. The book is ancient. The ink is red. I can no longer lie or hide.

I slip the waiting rings onto my left thumb. The first one slides all the way to the base, while the second one stays on the top joint. I connect the delicate metal hosing that bridges them at their jewel’s domed center, and stick my thumb-tip into the inkwell. There’s a low clicking as the rings’ bands begin to spin. I watch the stone blush deep red. When the rings are still and silent once more, I take them off and nestle them back into their velvet box. I dip the waiting black quill into the inkwell, and inscribe my one, true name, “Olivia,” on Gaehod’s magic list with my crimson ichor.

“Dominic, you haven’t moved.”

“Jetlagged, I guess.”

“Ah, of course.” The old man sat beside Dominic.

“Who was that woman you just took in?”

“Like you, she has returned from a long absence.”

“What is the nature of her, er, curse?”

“She is among the Undead. She can feel neither pleasure nor pain. She is not truly dead, nor can she be fully alive.”

“A vampire, right?”

“Her vitality depends on others.”

“Gaehod, is she a vampire?”

The old man inclined his rust-and-ice-crowned head. “I thought you did not believe in such things,” he said, rising. “Would you like to meet her? She’ll be at Pandemonium tonight, I should think.”

Dominic stood and pulled his battered laptop bag over his head. Its strap rested like familiar armor across his chest. “What’s Pandemonium?” he asked.

A bark of laughter erupted from the floor. “It’s my home!”

“Good morning, Alyx.” Gaehod beamed down at the heap of fabric and bone. “Pandemonium is our exquisite and divine retreat,” he said to Dominic, “a place to gather, to debate and dance.”

“It’s a kick-ass bar.” Alyx said, pulling himself up. He stood swaying behind Hell’s dapper innkeeper. “All kinds of girls there, if you know what I mean.” He tried to elbow the old man in the ribs, but missed and staggered against Dominic.

Dominic hefted the reeling man onto the sofa behind them. The momentum of Alyx’s fall was redirected through the sofa’s legs rather than being absorbed and wasted. Distant cogs whirled.

“Gaehod, I’m willing to register, but I’m not interested in bringing my life story up to date for you.”

“I’m sorry, Dominic.”

“Nobody is only a little damned,” Alyx noted, face planted in the sofa.

“Dominic, what threat could writing pose to you? Ideas are not so contagious, my friend, that mere exposure can infect the well indoctrinated—I mean inoculated. Damnation is not viral.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” Dominic said grimly.

“Come, Doctor! An epidemiology of sin?”

“I don’t believe in sin.”

“Then how could you be at risk here?” Gaehod rolled Alyx onto his narrow back and lifted his lolling head onto the arm of the sofa, sending shivers of black metal balls cascading into tracks. “Young Alyx here is making himself sick trying to change his perception with anything he can get his hands on”—Gaehod tucked the hem of Alyx’s stained bathrobe around the frail body—“while you worry that simply being here might alter yours without your consent?”

“It’s not that.” Dominic shrugged and followed the old man away from the unsleeping wreck of man on the sofa. “I’d just rather live on dry land than in a swamp. This place is not conducive to health.”

“You have your quinine, I believe?”

Dominic's jaw gripped. There was no way Gaehod could know he was self-medicating. "I have a strong physiological constitution, if that's what you're implying," he said icily.

"Precisely. Which is why you can allow your curiosity to lead you, even into Hell, for answers." Gaehod beamed. "I think you will not be disappointed. Come to Pandemonium tonight, and I promise I will help you."

"What about the woman who just checked in?"

"She would be an ideal subject for your research, I should think. And she's newly returned, just as you are, and likely to be at Pandemonium tonight as well. But I am afraid, Dominic, that it is a very exclusive club."

"Members only?" Dominic grimaced. "All right, you win. I'll sign your damn registry."

"And update your vitae?"

"*Vita*. If you insist."

"I'm afraid I must."

"Lead on." But they had already arrived. Gaehod opened an arched door for Dominic, but did not follow him into the room. It was no larger than a closet, but perfectly round. On a podium, in the center, a massive book, a scalpel, and fountain pen waited. Despite everything he knew about self-mutilation, Dominic picked up the blade with untrembling hands and opened the cephalic vein of his left hand. He positioned the precise cut over the brass-rimmed bone pot on the podium and looked away from it. The room appeared to have no ceiling, reaching upward infinitely. If he could scale the walls, he would arrive, not on an Irish street, not atop the ancient

ruin, but in the sky itself, among the stars, in Heaven. Dominic scowled. Already his imagination was becoming tainted in this place. Despite the calm and confidence he felt, he was in grave danger.

He mashed a gauze pad over the incision and pressed it against his thigh to apply pressure. “Never again,” he whispered to the boundless ceiling before he picked up the fragile glass fountain pen and dipped it in the bone inkwell. The weathered page before him bore a list of names in handwriting too similar to his. Shambhu, Bel-nirari, Gnith Cas, Antonius Musa, Huáng Z?ngx?, Venerio lo Grato, Ambrose Wellesley, Nat Love. He signed on the last line: Dominic O’Shaughnessy.

THE FIRST THING WHICH GOD'S EYE NAMED

Ophelia rolls onto her delicate back, grinning at me. Her tiny body writhes on the velvet sofa as the long wail of spriek tears through her. Head back, mouth gaping, feeding edges quilled, my youngest sister screams until her lungs are emptied, airless. The next inhalation makes the spriek. Inaudibly high, it strikes as an almost-pain in the sockets of our jaws. This is the way we summon one another. She should not use it now, no matter how long I have been absent from our ancestral home.

“What the fuck?” The door of L'Otel Matillide's Quarry bursts open behind me and Sylvia sweeps in, red hair flying, cheeks flushed in outrage. Seeing me arrests her. “Oh, hello, Ollie,” she purrs.

“Hi,” I say.

“Ophelia, that was completely inappropriate.” Sylvia's voice is harsh even through her lilting Irish accent.

“I know, Sylvie. Sorry?” Contrite Ophelia perches on the couch edge, her kneesocks slipping, but Sylvia stays near the door, beside me—her long-straying sister. She studies me a moment, then wraps her porcelain, adamantine arms around me and kisses both my cheeks. Together Sylvia and I walk over to the bank of low velvet sofas and join our younger sisters. But Sylvia doesn't glance my way again. Her steel eyes are plowing the one-way glass that separates our luxurious lounge from the sparsely furnished covert where our naked victims wait.

L'Otel Matillide's Quarry is newer than New York's and decorated in the same eclectic style that the old man uses elsewhere in his opulent hotel, a blend of modern high style with priceless antiques. No electricity or plastic. Hell is built to be self-sustaining.

“Only six?” I ask, counting naked bodies in the covert.

“That’s the rule, even here. I must wait. Mine is not available.” Sylvia leans back against the overstuffed sofa arm and stretches her stocking-clad legs on the soft cushions. She turns to our tall, muscular sister whose short-cropped blond hair accentuates her ridiculously high cheekbones. “Vivian, why don’t you go ahead and pick one so they’ll let another up?”

Vivian re-cinches the shiny vinyl straps across her chest and rings for the quarrrymaster without rising. A weird tension spikes the room, which I hadn’t sensed when it was just me and the younger girls. Sylvia, and her obvious impatience, has changed something.

Ophelia walks up to the glass. “I think you should pick the baby-blond fig,” she teases Vivian, tracing the outline of a very young, exquisitely pale girl who leans against the pane. “Or maybe I will take her”—Ophelia grinds her delicate features in a lewd wink toward me—“to spare her sweet pussy the shaving.”

“No. I hunt the redhead tonight,” Vivian says with no expression on her marble face. Sylvia doesn’t even blink. She’s still watching the covert.

“Vivian’s insistence on hairless women is well gossiped, if not fully understood,” Ophelia prattles in the gaping silence. She looks like a Victorian schoolmarm gone bad. “But I know her secret desire to incise just over the pubic mound so that what she has begun between the legs of her prey with her lips and tongue, she can continue at puncture. It is her endless quest to cause simultaneous blood release and orgasm.”

The quarrrymaster peers into the room from a door in the back wall.

“Release the tall female, with hair like my sister’s,” Vivian tells him, running her tapered fingers through Sylvia’s Irish tresses. I have a moment of pity for the masses of luxuriant copper hair that will fall to the razor tonight.

“She likes to meet them first, you know.” Ophelia giggles, nuzzling next to me.

Vivian’s tall, freckled redhead straightens. An overly muscled man touches her hand. It is such a tender gesture. A human one.

Vivian flips her long, muscular legs over the sofa end and waggles an impatient steel stiletto. “I’m a traditionalist,” she says. “I hunt with seduction. I pull up alongside them in a car and offer them a ride. But they’re not allowed to get into a car; that’s against the rules. So they decline. When I get out, they’re so grateful for the company, for the offer of help, for the distraction when I touch them—”

Vivian’s fig walks, with as much dignity as is possible barefoot, to the trapdoor in the floor of the covert. She bends from the waist, deliberately exposing the split orange of her still-unshaven sex, and grasps the ring in the floor. Swinging it upward, she turns and descends backwards from our view, pulling the trapdoor closed.

“Angelic charisma doesn’t hurt either,” Ophelia stage-whispers in a mock aside to Sylvia, who ignores her, and leans forward, watching the covert eagerly.

“No,” Vivian admits. “I touch their minds, it’s true. I calm them, lull them. I offer the backseat. They are so unresisting. I serve them, worship breast and belly, undress yielding arms, and open unprotesting legs. They give themselves to me so completely. They never ask if I’m the hunter, never question the way their fate unfolds, since it feels good.” Vivian towers over Ophelia. Our baby sister slides sensuously to her feet, running rosy fingers up Vivian’s lean thighs to stand, tiny and innocent, before her.

“Yes, and you taste them, don’t you?” Ophelia whispers hoarsely, the olive velvet of her frilly frock brushing Vivian’s slick jet latex. “You taste the soft and salty, red and white, opening them and opening them again. How many times? How many have you done? Gotten both?”

“Together, at the same time? Never.” Vivian flexes her jaws and takes Ophelia by her slender throat. “They’ll come in my mouth before they feed me. But never in the moment that they do. I don’t know, maybe it’s the pain. Or the surprise.”

“Maybe it’s like keeping your eyes open to sneeze,” I suggest.

Sylvia barks a laugh—she’s listening after all—but Vivian ignores me.

“No.” Vivian easily detaches herself from Ophelia, who crumples to the plush rug. “I cannot find one to combine her pleasure and mine, to be both sacrament and satisfied.” Vivian strides to the door in the back of the lounge, looking every bit the prowling dominatrix in her latex catsuit and metal heels.

“Thus Sister Vivian goes to seek the blood sacrifice of love,” Sylvia declaims, her brogue stronger, but her body still unmoving.

“She wants to taste the pleasure in their blood, I think,” Ophelia whispers, sliding up the couch to me. She rests her ringletted head in my nerveless lap. “Already Vivie is scenting her prey,” she murmurs. “At this moment, only a thin wall separates her from the woman who might finally fulfill her.

“Stay here a while,” she whispers, her swollen lips puckering. “Stay and play with someone your own strength, who you don’t have to be careful not to break, someone who does not fear you.”

“Fear me,” Sylvia growls, rising. She grasps a fistful of Ophelia’s tawny hair in her white fingers and rings for the quarrymaster.

“Open your mouth,” Sylvia commands her. Ophelia nods meekly, the back of her head pressing hard into my thighs, and parts her lips, pink tongue touching her teeth tips, the edges erupting.

Sylvia stretches her jaws and drops her mouth over Ophelia's to grind her razor points to lethal sharpness.

"Fetch the largest man in there," Sylvia barks at the quarrymaster, and drags the trembling Ophelia to her feet. "Go claim your fig and never spreek in this place again." Her voice is a cruel whisper. She glares into Ophelia's liquid eyes, then throws her at the door in the back wall and sits down hard beside me.

"Ophelia will take the strongest man in the tank," Sylvia tells me as our chastened baby sister retreats through the rear door, "and still be fined for damages."

I say nothing, and together we—Hell's two senior citizens—stare into the one-way glass at the four remaining figs in the covert. The downy blonde keeps glancing at her bare wrist, anxiously.

"Are you well, Ollie?" Sylvia reclines into the sofa's soft cushions. In a symphony of coursing sinews, the man who will feed Ophelia tonight sits up straight in response to his summons.

"Ophelia wants to give up control, or have it wrested from her," Sylvia says, her lilting Irish voice expressionless. "She wants to be dominated, but she is an angel, too powerful for mortals to claim. So she breaks them."

"It is our legacy to desire what we can't possess," I say.

"Thou shalt not," Sylvia mimics our father, "desire to know God biblically." I arch an eyebrow in her direction, but she's still staring into the covert. The fringes of her red hair graze the delicate bow of her collarbones, and her tailored black dress sets off the perfect whiteness of her marble flesh.

A sly smile parts her pale lips. "You should have seen His face," she intones, picking up our father's story in his voice, scrubbed of all but the faintest traces of Eastern Europe.

“All aflame!” I join in, and together we recite, “your mother and I—angels!—cast out to bear you, like Eve’s children, in suffering, outside the gates of Eden.”

“Oy, the suffering!” Sylvie puts in for Mother. “And they—given dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creeping thing that crawls upon the earth. And you, angel-born, cannot plant vineyards and eat their fruit, or take cup and drink.”

“So take Eve’s children, and divide them between you,” I chime in to finish my father’s story with my sister, “and eat their blood given for you!”

“Ah—” Sylvia sits bolt upright, pointing to the trapdoor in the floor of the covert. It rises and she leans forward in hungry anticipation. The sight of blond hair further excites her, but she sags into the couch again. A rippling muscular Adonis emerges, and begins to pace the covert.

“Damn!”

“You are waiting for someone in particular?” I ask, carefully casual.

“It shows, eh?”

“Tell me about him.”

“Her. No.”

Movement in the covert pulls her searching eyes again. She stands and presses her voluptuous body against the glass. “Please,” she whispers.

A blond woman climbs into view.

“Ah!” Sylvia leaps to ring for the quarrymaster, and then sits down again by me, a little unsteady.

Sylvie’s fig is young and appealing, but unremarkable except for the rather shocking paleness of her nipples and the defiant tilt of her pointed chin. She makes a slow parade around the covert. She’s tall, with the sort of ridiculous long legs you only see on fashion models and teenagers. She knows who hunts her, and she knows she is already there.

Sylvia watches her haughty fig circle, enthralled. “I always drank full-tooth. Even before we started building quarries and paying our figs to let us. But this girl is different. The dreams I see in her blood are so vivid, so rich.”

“You’re in love with her?”

“I just want to see myself in her dreams.”

“That’s what kills them,” I say.

“I know. And that would ruin it. I found her pole-dancing in London and brought her here, and everything I’ve done for ethical consumerism, setting up the Quarries, starting the initiatives and the committee, all of it has been for this—for her.” Sylvia is rigid, watching her.

The girl in the aquarium freezes, listening, then walks back to the trapdoor. “I let her see me sometimes, as she slips away.” Sylvia slides the brass key around its fine chain clockwise on her wrist until it hits the lock, then counterclockwise away from it and back again and again. She doesn’t meet my eyes. “We’re not supposed to, I know. But, Olivia, do you think she’s conscious

enough then to remember my face? Do you think she maybe wonders about me during her recoup days?"

"I don't know."

"I think about her constantly in the days between. I plan our hunts, dream her flavor, imagine her life. She is always crawling over my thoughts." Sylvia's haunted eyes meet mine. "She consumes me," she whispers. Her fig pulls back the trapdoor and descends from view.

"Good luck." I say. And I actually mean it.

Alone in the Quarry, I press my body against the covert's cool glass. Inches away from me, a nubile girl twists her coiled hair around a fragile ebony finger, but no sound or scent of her reaches me. So very young and almost wild with suppressed anxiety, she stands up and sits back down. She knows time is passing, but she, of course, is not allowed a watch. The covert, with its waiting room magazines and upholstered chairs, has no clock. Vampiric altruism extended only to our own comfort.

Another man climbs the stairs into the covert, the replacement for the fig Ophelia now hunts. The illusion of clothing clings to his sculpted body, ruddy tan except across the luminous white flesh of his ass where wicked red wheals stand in narrow strips. He has been whipped recently and sits gingerly. The Quarry recruits figs from Dublin and Cork, even Belfast, and pays them very well, but this man, slender and hard, and lithe as a flamenco dancer, is here for his own pleasure. He wants to be hunted. He is hoping to be attacked in the night.

I can't help him. Nor any of them waiting, in dread or anticipation. Even the figs who are not summoned have sold, at the very least, their peace for tonight. I have not sharpened my quills in so long that to feed full-tooth now would risk killing. I leave the Quarry and return to the public rooms of Pandemonium, rejoining those mortals who are cursed by only the will of God, and not their own as well.

Dominic fished in his jacket pocket for his room key to the rasping accompaniment of Alyx's tortured breathing. The poor bastard had followed him up the winding central hall from the lobby to the second floor and down one of the radiating corridors to this familiar doorway. It hadn't been a long walk, but it had exhausted Alyx, and he leaned woozily against the wall while Dominic flipped past the shiny, flimsy keys for his town house, office, and lab, to the dull iron key he'd thought of as merely decorative for years. He slotted it into the ornate lock and pushed the door open.

The room was unchanged, unused since he'd left it. But it was tidy, dustless, and the potted plants had thrived. Dominic put his laptop bag down on the bedside table, noting an aging red leather diary strategically positioned there. Alyx collapsed on the bed, a cascade of ball bearings harvesting the energy of his fall and noiselessly shunting it down through the floor. The hinges on the door, the feet of the desk chair, were all the same, rigged to recycle the momentum of every human motion. Alyx reached into the filthy pocket of his bathrobe and extracted a pair of blue lenses, which he began to switch with the bronze ones in his complicated goggles. Dominic turned his attention to the computer terminal—the only change in the room since he'd left it.

An erratic hybrid of modern science and timeless materials, the monitor used the latest (and sickly expensive) display technology. Dominic whistled between his teeth. He needed to see what that looked like lit up. He felt around the brass base for a power button and pressed it. A mechanical drone muttered as the machine's small wooden fan blades spun up.

He had forgotten how gracious this old room was. He had furnished his Cambridge town house himself, and lived in it every day since he'd bought it, but it still felt less homelike than this strange, underground hotel room that had stood empty for the last nine years. Dominic shrugged and opened the closet. There, looking fresh out of the box, were a pair of his favorite running shoes. He chuckled and picked them up.

"So you're a runner?" Alyx had a voice like hot asphalt.

"It's good exercise."

"It's more than that, or the shoes wouldn't be here."

Dominic looked at Alyx curled up in a miserable ball on his clean bed. “What do you mean?” he asked.

Alyx rolled his rheumy eyes. “I’m losing confidence in your ability to solve anything, Doc. I bet you go to the gym—big, healthy guy like you?” Dominic nodded curtly, pulling sweatpants and a T-shirt from the heavy metal-strapped dresser drawer. “But there’re no weights in your room here, right? No fancy dress-up clothes in your closet either I bet. Why? ’Cause you wear that shit, but it’s not who you are.”

“You’re trying to suggest only things intrinsic to us are here?”

“Yup. You don’t get stuff here, you get props. That new vampire chick we saw today? She’ll have a closet full of latex. Viv’s got whips and ball gags. Pandora gets a row of jars. Whatever.”

“What’s here for you?”

“Liquor.”

“You’re telling me Gaehod supplies you with alcohol?”

“Or I bring my own. I never quite worked that out.”

“God!” Dominic exclaimed, “that’s just unconscionable. I was hoping I could work with him to make some improvements here, help some people, but he’s poisoning his so-called children. He makes a big show of how much he loves us, and then supplies us with exactly what we need to destroy ourselves. This is bullshit. I came here to do research. I came here—”

“You came here ’cause you got called,” Alyx said.

“What are you talking about?”

“If you’re here, Gaehod sent for you. That’s the only reason anyone gets back here.”

“Gaehod did not send for me.”

“Yeah he did.”

“How?”

Alyx shrugged. “I dunno. You ask him. That fucker can mainline the memestream. Whatever he needs, he puts it out there, and we all just breathe it in. Might have been a movie that summoned you, or a song. It doesn’t matter. You were walking around on the surface, then before you knew what happened, bam! you’re in Hell.”

“Why would he have sent for me?”

“I dunno.”

“You do. You have an idea.”

Alyx regarded Dominic’s ceiling studiously. “I thought maybe he brought you here to help me.”

Clearly, the man needed help. “I don’t think Gaehod would like my way of helping you.”

“How come? What would you do?” Alyx pushed the goggles onto his forehead and struggled to focus his bleary eyes on Dominic.

“Well first,” Dominic said, “I’d recommend you eat more and stop drinking.”

Alyx made a coarse, derisive noise. “Alcohol is not my problem.”

“Look, Alyx, I don’t know what Gaehod has told you about alcoholism being a symptom of a deeper spiritual problem, but it’s bullshit. What the hell difference does it make whether it’s demons or drugs that’s possessing you? You still don’t belong to yourself. Something else owns you, and that’s no way to live.”

“You sound like Gaehod. ‘Alyx, stop giving your power away.’ But maybe it’s just my brain chemistry, right?” Alyx adjusted his blue-tinted lenses over his blood-tinged eyes. “Like you were talking about. Maybe there’s something screwed up in my head that makes me this way. Maybe you’ve got some pills—”

“Did Gaehod tell you I had medication?”

“No, but you’re a doc, right? Even just something to help me sleep . . .”

“You followed me up looking for drugs?” Dominic towered over the wreck in his bed, grinding his fingers into his palms to keep from grabbing Alyx by his sticky bathroom lapels and pitching him out of his room. “You think I’m going to write you a prescription?”

“I don’t give a shit. Whatever you wanna try on me, I’m game. Drugs, scans, tests—bring it on. I’m your goddamn guinea pig. You can’t fuck me up any more than I am. If there’s a chance, man. If you can figure it out . . .”

Dominic turned away, investigating his computer terminal to save Alyx the humiliation of being seen so close to tears. The warm yellow light of the monitor undulated softly, and Dominic picked up the slender metal pen beside it and touched the screen. A swirl of liquid color opened from the contact point and letters materialized from the patternless soup. {Hello, Dominic. Login, please.} He looked around for some other input device.

“It’s the roll,” Alyx said from the bed.

Dominic untied a satin bow and unrolled a thick velvet rectangle with letters painted on the fabric in gold. He placed it on the desk before the monitor and sank his wrists into the pillowy softness. He touched his fingertips to yielding bubbles beneath the letters and typed in his birth date.

He glanced over his shoulder at Alyx, motionless, eyes peeled and riveted to the ceiling above him, a look of stark terror on his ruined face.

Dominic called to him, but the man stayed frozen—suffering some sort of seizure? Dominic touched an emaciated shoulder gently. “Alyx?” he said again.

“Oh shit. Thanks, dude.” Alyx blinked and shifted on the bed. “I was having a bad dream.”

“Oh.” Dominic stood up and looked back at the glowing monitor. “Did you know you sleep with your eyes open?”

“I don’t sleep.”

“Sleep paralysis,” Dominic explained. “You’re awake but you can’t move. It happens sometimes coming out of REM sleep. You probably just dozed off without knowing it.”

“I don’t fucking doze off. Told you already. You can’t hear much but your own theories, eh? I don’t sleep. At all. It’s why I’m following you around like Hell’s fucking puppy dog. I want you to help me. I’ve taken so much shit, coke, meth, ket—whatever was around to keep me going—that my fucking body has forgotten how to sleep. Or believes I don’t need sleep. Or some stupid shit. I have to have my nightmares awake.”

“Alyx, I don’t know much about sleep disorders. I don’t think I can help you. Have you tried a sleep clinic?”

Alyx rolled into a fetal ball facing the wall and said nothing.

Dominic turned back to the beautiful monitor. A photo of eight bundled packets, some of parchment, some scrolls, some tanned skin, filled the screen. Dominic shuddered and toggled the monitor off. He turned for the bedside diary just in time to catch Alyx as he stumbled.

“You’ve fucking got to have something to help me, man!”

It occurred to Dominic that Alyx’s erratic movements were attempts at fighting him.

“You’re taking something, right? Give me some of that.”

“It wouldn’t help you.” Dominic tried to steady the man’s flailing body.

“Cut my head open, fix it that way. I don’t give a shit. I just need something.”

“You need to get a fucking grip.”

“On what! There’s nothing left. Nothing holds still.” Alyx reeled wildly, fists flailing at the air. Dominic allowed him to land a punch against his ribs to save his dignity. Then he bent from the waist, picked Alyx up, carried him to the bed, and dumped him on it. “You have to change what you’re doing. Nothing else, no drugs, no operation, nothing is going to make it better if you don’t change what you do.”

“I’m too fucked up to change.”

“You don’t have to change what you think, just what you do.

Decide to do something different, then don’t change your mind back, not matter how bad you want to.”

“Fucking New Year’s resolutions?”

“Make any resolution and refuse to reconsider it in the face of desire.”

“My will power’s broken. Got anything for that, Doc?”

Dominic started to explain why this wasn’t a medical issue, but caught the laugh choked in Alyx’s throat.

“Let’s get drunk tonight.” Alyx pulled the halves of his bathrobe together and pushed himself up against Dominic’s pillows. “The vamps hang out at Pandemonium most nights, and I know you’d like to meet that new gal. She’s gotta be one of them. There’s this other one, Vivian, you gotta see her. Smokin’ hot. Wears all this leather and bondage gear. Now that’s a woman who could make a man behave.”

“I want to run,” Dominic said. “And I’ll need to shower after.”

“All right. I’ll come get you in a couple hours then.” Alyx staggered to his feet, and sat down abruptly.

“I need to change,” Dominic prompted, shrugging off his jacket.

“Oh right.” Alyx stood up again more cautiously. “You’re going to run.”

“Yeah.”

“It won’t help, you know.”

Dominic held the door open for Alyx, who slouched through it. “I’ll see you tonight,” he said. “We’ll go look for Vivie and the new girl downstairs.” He gave Dominic a wicked grin. “When you’re done with your exercise in redundancy.”

Pandemonium is crammed with the meat of sex, the bone and blood of human hunger. It pulses with the endlessly throbbing, indifferent drone of every nightclub in every city. The smell of blood and desire rub against my spine, vibrating with the painless, rageless music. Beautiful bodies flow around the bar in delicious bloody excess, pumping dance and talk. They stand in clots, or bind one to another in corpuscular pairs and trios, men and women, men and men, homocytes and heterocytes. I slip into the stream like nicotine.

“Hiya, honey.” A cocoa-skinned Amazon dances up to me. Her hair spirals in fat dreads across her muscular shoulders, and her low-slung jeans bump my hip bone. I should have keened my quills on Sylvia’s before she went to take her blood communion. Soon my edges will be too dull even to make the tiny cuts that go unnoticed, but tonight, my surgically fine nails slid up slender brown arms and draw the sweet, sweat-tinged droplets so subtly that the dancer, focused where our belt buckles grind, does not feel their acute caress.

Her blood is slick. She has taken something. Another taste will tell me what. She turns me by the waist, grinding my compliant hips against her own, the forks of our legs spread like the webbing of fingers. Her long black lashes veil eyes that have not met mine. They could be brown or green. Her hair falls over her throat. I could push it back and kiss her neck, sample the slickness of pot or pills. Hell, I could puncture her and strike, feed properly and full, tear her supple body open with my dull quills. It will be the only way I have left, if I don’t keen them the next time I’m with my sisters. I’ll come back for her tomorrow night. Tonight, I’m already bored.

But over the dancer’s dark, broad shoulder, I catch an intriguing glimpse of a face I recognize from the airport magazine’s “rock stars in rehab” cover. He’s wearing goggles and a filthy bathrobe belted with an orange extension cord. One scarred arm twists upward to drape across the muscular shoulder of the man I saw today in Hell’s front parlor. He shrugs the rock star’s frail arm off and nods to me. Do I know him? Even in the dark club, his health and strength make a jarring contrast to the withered singer. Only his eyes betray his place here, among the damned. He has lived and died and been reborn, lifetime after lifetime. In childhood, these cursed Reborn forget, but as adolescence dawns, their memories of every incarnation awaken. Poor bastards. I think it’s worse than being undead.

The dancer’s grip on my waist tightens. Only her hips are moving now, and no longer to the tuneless music pulsing through us. Her eyes are not closed, but clamped, her hips not driving, but driven. A deep blood red seeps under her earthy skin. Brown stone nipples tent the fabric of her shirt. Perhaps, like my sister Vivian, I could possess the pleasure of mortals, summon their ecstasies, and command their orgasms. I pluck at a dark pebble with my hard fingers. The dancer’s startled cry is drowned in the torrent of music. But in her moment of wild-eyed surprise, I learn that they are green. She plunges below the surface again, pushing her body against mine. Her distended nipple sprouts hard between my twisting fingers.

I can feel the Reborn watching me, and find him more interesting than the tuneless dancer. The faces of the Reborn change lifetime to lifetime, but mine, of course, is unchanging over

millennia. If he knew me once, he will know me still, but I have seen too many for too long. Sometimes they all run red together. Without tightening or loosening the crush of my fingers, I begin to wind the fleshy bulb of the dancer's breast, left and right. Her body surges against my stillness. If angelic flesh could bruise, her grip would hurt me, but she is oblivious to my pain or lack of it, mindless of me except where her fork grinds against my thigh. If I were as open as she, would this arouse me? Would we pleasure one another with the throbbing music in the pulsing crowd, our sex and hearts beating rhythm?

But if I try to touch my scarlet lips to hers, the dancer will reject me. I could drop my hungry mouth to the generous rise of breast. That I would not be denied. She holds her breath, releasing it in sudden gasps. Her hips grind against me. The Reborn's eyes have moved on. The dancer starts to shudder. I look into her face, suffused with heat and color, with blood, with life. Her mouth opens like Ophelia's in spreek, but silent in orgasm. In its clutches, her graceful body contorts. Death agonies look the same and pass as quickly. And both are replaced with the same annihilated vacancy.

I want to be so emptied.

Alone again on the throbbing dance floor, I watch her rippling and scarless back stagger into the beating red stream of the living. Then I sense him. Behind me, coming closer, alone now, eyes on me. I wait, but he hesitates, a blockage in the artery that feeds the dance floor. I wind my serpentine way through the press of bodies toward the exit. He will follow. I slip through the doors. I could vanish now.

But no. I catch the door as the Reborn pushes it open, motionless. Unprepared to stop, he collides with me in confusion. I clamp his strong body to mine.

"Never hunt a hunter," I whisper low against the pulsing warmth of his throat. Motionless on the threshold, I hold the door open and his hard body imprisoned against mine. He tries to disentangle himself and, rather than make the point that my one arm could restrain him, I release both door and man, and stride away.

"Olivia!"

Now he has surprised me. “Did the old man tell you my name?” I ask.

“No, but I registered tonight. ‘Olivia’ was the newest name above mine.” He shrugs, lifting muscular shoulders. “I guessed.” He wears a buttoned shirt and a tie over his military torso, but he has an artist’s lips. *What a strange jigsaw.*

“Are you a vampire?” he asks.

I roll my eyes and walk away, but he falls into confident step beside me.

“You have totally screwed up the protocol, you know,” I tell him.

“Sorry.”

“The rules are very clear.”

“Yeah, I know.” He isn’t defiant, just indifferent.

“You’re never to ask an angel’s name, or use it without her permission.”

“Yeah.”

Cheeky! The cursed are usually obedient. What makes this Reborn bold? I grace him with my most seductive smile and turn into one of the ground-floor entrances to the spiral hall that curls upward to the glass skylight thirteen stories over our heads.

“Try again,” I say.

One corner of his handsome mouth twitches up, but he stuffs his hands into his pockets.
“Greetings, angel, my name is—”

“I haven’t announced myself yet.”

“Okay, okay.” He winks with an audacious grin. “Greetings, fellow guest. My name is Dominic O’Shaunnessy.”

“Greetings.”

He waits only a second. “You didn’t give your name in return.”

“I don’t have to,” I tell him. “I outrank you.”

“Jesus Christ!”

“Guess again.”

He laughs, and I find I like the sound. It seems to come from deep in his broad chest, rusty perhaps, but rich. A frown scores the strong planes of his face. “But you said I can’t guess.” He could be ferocious, but he’s playing.

“Correct.” I give a demure nod.

“Okay. So I ask the next question?” He clears his throat fussily. “How art thou damned?”

“I am Undead.”

“I am Reborn.” But his jaw grips when he says it. I wonder why.

“I am Olivia.”

“Yeah. I already knew that.” We both laugh. “Hello, Olivia.”

“Hello, Dominic.”

“You can call me D or D.O. if you want to. That’s what I’m used to.”

“Don’t call me Ollie. I hate that.”

We are nearing the first door in the hallway. I have access all the way up, but he will not, so I lean my elbows on the railing and look down over the floor of the Grand Reception Hall of the Hotel of the Damned.

“And to answer your original question: Yes, I am a vampire.”

How strange to say it, to hear the words hang in the air between me and a mortal man without the taste of terror in my throat or his blood in my memory—to speak the truth without hope of salvation, or fear of failure.

He stands beside me, his large hands wrapped loosely around the railing. His index and pinky fingers curl toward the middle of his hand, accustomed to tucking into fists, but the flesh is dappled and smooth, dusted with fine copper hair that glints in the dim light of the corridor. I glimpse tattoo blue beneath the cuff and wonder how he’s marked his body. Do the rich blue lines run over his hard chest, down his bicep and across the elbow of his other arm?

“I drew it on myself with Sharpie when I was seventeen,” he answers my exploring eyes, “and walked to the tattoo place. It was part of a pre-Roman British mania I was going through at the time.”

“The old woad markings . . .”

He shrugs. “At the time, it meant something about my approaching manhood. Childish of me, really.”

He seems as ancient as I am. Most of the Reborn never leave the hotel, once they remember their way back. I understand their unwillingness to experience yet again the heartbreak of living, dying, loving, and parting, knowing what will happen, having lived it all before. But he is old for reawakening, and has just today checked in.

Although they have not changed in size or shape, I am keenly aware of my high breasts and perfect skin. I turn to him, softening my body and my smile. “Why were you and your buddy stalking me in the club? It doesn’t look like your kind of place,” I tease him.

“My buddy? Oh, Alyx. No, he’s not really my friend, just someone I met here.”

“He’s famous, you know, in the surface world. The magazines all say he’s in rehab.”

“He needs it.”

“Was he the one tracking me, then?”

“No. That was me. I mean, I wasn’t either, but more than he was. I saw you arrive. I wanted to meet you.”

“Did you?” I steal a peek at him, his handsome head lowered, eyes down. He looks weary, but his profile is strong. I could love that face with its fierce red brows and hard jaw, or at least love to taste it.

“Yeah.” Earnest eyes meet mine. I slide a hand into the crook of his elbow and snuggle up against the mortal warmth of his muscular arm. I match my steps to his when we start walking again.

“Let me guess,” I tease. “You were stalking me because you’ve always had fantasies about vampires. You want to offer yourself to me, want to feel me strike into your lovely throat with my wicked fangs and feed.”

The sweet, dark chuckle rumbles against my fingers coiled around his strong arm. “No, nothing like that.”

“I’ve got it! You want me to turn you, to make you immortal. I can’t do that, you know. Hate to disappoint a fan, but it’s just legend—contagion by the Other. Vampires are born, not made. My sisters and I are all Desire’s fallen angels. There are no more up there to come tumbling down. Sorry, kiddo.”

“Nope.” He grins. “I’m not looking for immortality, although that would pose an interesting challenge to the so-called curse of being reborn, wouldn’t it?”

“Give it up,” I say with more venom than I intend. “There’re no loopholes.”

“What do you mean?”

I touch the metal plate beside the doors and they swing open on silent pneumatic hinges. Dominic walks beside me through them. “I came back here, to Gaehod’s hotel, because I have spent the last several thousand years searching for a way out, and I’m tired. I had hoped that in mankind I might find a key to my own salvation. I thought—in God’s divine do-over after his creation of angels didn’t work out as planned—I might discover my own second chance. I believed humanity might save the angels. But you can’t. I’ve come back here to become undead on the inside, too, to give up futile hope, and with it, suffering.”

He’s quiet a while, then turns his clear, deep eyes on me. He looks like I must when I scent for desire or fear the first time. “What if hope is not futile?” he asks me.

“That’s such a human response!”

Bending to match his height to mine, he takes my shoulders in his large hands. His brilliant blue eyes blaze with surprising passion. “I believe I can help you,” he says.

“Men always do.”

A tiny muscle flinches in his jaw with impatience or humor.

“Will you let me try?” He is fighting for composure, trying not to frighten me with his urgency, but the intensity of his beautiful face stirs something in me. Sincerity is a rare delicacy on the twisted, ironic lips of the twenty-first century. My deep teeth throb to taste it.

His lips do not move when mine brush them, so I kiss him again, more softly—slowly—the very lightness of my kiss a provocation. And it works. His hands grasp my shoulders to pull my yielding body against his powerful frame. The immobile strength of his chest is trembling, and he takes my lips in his, once and hard. Under his demanding mouth, mine opens to take his seeking tongue within. The smell of his pure masculine desire drenches me. Deep emptiness pulses in my gums.

His hands are hard on my shoulders. His brilliant eyes have mine again. “We can’t do this,” he says, voice choked. “I can’t do this. I want to help you. I really do. And I think I can. But I can’t get involved with you personally if I’m going to be working with you professionally. It’s unethical. It’s a bad idea. It’s . . . it just doesn’t work.”

“But it feels good,” I whisper.

“Bad ideas always do.” He’s looking away.

My kiss has rattled him, and his confusion and desire spread from his lips to me. I, who cannot feel pain or pleasure . . . I am tasting something new. I turn and walk away, but he falls into step easily beside me. We walk a long time in silence, spiraling up.

“Olivia, I’m a medical doctor. I work with brain chemistry and medicines. I believe I can help you escape the hell you’re in. There are treatments, therapies. You could get well, be happy. Live a normal life. I want to offer you the hope that things can get better.”

I round on him, furious. “I don’t want your hope! I came back here today with my last hope. Tonight, I realized that even my cynical sisters quest helplessly after something. Even they cannot be free from the tyrannies of hope. Hope is the unthinking, unseeing master of unending hell. I have my own. Don’t offer me yours!”

We have reached the top of the spiral and stand on the final circle of balcony beneath the domed glass. Above us, the Irish sky towers black and starless.

Dominic’s voice is meltingly tender. “What if you’re right? What if hope is the master of Hell? What if something in your own mind, in your own hopes, or fears, or ideas, is the cause of your suffering? What if you are not damned?”

“If I am not damned, what am I?”

“A woman in pain.”

“An ordinary woman?”

“There is nothing ordinary in any woman’s pain.”

“A mortal woman?”

“Would that be so terrible?”

My laugh is almost a howl. “I take no pleasure in food, but I still eat,” I tell him. “I have no joy in life, but I live. Does that sound like an ordinary woman? I am the Undead. The Hollow. I am

Numb. I am the sacred, stuffed into the profane. My body, made like yours of vile mud and ash, cannot contain all of who I am, and yet I am nothing at all. I am timeless, spaceless, crammed into time and space. I am the unspeakable made into a single word. I am a true violation of Truth.”

He dares not look at me. “I used to feel that way.” His voice is low with the weight of things never before said. “When I was a kid, I started having dreams of women. Most boys do, about that age, but mine were of women I had whole stories for. From all over history. The first time I had sex, I almost went out of my head. Not just the way it felt, but the images I saw—other faces, other beds, whole lifetimes.”

Even his desire, strong in the air between us, smells bittersweet. I swallow hard against the rising quills dripping hunger, and something else as well.

“For a while, the memories came flooding back so fast I couldn’t keep anything straight,” he tells me. “Then I remembered this place, the hotel, coming here in other lifetimes, and how to find it again. I came back. Here, there are diaries that look to be hundreds of years old, of lives that I remember. I remember my children, how much I loved them, how they died in front of me or watched me die. I tried to track the lineage of one son born before the Second World War, but I was black, and the records are bad. I felt”—he gropes for an unfamiliar word—“helpless.”

“But they aren’t memories,” he continues, so determined he sounds angry. “They’re delusions that behave like memories. Seizures in the memory parts of my brain. I’m learning to stop them. I’m getting close to a treatment.”

“Your quest has become your treatment, not the other way around.” I shrug. “Even the search for a quest can heal you mortals.”

“No, it’s more than that. I no longer accept the idea that I’m cursed. It’s ridiculous. I was a child and I made up a story. You probably did something similar. I universalized my experience. Comprehending my mortality changed me, that’s all.”

“But the lineage of myth runs on. I saw a Persephone on the airplane.”

“I don’t believe in any of that—gods, titans, angels, curses—none of it.” His eyes, earnest and hungry, search my face.

“That’s some power trip you’re on,” I say. “I may be a victim of God’s ideas, but you have made God the victim of yours.”

He takes a step toward me, reaching for my hands. “I want to help you.”

“I don’t need help.” I pull my quilled nails away from him.

“You’re unhappy.”

“I would rather be a damned angel than a sick human. Besides, you’re unhappy, too.”

He drops my eyes.

“Physician, heal thyself,” I mock him.

His head is bowed and he seems to be studying my fingers, still held in his. “God, I hate this place,” he whispers.

“Then why did you come back?”

“I had to.”

“Then you’re not as free as you claim,” I say. “If God cannot compel you, what does?”

“My work.”

“Ah, Mammon. He’s an uncle of mine.” I pull my hands away and walk the edge of the balcony. I can sense his eyes on me. His solitary shadow stains the wall across from us.

“I didn’t come for money,” he says to my latex back. “I mean, I did, sort of, but not only for the money. For what the money can do.”

I turn to him. He looks like a warrior—proud, beautiful, powerfully built, straight, and hard. I could break him for fun. “No man serves a god for its own sake, only for what it might do for him,” I tell him. “You serve science with a zealot’s prayer for your own salvation.”

I walk toward him, but he turns away from me, struggling for control. I watch his broad shoulders and the hard curve of his back.

“I take it you are uninterested in participating in my research?” he says, still not looking at me. The masculinity of his beauty is exquisite—strong but not blunt, mortal but unshielded, and the contradiction pins me with fascination’s fine spines. They prick like desire smells.

“I could bite my lip and kiss you,” I whisper, conforming my soft body to the unyielding length of his spine, “and in my angelic blood you would taste real freedom. I could drink from your mouth without hurting you, and feed all my hungers while I strengthen yours.” I slide my hands along his strong shoulders and press myself onto tiptoe to bring my succulent lips to his ear.

But I do not kiss the tiny pulsing place beneath it. “For days after, you will see more clearly, think more swiftly, be stronger physically and less prone to disease.” He wets his lips with his tongue and swallows hard. “Come,” I whisper to him, “claim what you desire.”

“What I want is a woman.”

“You can have an angel.”

“I want reality.”

“Reality may encompass more than you imagine,” I whisper, dark, insinuating.

“Reality is what we experience.”

“There is no difference, in your brain chemistry, between reality and imagination.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m an angel, Dominic,” I tell him. “Maybe I’m yours.”

6

I DON'T WANT TO SEE

“Are guardian angels real? Is that ridiculous, underfed, vampirewannabe Olivia mine?”

“I would not expect to find a guardian angel in Hell, Dominic. Would you?”

“No, of course not.” Dominic glowered at Gaehod across the old man’s cluttered study. “Why would they be where you’d actually need them?”

Gaehod threaded a path through teetering stalagmites of paper and books. “How is Olivia?” he asked.

“She’s nuts.”

“Is that your clinical diagnosis, Doctor?” The old man lifted a slippery stack of books, papers, and brass fittings from a faded pink armchair. “Have a seat, Dominic. I’ll make tea.”

“I’ll stand, thank you.”

“A fellow brought me a nice selection of green teas as a gift last month.” Gaehod slipped through a cityscape of rolled maps from the chair to the shelves that flanked a wide-open stone hearth. “I had a new one on Wednesday. I really liked it.” He held a desiccated green tangle of leaves up for Dominic’s inspection before dropping it into a small black clay teapot. “It is a sea creature, I think.”

It did look rather like a miniature green dehydrated squid, and wrung a reluctant smile from Dominic's angry mouth.

"I was surprised that you chose the paper volume to resume your writing here," the graceful old man said. Dominic nodded. He'd been right not to trust the confidentiality of the networked machines.

Gaehod balanced the teapot and two handleless mugs on a tray. "I understand you have found an admirer in our resident celebrity."

"Alyx?" Dominic stepped over the stacks and towers to take the tray from the old man.

"Thank you, Dominic. My . . . ah, vertical filing system may allow my work to reach great heights"—he winked—"but it's rather a nuisance for the housekeeper. I must make my own tea."

Dominic stood absurdly, in the belly of the lunatic hotel, holding the tea tray. He fought the urge to hurl it, with its pot and mugs, across the room while the innkeeper pattered, clearing a spot for it on his desk. "I understand you stock his room with liquor," he said. "How do you justify that? Alyx is drinking himself to death."

"So it would seem." Gaehod took the tray from Dominic and placed it carefully in the empty space.

"And you don't intend to do anything about that, do you?"

"I intend to let it break my heart."

Seated, Gaehod looked so small and so deeply forlorn that Dominic's outrage seemed tawdry beside it. He sat down across from the old man in the flattened pink armchair.

"Alyx thinks you bring us all here, you know," he said at last. "He thinks you summon us."

As if recalled from a distance by Dominic's words, the old man turned his drifting attention from the fire to the teakettle hanging over it. "I write letters, little more," he said. He reached through the glowing copper tubing that snaked through the fireplace and grate. He raised the steam-capture cap from the nose of the kettle and poured a stream of boiling water into the pot. "Of course, I did write to you," he added, brightening. "And here you are."

"You never wrote to me," Dominic corrected the old man.

"I did, actually." Gaehod cast about absently and selected a paper from one of the delicate, swaying stacks. "Ah, yes. Here it is." He handed a letter to Dominic.

"But you didn't mail it . . ." Dominic said, scanning the letter.

My darling ones, Reborn and Undead, Damned, Cursed, and Misbegotten—Hell calls her absent children home. Let us meet in general congress at L'Otel Matillide this April to debate whether, in the dawn of this new millennium, we face the twilight of demons. Are we grown obsolete? Shall Hell, at last, disband?

The weak have inherited the earth, but it was not always so. When angels fell, they landed here and, clothed in flesh, walked the land because they could not fly. But Man was given his dominion, drowning Knowledge in his blood, while Desire, sweet vampires, grew fangs and fed upon him. Undead, come home!

In Myth, my Titan children are cursed for the gifts they gave. Some, for fire, burn lifetimes in darkness, creating what none will see, song without listener, image without eye. Others suffer, for a greater gift, through remembered incarnations, the simple agony of love and loss repeating. I call these Reborn home!

Be thou summoned, my children, two champions to do battle for the fate of Hell. Let us gather our ancient, scattered tribes to fashion for ourselves the gift denied us. Shall we close our gate? Shall we steal our destiny? Come home and make your voices heard. Only here can you speak truth, for home is the origin of sin. De profundis, G.

Dominic glanced up, mouth agape. “You’re thinking of closing the hotel?”

“You’ll join me for a cup of tea, I hope. I’m afraid I have little else to offer. I no longer drink wine.” The old man filled the mugs with steaming liquid.

“Gaehod, are you seriously considering putting an end to this?”

“I keep asking myself, do we really need it anymore? It’s beginning to seem redundant of the surface world.”

“Hell is obsolete?”

“You have to wonder, don’t you, when you can buy a pentagram at your local Galleria? I understand that vampires even have their own TV shows nowadays. Witches advertise for coven-mates on the Internet. It’s harrowing.” The old man reached across his chaotic desk to hand Dominic a mug, golden nails glinting, and sat down again as though the effort to bridge the desk

had exhausted him. “Who knows?” he sighed. “Perhaps even my secrets might see the light one day.”

Dominic didn’t need his years of psychiatric training to comprehend the terrible pain of the man beside him, despite his light tone.

“What do you think, Dominic? Without social ostracism and religious persecution to drive us underground, do the damned still need this?”

“We still have shame.”

“Oh?”

“I meet other—” Dominic hesitated. “I meet other what you would call ‘cursed’ souls sometimes. We all bear the same mark.”

“Shame?”

“Yes. That inexpressible sense that something fundamental is wrong with us—that we are somehow secretly and unknowably flawed.” Dominic took a cautious sip from his warm mug. The tea was vaguely floral, but not at all sweet. The old man sat silent, not touching his cup. “But it’s vampire hunters now, actually,” Dominic said slyly.

“What?”

“The ones with the TV show. ‘Slayers,’ they called them.”

“Really?” The old man rewarded Dominic with a faint smile. “I should expect a very brief program. Slayer hunts vampire. Slayer dies.”

“She usually does okay, actually.”

Gaehod chuckled. “How very reassuring. Perhaps there is still some fear left then, some resistance to the heroic damned?”

“I think so.” Dominic drained his little mug and gazed into it moodily. “Gaehod,” he said at last, “they really are not heroic, you know. They’re sick, most of them, and in pain. I know you can understand that—how much pain they’re in. Maybe, if you stop romanticizing the damned, you can help them. Otherwise, we’re no better than St. Paul down here. Suffering isn’t enough for salvation.”

“And do you believe you know what is, Dominic?”

“I believe I have an obligation to try and understand. To do what I can to help relieve suffering.”

“Yes,” Gaehod whispered. “It’s hard to witness suffering without desiring those things.” Gaehod refilled Dominic’s mug. “I’ll introduce you to one of Olivia’s lovely sisters after lunch.”

Dominic shrugged.

“You need to collect subjects for your research, and I promised to help you. How do you like the tea?”

“It’s nice. The leaves are tied together, aren’t they? That’s what you were showing me. That’s why you don’t have to strain it from the pot.”

“More flower than cephalopod I suppose.” The old man smiled at Dominic with a fondness so obvious it made him squirm. “Olivia should be joining us shortly.”

Dominic’s mind instantly replayed the striking spiral of beautiful woman through the lobby’s floor. His rebellious body reeled though a swifter but less orderly replay of her lips closing over his. He had resolved against enrolling her in his study. She would make a poor subject.

Dominic drained the teacup and stood. “I’d like to talk with you more about closing the hotel, Gaehod. But it’s lunchtime and I’m starving.”

“She’s very beautiful, don’t you think?”

Dominic slung his laptop bag over his shoulder and scanned the floor for a path to the door. “Olivia? Yes. She’s very beautiful.”

“You say that without pleasure.”

“I don’t trust beautiful women.” Dominic lifted one of the lobby’s small, mechanical trays from the floor and replaced it, wheels up, on the seat of the armchair he’d just vacated. He had had less trouble walking in.

“Why is that?” Gaehod asked.

“Oh I don’t know, something to do with the absurdity of today’s dieting beauties who spend half their lives in the gym trying to sculpt a body like their foremothers had when necessity required that they work in the fields and suffer long and hard for just enough to eat.” Dominic took several more steps toward the door, but had to stop again and shift a display case filled with glass beads from his path.

“I like looking at her.” Gaehod smiled.

“I imagine she enjoys that.”

“I hope so. I do make a point of trying to see her.”

“She’s hard to miss. She really plays it up too, the pale skin and black hair, the tight clothes. She’s the kind of woman who likes to stand out in a crowd, who wants men looking at her. I’ll bet she spends a lot of time looking at herself, too.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Gaehod shook his graying head solemnly.

“Oh, don’t give me that crap about vampires and mirrors. I saw her reflection in the dome of the roof last night.”

“Yes, but could she?”

Dominic seized the door handle and turned back to the old man. Despite his crisp shirt front and buttoned-up vest, Gaehod looked small and tired amidst the clinking mechanisms of energy capture and the towering stacks of books. “You save everything, don’t you?” he said.

“I do try. I’ll come by your room after lunch and we’ll go down to the gardens. Do you know your way to the kitchens?”

“No,” Dominic said opening the door, “but I’m a smart guy. I’ll figure it out.”

I knock on the old man's door, and a young man answers. *Fuck, this Reborn is everywhere.* His fearless blue eyes pierce mine. One thundering heartbeat drains the color from beneath his copper-stubbed face and fills the narrow space between us with the leafy scent of his desire. He grits his jaw against it.

"Please come in, Olivia," he says stiffly. "I was just leaving."

There is so much crap spread over Gaehod's floor that I can't walk past Dominic into the inviting firelight and uncomfortable chairs, but I won't step back into the hall to let him pass. He closes his warrior's eyes against my sinuous body sliding across his immobile chest and thighs, squeezing past him into the room.

"Olivia!" The sharpness of the old man's greeting startles me and I trip over a mound of leather-bound, gold-edged books. Dominic reaches swiftly and steadies me, hard hands on my waist, faster than I knew I was tripping. It would have been an ideal opportunity, had I been thinking, to taste him with a quilled nail against his strong wrist.

But he disentangles himself easily and is quickly out the door. "Olivia, my dear," Gaehod continues, oblivious to the stumbling his stacked books and rolled drawings, collected specimens and boxed treasures have caused. "Dominic needs an escort to the kitchens."

"No. I don't." Dominic glowers in the hall.

"Would you be so kind to help him find his way?"

"That's really not necessary."

I look at Dominic again. He truly is delicious. With the hard lines of strength and sinew disguised under a ragged sweater, and the wide strap of his bag across his broad chest like a bandolier, he looks like academe's own warrior.

"I'd be happy to," I say sweetly. "You want anything while I'm down there, Gaehod? Sandwich?"

"Thank you, but I no longer eat bread."

"Soup?"

"That would be lovely."

I smile at Gaehod and wink. "Back in a bit," I tell him, and turn to Dominic. He stalks down the hall ahead of me in the wrong direction. "So tell me about these tests you'll be doing on me," I ask him.

"I'm not going to run any tests on you."

"Why not? I've got nothing better to do with my time." I take his elbow and turn us around.

"I'm not sure I could be objective."

"All my sisters are more beautiful. If you're waiting to find a vampire you don't desire, you'll have nobody to study," I tell him as we trot down the stairs abreast.

“It’s not because you’re beautiful that I can’t use you in the study.”

“No?”

“No, it’s because you appear to be attracted to me. I can control for my feelings, but not for yours.”

“I don’t have feelings.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Your belief is irrelevant. And insolent. How dare you presume to judge the truth of my nature?” I slam open the swinging doors into the kitchen, sending cascades of ball bearings rattling away. “You can’t even face your own nature.”

“But you know all about it, don’t you?”

“About the Reborn? Sure.” I yank open a low drawer and pull out a copper-bottomed pan.

“Don’t you see the hypocrisy in that?”

Everything about him enrages me—the savagery of his masculine beauty, the discipline of his athlete’s strength. “As though you could talk about hypocrisy!” I shake the pot at him. “You, the healer who can’t care for his patients.”

“I’m not a physician. I told you. I’m a researcher.”

“Why would anyone research anything, except for love?”

“There’s only one other option, isn’t there?” He squares his broad shoulders and refuses to step out of my path. I could tear his handsome arms from their sockets and put them on to boil. But something in his ruthless, blue eyes—the pain beneath the fury—stops me. He doesn’t shout, but his voice could not hold more power if he did. “I work like I do out of fear—fear that I’m crazy, fear that I can’t control the things my mind creates, hell—fear that

I can’t control anything at all.” I step past him and put the pan on the stove. A gas flame leaps up to embrace the copper. He meets my eyes defiantly, anything but fearful.

“So, what exactly do you fear?” I ask him. I already know the answer.

I wait for him.

He smiles grimly. “Love, I guess.”

And it’s true. He fears it because he has already suffered it—the entire pattern of birth, and love, and death. The endless agony of losing those he has loved. The grief his deaths have caused those who loved him. A terrible and primal love drives him to protect himself, his family, and his lovers from that pain. I have never wanted anything as ferociously. And I am the angel of desire.

I walk past him along the long rows of refrigerator drawers until I find one marked “Soup.” Dominic pulls his ratty shoulder bag off and hoists himself up to sit on the counter beside it. His guileless eyes don’t leave me. He watches me spin the lid off a soup jar and dump it into the pan. My mood won’t soften under his gaze the way my tits would.

“I think,” he says at last, “that my guardian angel would be a better cook.”

This makes me laugh. “I think your guardian angel is asleep on the job,” I say.

“That’s what I thought.” He nods sadly, but winks at me. “Guess I’ll have to make my own sandwich.” He leaps down from the counter and engages noisily with the ball-bearing-hinged cabinets and drawers. I stir Gaehod’s soup, watching Dominic. His athlete’s body is graceful and efficient, but how passionate he is, and how hard he loves—and the terror of that love—puzzle me. I scent the air, but there is no fear and no desire on him. I would break my teeth against his throat, he is so free right now.

“Olivia, we got off to a weird start. I’m sorry. I’d like to try again.”

“Okay,” I say.

“Want a sandwich?” he asks me.

“No.”

“You sure? You could use a little meat on you.” He’s joking. My body would plump for him sweetly if he wanted me that way.

I pour the old man’s soup into a bowl. I’ll be damned if I’m going to let that stand. Desire is an actor’s trick-handled knife. If he doesn’t want me, I’ll turn the blade around.

“Yesterday, you said you could help me.” I slip a spoon into Gaehod’s bowl, keeping my eyes down and my voice uncertain. “I’d like that.”

He has stopped with the bread and lettuce, the tomato and the knife. I stir the soup a little with the spoon.

“I thought you weren’t interested.”

“I am, but . . .” I look up into his fierce blue eyes. The tenderness in his face almost makes me feel ashamed. “Okay, if I’m honest, it’s mostly that I’d like to see more of you.” Almost, but not quite.

“Olivia . . .”

I pick up Gaehod’s soup bowl and push the trick blade in. “I shouldn’t have said that, about wanting to see you. I have to go.”

Some may master their own, but few can resist the taste of another’s desire. We’re all part vampire in the end.

The catacomb of hallways swallowed Dominic, walking beside Gaehod, perfectly dressed for a night at the Victorian opera, except for his absence of footwear. Intrigued by Olivia’s new openness to his work, eager to start working with her, Dominic was not interested in meeting the other vampires right now. But the innkeeper had stopped by his room and collected him after lunch. And he did still need several more girls to round out the study.

Along one corridor, Gaehod stopped to look through a mullioned window. It opened into a room whose opposite wall was lined with identical, but smaller windows. In front of these windows, on benches, blank-eyed men and women sat unblinking, shoulder to shoulder, in close-packed rows. Horror fingered the back of Dominic’s neck.

“Who are they?” he whispered to Gaehod.

“Watchers.”

“What are they watching?”

“A life.”

“Whose?”

“It doesn’t matter—they just have to watch it all, from beginning to end.”

Dominic suppressed a shudder.

“It’s not so bad,” Gaehod reassured him, “a little tedious in the hours of sleep, infancy, and old age, but they are damned for one lifetime only, for the sins of their last. It’s soon over.”

“Why?” Dominic realized he was whispering, although Gaehod made no attempt to lower his voice.

“The last time around they had fates, not destinies. They made no choices. ”

Dominic shook himself. “Isn’t it a little creepy for the people who are being watched every second of their entire lives?”

“The Watchers only bear witness. They can’t do anything about the life they observe, so most of the Watched aren’t aware of them. A few will sense them, of course, and believe in angels or fashion tinfoil hats.”

“Does it work?”

“The tinfoil?”

“No.” Dominic scowled at Gaehod.

The old man returned his glare with a subtly mischievous smile and the overtly theatrical whirl of opera cape over one shoulder. “I thought you did not believe in reincarnation, Dominic,” he chided and started walking again. As they turned the corner, Dominic caught a momentary glint of light off glass. Had there been another window across the hall, behind him? He hadn’t thought to look.

Dominic bit back his welling rage and kept walking until he was confident he could keep the anger from his voice. “Why are you showing me this?”

“I promised you a tour.”

“I thought you were ready to stop all this, to close this place down?”

“I have been considering that, yes. What do you think, Dominic?”

“I think all these underground people need help,” Dominic said wearily.

“And of course you need your research subjects who might be easier to persuade if their familiar, comfortable home were no longer here to welcome them.”

“I think their ‘familiar, comfortable home’ keeps them in their familiar, uncomfortable sickness. If they were forced to function in the real world, they might recognize the disconnect between reality and these stories they tell about themselves.”

“They should dismiss these mythic selves?” Rounding another corner, Gaehod’s cape gave a skeptical swirl.

“They should get help.”

“My dear boy, I house the damned and the cursed: descendants of ancient races, angels, and the great-great-grandchildren of titans and elves, as well as souls punished for a single lifetime’s wrongs. They’re exquisite and deep, rare, magical beings. Why should they want to be anything but what they are?”

“Because they’re in pain. Gaehod, I’m afraid your affection for these people keeps you from seeing how screwed up they really are.”

“Yes.” Gaehod nodded. “Love is blind.” A warm smile split the old man’s face. “Speaking of which . . .” He pointed a slender finger toward a flight of stairs where a set of naked, olive-skinned legs was descending into view. The two men, young and old, stopped to watch the woman appear, rosy toes, dimpled knees, gently swaying hips, high delicate breasts, softly parted lips breaking into a stunning smile.

“Hello, my dear,” the old man said, placing a reverent kiss on the girl’s inviting cheek.

“Hello, Father.” She embraced Gaehod, held him against her gentle body, then continued down the hall.

“Who was that?”

“She’s a student from the Venice school, a hierodule, just arrived.”

“A what?”

“A *hetaera*, a *nad?tu*, how do you translate it?”

Dominic recognized the Greek. “Temple slave?”

“Temple prostitute, sacred prostitute. That’s closest I think.”

“I can see why you enjoy your work.” Dominic turned a wry eye over his shoulder at the beauty swaying away.

“I have tried to help them.”

“I know you have. But, Gaehod, I think they might get more help, better, more modern help, if you closed the hotel. Psychiatric medicine has come a long way. A lot of people in tinfoil beanies do very well on paliperdone.”

“You want me to close the hotel?”

“Yes, Gaehod. I do.”

“Would you be willing to champion that cause?”

The miles of rock between him and the surface world of light and sanity, of reason and science, crushed him. How could he champion anything? “Absolutely,” he said.

He drew breath to question the old man, but they turned a corner and he released the air in a low whistle of surprise. Dominic and Gaehod passed beneath a towering gate, high and wide and without bars, into a twilight, subterranean garden.

The peculiar light made a contrary dusk in which color stood out more starkly rather than muting into the gloom. The golds and purples were shocking, and even the gray-leaved olive trees, whose gnarled roots clutched the bare rocks along a black river, seemed young and supple. Dominic followed Gaehod’s bare feet across brilliant, soft green grass riddled with golden crocus and bending daffodils, to the edge of the black water. There, the unmoving figure of a gorgeous woman sat staring into the water’s reflective surface.

“I am so very sorry for your loss, my dear.” Gaehod bent over her, mingling white threads of hair with her crimson streams, and kissed her flawless brow. She sighed, but did not look up. The strange garden light stripped her of shadow.

“I didn’t mean to.” The woman’s voice bore the indents and peaks of Ireland, rolling and enchanting, even with their burden of grief. “I haven’t killed in years.”

“I know.”

“I loved her.” A perfect tear, in which the whole strange garden was reflected, inverse, trembled on the delicate rim of her upturned eyes. Gaehod brushed it away with compassion so intimate and profound Dominic turned away.

“Sylvia, I’d like to you meet Dominic. He is Reborn and, like you, remembers many past loves.” Sylvia’s icy gray eyes, when she turned them to Dominic, held pain miles deep.

“If only the river I sit by were Lethe,” she said to Dominic, her Irish voice a sweet burble beside the silent water, “we could both drink and forget.” She patted the green bank beside her with a graceful hand. “Come tell me of your lost loves.”

“I don’t remember.”

Dominic pulled his laptop bag over his head and sat down, pushing it away from him across the black grass.

“I’ll leave you two to get acquainted.” Gaehod smiled down on them. He turned and walked toward the door, stopping only once to pet a potbellied dog and pluck a pomegranate from a shrubby tree.

Sylvia gazed into the black water. Dominic wished he had remained standing. “I was looking for God,” Sylvia murmured, “but I saw myself instead.”

“So you killed her?”

She shrugged a slender black-swathed shoulder. “That killed her. Mortal blood retains deep loves and fears. When we feed, we catch the glimpses, like dreams. It’s the danger in going back to the same source too often. You become one of their fears.”

“Or loves?”

“I guess.” Sylvia shrugged.

“So what kills them?”

“If you keep feeding when you can see yourself in their blood, it . . . I don’t know. I guess it closes a loop or something. It stops their hearts.”

“That’s impossible you know, right? To see memories in blood? Memory is a neurological function. The notion that even genetic information is ‘in the blood’ is purely poetic.”

“Gaehod said you were interested in memory. Do you remember every love from every lifetime?”

“Every one. No—but they’re not really memories, they’re delusions. I only think I remember them.”

“How tragic!” Sylvia pulled her lips into a succulent moue. “You lose your lovers twice this way, once in the deaths you remember and then by not believing their memory.”

“You can’t lose what you never had.”

“Of course you can. You can lose hope where things have always been hopeless. You can lose faith although there was never a God.”

“You can’t lose your heart if you don’t have one.”

“You have a heart, Dominic. I can hear it.”

Dominic felt very conscious of the meaty apparatus of humanity, of his beating heart and too-big, useless hands.

“I didn’t mean literally,” Sylvia giggled, and slipped fragile, porcelain fingers between the buttons of Dominic’s shirt, pressing coolness and heat against the bare skin of his chest. She ran her fingers over the snaking raised lines of his tattoo. “Distract me from my sorrow, Dominic.”

He took her fine, white elbow in his clumsy hands and extracted her arm from his shirt. Sylvia wore the same strange key bracelet that circled Olivia’s wrist. It, too, was clasped with a small padlock, and although it looked as though the key would fit into the lock, the chain was too short for the key to reach. Sylvia dropped her hand to Dominic’s crotch and began to stroke him through his constricting jeans.

“Doesn’t that feel good?” she whispered against his neck, raising a legion of chills.

He nodded. “It does. But I’m not going to make love to you.”

“I didn’t ask you to. Fall in love with me instead.”

Dominic grinned ruefully. “Make love, fall in love.” He shrugged. “I’m not going to do either.” He moved her hand from the buttons of his jeans and placed it on her lap.

Sylvia’s spurned hand swept to the tiny black buttons of her high-necked blouse. Beneath the delicate black cotton, her pristine skin shone in the strange garden light. She pushed the halves of her shirt open and ran dainty hands over her exposed, abundant breasts. Her luminous pale coral nipples contracted in the cool air and she fanned seductive fingertips across them.

“Do you want to touch me?”

Mute, Dominic shook his head.

“I can’t feel your touch. You can be as rough as you want. You cannot bruise or injure me. You can’t hurt me.” She cupped her full, inviting breasts with caressing fingers.

“I could break your heart.”

“I could break your neck.”

“Do you want to?” he asked her.

Sylvia tipped her perfect, pale face to one side, considering. Her copper hair tumbled gracefully over a milky shoulder. “No.” She smiled. “I don’t think I do. Do you want to break my heart?”

“No, in fact quite the opposite. Sylvia, I believe I can help you. I’m working to develop medicines that might heal your heart. Would you be willing to participate in a research study? I could pay you.”

Sylvia’s laugh rang silver and unfettered. “Darling, I’m a vampire. I have more money than I could ever use.” Sylvia looked down at her breasts in her hands. She pushed the twin globes of tempting flesh toward her lowered chin and dropped them so they shivered and rolled deliciously. “I don’t want money. I want your desire.”

“You have that.” His voice was thick.

“How would you touch me, knowing you cannot arouse me? How would you make love to woman for your pleasure alone, knowing she feels nothing?”

“Physical numbness is not an uncommon psychiatric symptom. I believe you can feel. I can help you.”

“Try.” She held the cloud pink nipples toward his dry lips.

“I cannot become sexually involved with study participants,” Dominic ground between clenched teeth. “And in good conscience, I can’t make love to you knowing that I am incapable of having emotional or romantic feelings for you. I can’t fall in love again.”

“I believe you can feel. I can help you.” With a sweet smile, she turned his words back on him. He reached for his laptop bag, but Sylvia knelt on the riverbank, her ripe breasts overfilling the forked fingers of one hand. Dominic’s mouth was dry, but he dared not lick his lips so close to the succulent flesh. Sylvia’s free hand pushed back the collar of his shirt, tracing the jugular thread where it beat lust and iron. A red tear splashed onto her upraised breast. It trickled down the cushion of rosette flesh, hunger, and salt.

“Hello, lovers.”

Tall and almost fluid, Olivia stood silhouetted in the portal, motionless. Dominic jumped to his feet and looked around for a reason to be standing. The sight of Olivia yards away affected him as Sylvia, even topless and nearby, had not. Sylvia reclined on the bank, pillowing her head in upstretched arms. Her round breasts stretched into pears, swollen marble teardrops sprung from the black veil of her unbuttoned blouse. Dominic looked from her to Olivia to the river, and back, irresistibly, to Olivia. She came toward him across the flower-spattered grass. Dominic spotted a tree growing beside the stream and, looking for something to do with his hands, reached for one of its fruits casually, but the wind swayed the branch beyond his reach. He tried another time and sat down empty-handed.

“Shouldn’t eat the food of the dead, anyway,” Sylvia mused, still bare-breasted. “Hello, little sister.”

Dominic stood up again.

“Gaehod said I would find you here.” Olivia addressed only Sylvia. “I came to offer my sympathy.” She did not glance at Dominic.

“Whatever for?”

“For the death of your timeless love,” Olivia said.

“Oh that. Have a seat, Ollie. Have you met Dominic?”

“Yes.” Olivia sat coolly beside her sister. “Have you been rending your garments for grief, my sister?”

Dominic felt the blood rise in his face. From the green ground, the two stunning women regarded him unblinking.

“Perhaps we should go for a swim?” Sylvia suggested. She began to peel gauze-fine layers of clothing from her body.

Spellbound, Dominic watched the hypnotic dance of fabric and flesh, then collected himself. “I think I’ll just go for a walk,” he said and struck out blindly away from temptation.

He walked away from the two exquisite, delusional women, deeper into the dark garden, straying aimlessly. Finally he sat down against a gnarled apple tree. He wasn't having much luck recruiting vampires for his study, although they seemed willing enough participants in anything else.

"Guess who?" a sibilant voice whispered. Dominic looked around, but couldn't see anyone. He didn't think Olivia had followed him. Sylvia would be swimming in the black river now, her pale, sinuous body slipping through the soundless water.

"Guess who?"

Dominic checked behind the tree, but found no one. He shrugged. It was a weird place. "Give me a hint," he said to the empty air.

"I'm shaped like a cock, but I move like a cunt, and my throat's open all the way down."

"Olivia?" Dominic stood up again.

"My tongue is forked for her pleasure, whispering 'eat!' Women have had food issues ever since."

"Oh, I get it. You're the serpent in the tree of knowledge, right? Where are you?" Dominic searched the tree's golden branches, but movement at the base caught his keen eye. From a hole at the root of the tree, right where he had been sitting, a forked tongue flickered in the darkness. All Dominic could see of the snake, when the tongue retreated, were twin, unblinking, black eyes, two darker places in the black of the hole.

Time for new meds.

“Are you going to talk me into eating an apple?” Dominic asked the hole.

“Not if I can simply shake the tree and drop one on your head.”

As if something deep under the ground, in the roots of the tree, were pushing it, the serpent’s head squeezed out of the small hole and onto the grass. “Knowledge, inspiration, revelation, it’s all me!” it said.

Its iridescent, blood-red body glinted rainbows and gold in the perpetual twilight brilliance of the underground garden. Its mirrored scales and blunt, rounded head pushed along the ground and against the tree trunk. It wound, making three smooth coils up the trunk, to the height of Dominic’s hips, and lifted its head, like a bobbing arboreal erection from the tree’s trunk. “Riddle me this,” the snake said, “does not even human law make knowing the difference between right and wrong a prerequisite for punishment?”

“Yes.”

“And yet Eve damned all women by doing something she’d been told not to—before she tasted of this tree. She had no knowledge of good and evil until she ate. She disobeyed without the ability to know disobedience was wrong.”

“But *you* knew it was wrong.”

“Yes.”

“So why did you tempt her?”

“I didn’t. I told her the fruit was knowledge, not poison. That’s all I ever said to Eve. ‘It won’t kill you.’ Curiosity killed the cat (and the pussy). Eve was damned for nothing less.” The snake wound higher up the tree, coiling again and again. “And yet my apples are still to blame for most of the suffering in your world.”

“Oh?” Dominic reached into his pocket and extracted a bottle of pills. He knocked one into his broad palm and swallowed. “How do you figure?” he asked the helixed snake. *Might as well enjoy the theater until the medicine kicks in.*

“You will always see the world in paired opposites now: male and female with their fig leaves, right and wrong with their swords. Ask yourself, would the story have ended differently if Eve had not blamed me?” The snake wound a seventh time around the tree. Eye to eye with Dominic, its flat head extended from the trunk in a new and breathing branch, it whispered, “What if Eve had answered, ‘I chose to eat this’?”

Dominic glanced, with a vague sense of dread, at the hole beneath his feet. From its darkness, pushing upward, the snake’s tail protruded and rose. Shimmering and winding upward, it spiraled the tree, crisscrossing the glistening coils already wound there, reflecting itself on itself in infinite recursions. Dominic squeezed his eyes shut and opened them with only dim hope the apparition would be gone.

“You humans walk so eagerly into tyrannies,” the snake mocked. “The thrall of addiction, of oppression, of victimization—‘I was tempted. I couldn’t help myself. It’s genetic.’ Or you hand your power over to other forces, kinder gods, and are controlled by your To-Do List, or your Childhood Trauma or your Chemical Imbalance. New gods for a new age.”

“Listen,” Dominic growled, “if it weren’t for my fucked-up chemistry, we wouldn’t be talking.” The tail wound higher, sliding over and slipping under itself.

“Eve swallowed not the simple split of good and evil, but duality itself,” the snake said. “So she and Adam saw the differences between all split things: man and woman, good and evil, god and human, and went scrabbling for fig leaves to cover them up.” The tail reached the head, and the snake flicked itself with tip and tongue slyly.

Dominic shook his head and looked back through the garden, back toward the relatively less hallucinatory vampires. This snake was enough to make him miss those girls.

“And that’s original sin, my friend,” the snake whispered, “the cleft in your mind that you can’t span. It’s elegant, really. No work from me required, to stretch you on the rack of paradox. And I—self-pleasuring, self-destroying—put my tail in my mouth, and suck, and swallow.”

“Dominic?” Dominic wheeled violently away from the snake whose body seemed still to be winding and reflecting, pushing from below the tree, into and around itself. He wanted to hide.

“Dominic?” called Olivia. “Where are you?”

“I’m here.” Lord, what a state he was in.

In the luminous gloom of the garden, the Reborn’s freckled whiteness stands stark against the browns and greens. He tears an apple savagely from the tree and glares at me like a hunted thing. But I am not hunting him. *Not really*. Gaehod asked me to keep an eye on him, that’s all.

“You didn’t want to come down to the river?” I ask him. “Wash away your sins?”

“I don’t believe in sin.”

“Right. Are you going to eat that?”

He looks at the apple, a red so deep it's almost black, and tosses it lightly into the air. "Why, are you hungry?" He meets my eyes for the first time since I entered the garden.

"Yes," I say, because it's true. He pitches the apple to me, harder than he needs to, but I catch it with ease.

"I've already had one," he says, voice held steady. "But I have seen people chewing different fruit from the same damn branch fly planes into buildings secure in what they ingested here. So thank you, no. I do not want another one of your damn apples."

I drop the apple into the pocket of my coat, black as an oil slick and as long, and walk up to Dominic under the tree.

"What do you want then?" I whisper. He smells like fig leaves and denial.

"I want not to be here anymore. I don't want the weird light and the underground garden and the lunatic landlord. I don't want your sister unbuttoning her shirt—"

"Knowing what you don't want is not the same as knowing what you do," I remind him.

He grimaces, and meets my eyes. His voice, when he speaks again, is stripped raw of its usual veneer of academia and irony. It is naked. "I don't want to keep meeting new vampires. But I need a reasonably sized study group to make good on a promise I don't want to have made for money I don't want to have taken for research I don't want to do."

Rage haunts the junctures of his handsome face. Even the colors of him battle one another. His red lashes bloody his blue eyes. Dark freckles bruise his golden skin deliciously.

“Come on,” I say, “let’s get out of here.”

OVERTAKEN

I could have changed into less conspicuous clothes, or boots with something less than a three-inch heel, but as I throw my sleek leg over the black body of the Harley and gun it, stiletto and latex seem just right, tight and cold. I ride the bike like the pale horse it has replaced, out from Hell's underground garage at full speed. And the Reborn keeps up. He matches me turn for turn, skid for skid. So I fall in beside him, losing my vampire biker bitch in the steady, muzzled percussion of our harmonizing engines. We ride together into the lilacs and the rain.

An hour out of Cashel, Dominic points at something through the trees. I catch a glimpse of walls and windows, of moon-raked sky where roof and glass should be. We pull off the road and push our bikes into the underbrush.

A fence towers along the road, but I track Dominic as he walks away from the bikes, skirting the barricade. He finds a low metal gate and pushes it open. Spectral cows regard us darkly in the ashen April moonlight.

He sets off purposefully toward the ruined church across the gray grass. "Come on," he calls, unperturbed by the spotted cows whose whiteness leaves them grotesquely incomplete where the night swallows the black places in their hide.

"Ireland has a relationship with her past almost as strange as I have with mine," he says, his restless eyes roving the abbey's decaying silhouette.

"What are you talking about?" I snap. Dominic has relaxed on the ride and is comfortable in the field, ambling where I must pick my way, trying to distinguish cow pies from clover.

"The whole island is spotted with derelict cottages and abandoned churches like this one. They sit in pastures as invisible to the Irish as a mother is to a teenage girl." His smile is warm in the

cool night, friendly and frank. He's having fun. But we are approaching the clump of cows. They stand along the low stone wall that bounds the ruined abbey. There is a gate, but Dominic vaults the wall and turns to offer me a hand across it. I can leap ten vertical feet without a running start. It would rattle him right out of the complacent gallantry that holds out his waiting hand to me but, quite frankly, the cows rattle me, so I take his warm hand and step onto the wall.

"Can't they climb a fence this low?" I ask him.

"The cows?" He grins up at me. "It'd be more like a clamber, but yeah."

He circles the church, studying the old stones carved by hands dead for hundreds of years. I listen to him in the dark walking over the damp grass. He comes back to where I'm standing on the wall and looks past me at the cows. "Of course," he tells me in a casual drawl, "a motivated cow could jump that wall."

I leap down and wander away from him into what was once the central courtyard of the church. A row of Gothic arches opens onto the grassy space, lined on one side by a covered walkway tucked under the hulking stone. A crumbling bell tower stands in the far corner like a drunk's party hat. Dominic prowls the ancient, sacred darknesses. I close my eyes and scent for his desire. It's there, strong and warm in the cool Irish night.

"How can you tell a motivated cow from one that isn't?" I call after him.

"A motivated cow is one that's being chased." His low voice comes from above me, and I look up to see him sitting in the threshold of a second-floor doorway.

"Chased?"

"Sure, by a coyote or a rancher. All the rest are resolutely *un*motivated." I can see the structures that once supported a wooden floor in the stone beneath him. Above him, roof scars tell the same

story, of years of rain and roof taxes, of history and possibility. Ruined things, roofless to the dark, these walls can no longer be owned the way other beauties are.

From the bell tower's spiraling staircase, I step onto the flat top of a first-story wall and walk to the ragged edge where the stones are gone and an empty space connects my portion of wall to the rest. I sit down, across the void from Dominic.

"Have you been here before?" I ask him

"No. But the first time I came to Ireland, I drove around a lot. I wasn't sure where the hotel was. I had to feel my way across the country." He's quiet for a while. "But I'm connected to it somehow," he says, almost to himself.

"I've never lived in Ireland," I tell him.

The night is unnaturally still, no wind or birds break the silence, and his deep voice reaches me across the empty sanctuary.

"This and a couple of other countries, I have a fascination for, mostly made of bad fantasy movies, I guess. I imagined a life in Ireland long ago in which"—he chuckles—"God, this is embarrassing, in which I was some sort of pagan warrior. It's very vivid, in places, this imagining, and when I was younger, I could almost be homesick for it. For the time, the language, for the land itself, the way my body feels in Ireland. For a woman I loved. A woman I made up, I guess."

"Tell me the story?" I turn sideways on the wall to stretch out onto my scarred back. The stones, flat to receive the roof timbers, are cold but not uncomfortable and the moonlight floods into my flawless face. I close my eyes.

"She was the priestess. A healer. A woman not my wife."

“But you were in love with her?”

“It was an adolescent fantasy. I was forever falling in love with these made-up women.”

“What about real women?”

“Not in this lifetime.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just an expression.” He laughs, but it’s a bitter sound. “No. I have never been in love. What about you?”

“Hundreds of times.” In the empty space that slopes from beyond my stilettos, I can almost see the stones that are gone. I stare into the edge of rock and nothingness, the boundary between what was and what might be, between the past and the lost.

I want to see my wall from the ground. I leap down, the billow of my coat crackling like flame. The emptiness is more alive to me than the dead stones, and the wall more interesting where it is not, where anything could have been or could now be. I step into the gap. “Come here,” I whisper.

Dominic hits the ground behind me. His pale skin is made for this Irish darkness. Whatever soul in him is reborn from place to place, his body comes, through generations, from this land. He is beautiful in it, and not afraid of me, the ancient evil curse in the black unknown, the vampire.

“Do you want to know what it feels like?” I ask him. “Love?”

“Olivia, I don’t—”

“Walk through that doorway and stand opposite me.”

I wait. He does.

“Now look up,” I tell him. He raises his handsome face to the high moon, exposing the long pale of his dappled throat to the cool night. “Do you see the triple arch of that window?” I ask him, unable to follow his gaze up, riveted to the strong, subtle lines of vein and muscle in his neck.

“Yes. It looks like it held stained glass once.”

“Probably,” I say. “See how the stonework is different from the surrounding wall?”

“Yeah.”

“Look through it at the sky.”

“Okay.”

Okay.

“Pick out a star.”

“Any star?”

“Yes, just pick one, but don’t forget which one it is.”

“Okay.”

“Now look at it. Really look hard,” I tell him. “Imagine that star is your home. It is where you were born: Eden before the apple. The perfect place. There you were held in the loving embrace of childhood, innocent and free, with no difference between what you want and need, and all your needs met. It is Heaven. Imagine it.” I wait. “You can love that star, can’t you?”

“As an ideal? As an abstract concept? Sure.”

“Good.”

He stands straight and fearless in the night, his beautiful body relaxed but powerful even so. It holds something of the warrior’s lithe wariness still, even completely unconcerned for his safety.

I walk around behind him. “I’ve picked a star, too,” I say, “but I want you to tell me about yours first. Describe it for me.” I turn my reluctant eyes from his moon-kissed flesh to Heaven.

“It’s small, and very far away, between two brighter stars.”

“Are you looking through the center pane?” I ask him.

“Yes.”

“I am, too. Go on.”

“It gives the illusion of twinkling, even more brightly than the other stars around it.” His voice is low and warm, layered in secrets like spy’s or a priest’s.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“And it has a light yellow cast to it.”

“Mine, too.”

“It’s not the highest star I can see through the opening of the window.”

“No, but there’s just something about it, right?”

“Yeah. I’m not even sure why I picked it.”

I step closer to him, to his capable shoulders and warming scent in the chill dark.

“The two stars near it are faint, too, and around them there’s almost a ring of blackness. No other stars at all nearby,” he says, standing motionless, looking up. His breath is slow and peaceful. Even the smell of him is growing subtle in the night.

“But it seems to make a triangle with the other two, right?” I slip from behind to beside him, standing close to the animal heat of his living body.

“Yes,” he says. I touch my temple to his. “Can you tell which one I’m seeing?”

“Yes,” I say. “It was the one I picked, too. Isn’t it beautiful?”

I am lying. He smells of stone and wind. Of the ground we stand on, and the bikes we rode here. I inhale deeply, barely touching him, drinking in the warmth of his temple against mine and the slightly cooler back of his masculine hand where it brushes mine until it reaches out. He takes my cold fingers, wrapping them together in his own. The brass key around my wrist slides between our hollowed palms. The light of all the stars shines into our upturned eyes.

“Love is this feeling.” I whisper so low it is almost only in his mind. “Believe we both desire to possess that star for ourselves and to share it with each other. Believe that.”

“Is it true?”

“Beliefs are what you know without choosing to. Just believe.”

He closes his midnight blue eyes and leans imperceptibly against me. “I don’t know if I can do that.” His voice is so low my angelic hearing must tense to catch each word. “Have you ever been to Glendalough?” he asks at last, so softly.

“No.”

“The first time I came to Ireland, I spent a day there. Its bell tower was my favorite thing from that trip.”

Darker stones than the ones before us rise in an almost window-less spire before my eyes. What the fuck? Reborns can't psycast. But I am seeing things not here. I separate my temple from his, but he doesn't notice.

“It's seven stories high, a sacred number, the sum of four—the perfection of the physical world—four cardinal directions, four elements, four corners in a square, plus three—the perfection of the spiritual world as embodied in the Trinity.” He shifts his weight, but his hand stays warm around my fingers. He likes to teach. The smell of him swells my deep gums in aching pockets. “But I think I like this tumbling church better. It's a broken, lost, annihilated cosmos, where cathedral walls fall away into nothingness.”

I move back a little from the smell of him, but the hunger pushes down my throat all the same. “Yeah, I like this nameless church with its poor three-story tower more,” he says. “And I like the missing places here more than what remains upright there.” He shakes his head to clear it and turns a wry grin on me. “How screwed up is that? Wabi-sabi. The beauty of broken things.” He raises his hand—and mine still enveloped in it—and bows his head over my folded wrist. His warm human lips touch my flesh. My body cannot feel the nuances of his kiss, but the beauty of the gesture wrings my soul. I strangle a gasp.

“Thank you,” he says, still holding my small hand in both of his.

Hunger gallops over me.

In the moon's naked light, all the places where his face wears rage are stripped to an ancient, bare pain. His eyes pierce me. “Thank you,” he says again. “I needed to get away.” His beautiful lips curl into a soft smile before he presses them against the knuckle of my thumb. A hard, motionless shiver radiates from that point through the deep bones in me. My nails quill against my crushed fingers, but he's looking right into me, warmth and memory in his night-blue eyes.

“A week ago,” he says, his deep voice rippling into me, “I was eating doughnuts in Cambridge with uninterrupted days in the lab ahead of me as far as I could see. Now I’m back where I swore I’d never be, indentured to a funding source, doing fieldwork, a tenant in a loony bin.” Hunger climbs my chest and claws down to my breasts. “It’s been an intense couple of days. It feels really good to be out of there. Out here. With you.”

He frees my hand and stalks off toward the wall and the cows. They have not moved, but I wish he would come away from them. Back to me. Need grips my belly. I should have fed before. Hunger is clouding my thoughts. I walk away from him across the yard, away from the rising smell of his desire, away from the cows.

I duck into a darkness blacker than the night and mount the spiraling stone steps of the squat bell tower again. I climb beyond where I had sat before, to get above the terrible hunger his desire raises in me. I balance on the decrepit peak. My wingscars ache to stretch and unfurl, to hold the night in their divine embrace and soar.

Falling wouldn’t hurt me, but it would be ugly. His scent carries on the teasing breeze. Only angels fall with grace.

“What time do you guess it is?” he asks. He can’t see me.

“Between late and early.” I walk back down to him.

“Do you need to be back before dawn?”

“No.” I step into the double archway of what must once have been a massive wooden door and he comes to me, away from the cows.

“Olivia?”

I turn away from him and pace the low, paved passageway where the moonlight does not penetrate. My hunger opens from a specific need to a wider well, plumbing me.

“Olivia.” His voice is low, but reaches through all the dark, open places. “Dublin has a lab where I could do the kind of work I need to, to keep my funding, to advance my research. If the hotel closes down, do you think you might be able to talk any of your sisters into coming to Dublin? They wouldn’t have to do anything except let me examine their brains. No promise of a cure, no medicines, just spend a little time in the lab and let me get some baselines?”

“They’re happy at the hotel.”

“Are they? Are they happy there?”

“Their suffering is familiar there,” I tell him. “They know the contours of that place, of their pain.”

“Better the devil you know, eh?”

“He’s like a father to me. The hotel is my home.”

“I thought that star was home.” He touches my elbow. I had not heard him approach. He should not be able to surprise me. “The way you talked about that star, I could feel it.” My angelic hearing has never been surprised before. “Olivia, come to Dublin with me? I won’t ask you to participate in the research. We can get to know each other a little better, discover the city. I could use your help.”

“Why are you so interested in vampires?”

“I’m not. I mean, not specifically. I’m interested in understanding why you, why people like you, feel so apart from the rest of humanity, why we think of ourselves as so radically different, as cursed or damned or worse.”

“What is worse than damnation?”

“I don’t know. To have no God to damn you, maybe.” Something not-quite-fear bleeds into his scent. I breathe it in. Caution under manhood, sex, and suffering. I clamp my jaws against the quilling.

“My sisters would have no reason to go to Dublin,” I tell him through my gripping teeth.

“To help their sister?”

“That’s no reason for them.”

“To help themselves?”

“They won’t believe you can. At least not beyond a good night’s feed.”

“Or fuck,” he snorts. “I’ve never seen such a sexually aggressive psychotype.”

I work the rage in me, to ease the eruption in my bones and gums. “We can’t fuck.”

“What?”

“We can’t fuck. A vampire’s sex is closed—monstrous, grotesque.”

“Olivia.” His tender hands turn my body to him. He searches for my clouded eyes in the darkness. “Olivia, shame around sex is very common. It’s something people work through.”

“I’m not ashamed.” My teeth are fully quilled. The scent of him drenches me. “I’m a virgin.”

“They’re not mutually exclusive, you know.”

“I’m made of stone. Impenetrable.” I’m grappling for anger again, struggling for anything but the pure volcanic hunger diving through all my veins to my aching lips.

“Olivia, were you abused?”

“I was damned.”

“Olivia—”

“You just won’t face reality, will you?” The anger finds me and I push the flood roiling over need. “I am damned. You are cursed. My sisters are angels thrown from Heaven. So while our psychotype may appear sexual, we’re really just aggressive. We hate what we cannot possess, so we find ways to borrow it. We make you want us, and we feed on your hunger. We are the angels of desire. We have none of our own.”

“You have no desire?”

“No.”

“But you get hungry, don’t you?”

“You have no idea.” The feeding edges force through the pliant flesh of my mouth. I’m almost choking on them. “But that’s not desire, it’s craving. It’s inescapable. It becomes irresistible. Everything but the impulse to feed dies in you, and you’re eating before you know you’ve struck. That’s how Sylvia killed her fig last night.”

“Her what?”

“Never mind.”

“Did she actually kill a real person?” Horror now, in the heady mix of smells. Almost disgust. I suck it in to poison myself. “What kind of ridiculous fantasy role-playing does Gachod provide for down there?”

“Sylvie didn’t mean to kill her. I think she loved the girl.”

“God!”

“That’s what she thought.”

Rage and incomprehension dance over his warrior's face, slipping into the familiar hollows. I watch him struggle for mastery. "Olivia, surely you can see that the hotel is not a good place to be. It's unhealthy. You know that, right? That's why you've never been here before now, isn't it? Look, Gachod is thinking seriously of shutting down the place, sending everyone home. If he's killing people, for Christ's sake, it shouldn't be too hard to see why. He's asked me to help convince people. Olivia, would you . . ."

"No." My anger is gone. It has abandoned me fast as love and has left me as exhausted. "I'm tired of trying to pass for human in the surface world," I tell him. "I love the hotel. I've come home to take off the mask."

"You've come home to wear the costume. Look at you"—he chuckles—"touring the Irish countryside in knee-high boots and leather pants."

I slide from his strong fingers effortlessly.

"Olivia, I'm sorry, it was a joke."

I am striding into the grassy courtyard and through the towering door-shaped hole. I could pierce his skull with my nails.

"Olivia, that was cruel of me. I didn't mean it."

The cows regard me silently as I near the low wall.

"Olivia, stop. I'm sorry."

If I continue my purposeful walk in this direction, will it look like chasing to the cows?

I face him. Feeding full-tooth on this desirable, stupid man would approach pleasure, he has me so enraged. Just his shock would be delicious.

“What makes you think you have any influence with the old man?” I demand.

“He asked my opinion.”

“About whether to shut down the hotel?”

“Yeah. It’s not something he’s planning on doing right away. He’s just mulling over the idea.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing, really. That I thought his affection for some of the hotel’s guests kept him from seeing the real nature behind their reasons for being there.”

My laugh is a bark, and the cows shift their weight in the black grass behind me. They’ve stopped eating. I move without a sound away from them.

“Olivia, I am sorry. Look, it’s got to be getting near morning. Let’s head back. They’ll be serving breakfast by the time we get there. I just realized I’m starving. I say stupid things when I’m hungry.”

I pull the apple from my coat pocket. “Here.” I raise it in the waning light. The moon is setting, but the sun does not yet bleach the sky. I could throw it to him, but I simply hold it, offering it to him, if he will come and take from me.

He closes the distance between us, smiling. Innocent, he comes to take Eve's apple. I keen the nails on the hand that holds it. He thinks it is a peace offering, held between us.

I draw my quilled nails down his long fingers as they curl around it.

"Ow!" He palms the apple into his other hand to see the bloodied slash.

My quills are too dull, the opening too wide.

"I must have caught myself on the edge of your nail," he shrugs and sucks the cut.

My veins seethe in constricting agony. His scent hangs fresh and thick in the air between us, and my harvest runs, live and sticky, down two fingers of my frozen hand. I writhe with aching for it. And because I am angry and done hiding, done with being desirable before all else, I mimic him. I put my stained fingers in my scarlet mouth and suck.

"You did that on purpose." He stuffs the cut finger into the back pocket of his jeans.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to." His powerful taste lingers behind my lips. *Not enough.* I want to close my eyes and savor. "I didn't mean for you to feel it," I tell him. "My quills are dull. I need my sisters to keen them, but I hate asking."

“You don’t seem to mind just taking.” He shoots me a rueful grin and bites into the apple.

“If I had asked you, would you have given me permission? If I had told you, out here in the quiet night, if I had whispered to you that I need your blood to feed me, would you have given it?”

He says nothing. I reach behind his muscular back and take his hand at the wrist. It slides from his pocket and I bring it, American lint and masculinity, to my lips. “Am I the succubus?” I whisper. “Gorgeous insatiable lust, tempting in the night?” I push the red snake of my tongue between my lips and draw it up the shaft of his straight finger. “Do I come to you from underneath, full of desire for you?” I balance the tip of his finger on the curl of my pointed tongue. “No, I am the opposite. The desire that fills me is from you, not for you. It’s your want that satisfies me. But if you want, you can be denied.” I touch my teeth to his rounded fingertip and close my lips around it. “To desire is to give your power away.”

“So you protect yourself from rejection by denying that there’s anything you want?” He’s following my words and not my lips. I hold his wide finger in the soft, pursed cushion of my perfect mouth and suck. It stops his breath. The blood, no longer flowing, is salt and earth on my parched tongue. I long to open the cut again.

Letting his flesh blur my words, I answer him. “I am what is desired, not who desires.”

His passionate eyes, dancing between my lips and my eyes, are keenly alert to the deliberate eroticism of the gesture, but also on the challenging trail of diagnosis. He sees patterns, not people. I suck more firmly, drawing the length of his hard finger into the empty womb of my mouth, the welcoming wet of my tongue against his hungry flesh.

The apple falls from his free hand. “If I want you, does that give you power over me?” His voice is thick and I wind my seducing tongue around his finger, sucking. He wants me. I can taste it.

“You believe that my attraction to you gives you power over me?” he repeats, his thoughts struggling to stay above his rising lust. He puts a finger beneath my chin and tips my face up to his. His captive finger, sliding from my crimson lips, glistens between us, only its tip still my mouth’s prisoner. “Is the vampire fetish really a power one?” His blue eyes search my face. “Do vampires drink blood as a symbol for taking vitality, of taking my power into you?”

“We drink blood to live.” I tell him. His strong hands cup my face, but I flog my anger to keep his hungry scent from overflowing. “I drink living blood because I have none of my own. Because I’m tangled in a nasty web of interconnectedness that binds me to strangers for what I eat and my family for how I do.”

He holds my face, concern and tenderness in his mortal eyes. “I think everyone feels that way, the dependence on others, and the connection to other living things.”

For all his cleverness and his clinical detachment, the smell of his irrational desire grows steadily with his hands slipping into my hair, his yearning eyes holding mine—another blind mortal who has confused physical form with moral content. “Hell, even quantum physics will tell you that the observer and the observed can’t be totally unaffected by each other,” he murmurs. Desire drains the choice from him. Our lips are almost touching. “Even space and time are connected, right?” I push a piece of hair away from his drowning eyes. “There’s even a nomenclature—‘quantum nonlocality’—which seems to show us that, on some deep level of reality, even the speed of light doesn’t limit connections between wildly separate events.” His lips touch mine, and a hard blood-hunger stabs my fingers and teeth and heart. In seconds, I will strike.

Choice is all you ever own. He whispers my name against my inviting mouth. I step back from him. Choice, and the knowledge that hangs from its bough.

“I’m okay with the connections,” I tell him. “Everything that touches me belongs to me.”

“So it is about power, isn’t it?” He keeps his hands on my arms.

I could kill him here. I could drink and bathe myself in his intense desire. It would be days before anyone knew. He touches his forehead to mine, bending to look into my eyes. “Did you have a very authoritarian father?”

I laugh. “He only wanted me to love him,” I say, but I can’t hold his questioning eyes. I turn away from him and pick up the apple he dropped. “Love him with all my heart, all my soul, all my mind, and all my strength,” I say, looking away from him to the abbey.

“That sounds really difficult,” he says to my shiny black back.

“That was just his first commandment,” I say. “It was the second one that was really a bitch.”

“Olivia,” he reaches for my hand, but finds the apple. He takes it and throws it hard away from us. I turn to watch it fly. It tumbles up into the night and lands precisely between the eyes of a cow. I gasp, but the cow does not move.

“What will it do?” I whisper.

“It’s thinking,” he whispers back, an infuriating smile staining his warm voice. “It’s thinking ‘Ow! What happened?’ ” I stifle a giggle at his witless cow voice. The creature bends its head and snuffs in the grass. “Now it’s thinking ‘Can I eat that?’ ” The beast raises its ghostly head, chewing.

“What’s it thinking now?”

“Nothing. It’s eating.”

“Does it know what hit it?”

“It’s forgotten.”

“Do cows believe apples just fall out of the sky in the middle of a field?”

“They’re not very smart.”

“Let’s go back,” I say, stepping over the wall and walking past the stupid cows toward our bikes. Dominic follows me because I am beautiful. And the cows, because they are true believers, stand still.

Dominic sank into a plush wingback and gazed through the glass dome soaring stories overhead into the dull dawn sky. The metallic hail of ball bearings absorbing his weight on the chair would summon one of the wheeling brass carts to his side in minutes. Deserted at this ungodly hour, Hell’s lobby was almost indistinguishable from any luxury hotel’s. Clusters of overstuffed chairs and artfully placed trees in massive pots defined discreet seating alcoves. Were it not for the complex pattern of energy-harvesting canals in the floor and the flame-licked walls, he could be back in California waiting for Madalene Wright to summon him for a status report. And he would be able to give her good news.

Dominic leaned back into the welcoming comfort of the chair and allowed a secret smile to radiate across his face. It reached into the tight hinges of his jaw and spread an unfamiliar warmth across the muscles of his neck and back. Olivia’s perfect face drifted before his closed eyes, and he lingered over his memory of it, her oceanic eyes, gray and stormy, her slender shoulders of milky satin over sculptured strength. He was falling in love with her. He opened his eyes and stared straight through the distant dome into the Irish dawn. He was in love with her.

A brass tray, spinning on its single wheel, pulled up beside his chair. Dominic unclipped the notepad and pen from its polished surface and hesitated. He could write for a menu and one would be sent, or he could conjure from his own imagination anything he wanted for breakfast. He thought a minute and wrote “oatmeal, coffee, eggs, yogurt,” and closed his eyes again to find the tidal tug of Olivia’s face circulating through him.

He caressed the memory of her icy fingers gripped in his, recalled the lunar paleness of her high cheekbones when her flawless face turned up to him. Permitting himself, sleepy, to swim in memory of the most desirable woman he had ever seen, he was still not slipping into seizure. No slippery events slithered into his recollections of Olivia that had not occurred on the black abbey grounds. Her alluring smile, holding out the apple, the erotic shudder of her velvet lips around his finger. These were his most perilous waters, the thoughts most likely to trigger the unwelcome faces of wives whose names drove yawning gulfs of longing and grief into him. But he was happy. Bordering on euphoric.

Dominic touched his fingers to the carotid pulse below his jaw. It beat steadily, his breathing regular. No indication of abnormal mania. His mind was clear. But he was in love. Love lit up the caudate nucleus, primed dopamine receptors, and triggered seizures. But there he sat, with just the elevated energy, focused attention, and increased reward-winning motivation of a man catapulted into Heaven by a woman's eyes. His latest pills were working!

Dominic resisted the urge to leap onto the ebony table behind his chair, throw his head back, and howl in triumph. He hadn't had a seizure since the snake in the buried garden. And he wasn't convinced that insidious creature had been a proper seizure. There had been no taste aura, no sense of *déjà vu*, or memory. It had been more hallucinatory than engramic. Full-blown immersive hallucinations would destroy the promise of the AEDvIII.0s, and Dominic intended to be vigilant against any similar experience, but he suspected the serpent had more to do with where he was than what he was taking. No, there was good reason for optimism.

If he was right—and he needed to be more certain first—if the AEDvIII.0s were really as effective as he suspected, convincing Gaehod to close this madhouse would be a much simpler effort. With the hotel closed and Olivia in agreement with him, he would certainly be able to convince her vampire sisters to participate in a drug trial. Madalene would be beyond pleased. Dysart would have to forgive him for keeping his experimentations secret. He would get tenure, and marry Olivia.

The excitement coursing through him made it impossible for Dominic to stay in his comfortable chair. He got up and paced the lobby, marveling at the cobweb of energy-capture channels in the floor. L'Otel Matillide was certainly a miracle of engineering. Dominic stopped before a strange, empty hearth made of three massive stones and cocked his head at the cantilevered hallway above him, tracing the graceful metal struts with his eye. He had to make sure he got at least an afternoon of photography in before Gaehod closed the place down. There was so much to

document. Or perhaps the old man would convert the place to a real hotel. The naked gas flame walls would never pass code. Not even in Ireland. But the rest . . . Dominic rested a hand on the cozy green wingback by the fireplace and smiled.

The four brass columns formed when Olivia's spiraling elevator walls folded in on themselves caught Dominic's eye, and he wandered over to investigate their construction. Still marveling at Hell's vast beauty, he tripped over a pile of filthy rags and hair dumped against one of the bright pillars.

"When you're quite done gazing about you in delight and surprise like fucking Harry Potter, you might help me up. Or maybe you'd like to kick me again?"

"Sorry, Alyx. Didn't see you."

"No, how could you, being all starry-eyed and shit."

"Sorry," Dominic said again, and wiped the idiot grin off his face. "I just ordered some breakfast. Want to join me? You should eat something."

Alyx raised a scarred arm. Dominic grasped the tumble of bathrobe and bones by the wrist and pulled. To his surprise, Alyx peeled up from the ground and landed across his chest with a muffled grunt. Dominic hadn't meant to pick the man up, but he weighed less than a child. He returned to his vacated chair, deposited the rock star, and sat down across from him.

"So what's got your handsome head in the clouds, oh you great god of reason and science?" Alyx asked.

Dominic stretched his legs out before him, leaning into the chair's soft embrace. "I was just wondering what this place would be like if Gaehod opened it to the public."

“It’d die.”

“Do you think so?”

“It’s what happens to anything when it stops being used and starts being saved.”

“I bet UNESCO would designate it a world heritage site.”

“Have to be dead before you can be preserved.” Alyx tugged his bathrobe closed, clinching the shoelace harder around his skinny waist. “What are you trying to shut down Hell for anyway?”

“How do you know about that?”

“You just don’t fucking listen, do you? I already told you. That bastard up there, in all his chaos and mechanical bits, and books, and tea, is just fucking sitting on the goddamn inlet to the memepool we’re all drowning in. He’s the Typhoid Mary of ideas, the ultimate replicator. If he thinks it, we all know it. Without knowing how we know it. It just gets into the water.”

“Alyx, that’s really not possible.”

“I know you’re the poster child for the Hell-closure faction.”

“You make it sound like a war. Gaehod’s just thinking over his options.”

“Bullshit. It *is* a war. And you’re the enemy general.”

“I’m not. I’ve just been putting together a proposal.”

“It’ll be the Israelites and the fucking Philistines, down to a battle of chosen champions, one per side, to the death.”

“It’ll be a PowerPoint presentation.”

“Trial by combat.”

“Me versus Gaehod?”

“Can you really be that stupid?” Laughing shook Alyx until the danger he would tumble out of his chair forced him silent. “Guess I’ve got no worries about being turned out of my home if you don’t even know who you’re fighting.” Still gulping back giggles, Alyx struggled nearly upright in his chair. “Hey,” he asked Dominic, “you still looking for victims?”

“Research participants?”

“Whatever.”

“I am, but honestly, Alyx, I think you need sleep and food more than medicine. That and to stop medicating yourself.”

“I wasn’t talking about me, you dick. I know you can’t help me. I’m looking for the Reset button.”

“Alyx—”

“Cause David’s sister’s walking this way.”

“What?”

“You are the dumbest motherfucker I ever met. And I’ve known plenty of people up to their assholes in denial. But you, my friend, have got your eyes about sewn closed.”

From behind Dominic, a stunningly tall, muscular woman in vampire-black fetish wear swept past.

“Hello, Vivian,” Alyx managed to squeak out before the woman leapt onto the arms of his velvet chair. Silver buckles glinted down her rippling back. She had undergone extensive back surgery, Dominic noted, but seemed agile enough now. She lowered herself in a predatory crouch over Alyx’s wasted body and grasped his head, one gloved hand in his long, thin hair, one gripping his jaw. She lifted the man by his face to her mouth and kissed him.

Dominic looked away from the rock star’s opening bathrobe, returning to his studious examination of the miraculous architecture of Hell’s front parlor. He had actually distracted himself when he heard Vivian spring down from her perch over Alyx. He was paler, but smiling.

“Dominic, this is Vivian, one of Olivia’s sisters.”

Dominic stood to shake hands with the striking blonde.

“Eyes, Alyx!” Vivian barked.

Dominic glanced at the collapsed rock star, who made no attempt to conceal his lecherous study of Vivian’s high breasts. Dominic valiantly kept his eyes from the black-and-red-iron-cross latex pasties barely covering the prominent tips of the exposed flesh escaping her tightly cinched corset. “Pleased to meet you,” he said, hand out.

Vivian shook her spiked white hair and laughed. She grasped his hand with surprising strength and yanked his wrist so forcefully Dominic nearly fell into her. She sniffed at his wrists and released his hand.

“Have you seen her?” she hissed. “We’re supposed to meet Gaehod for tea.”

“Olivia? Not in the last half-hour. You might look in the kitchen. She said she was hungry.”

Vivian’s glance toward Dominic dripped disdain.

“Hey, Vee—” Alyx called, but she turned on her steel stiletto and stalked out of the lobby. “I think she kinda likes me,” Alyx murmured.

Dominic sat back down. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. She does that sometimes. Just walks up and kisses me.”

“Does she ever talk to you?”

“No. But it’s me. What’s to say?”

Like a riderless unicycle, another service tray wheeled up beside Dominic’s chair bearing a pure white porcelain teapot with matching sugar dish and creamer. Dominic fixed himself a heavily sweetened cup and dismissed the tray with a gentle push.

“I’d imagine you’ve got some pretty good stories,” he said, taking a long sip.

“What? From the rock star days?” Alyx snorted and rolled over in his chair. “Tales of drugs and debauchery? Cautionary stories about sex and drugs? About pride before destruction?”

“What kind of music did you play?”

“Straight-on, hard-driving rock and roll. None of that nasal whiner shit the pussies in their jackets and Vans make now. I was a fuckup from the get-go.”

“But you were good at it.”

“Good at being a fuckup? It’s all I know, bro.”

“No. I meant at singing.”

“Hell yeah. But it broke me. You’ve got no idea, man, what it’s like to stand up there every night and let it hit you. All the kids out there, all their ugly faces, all of them screaming every goddamn word you wrote. It comes at you like a train, and you send it back to them. They put their hands up. Like they’re gonna throw their souls at you. And you gotta catch it or it’s all

these souls just raining down around you. You gotta catch every one and channel it back. Your body just rattles with it for hours after, all that attention driven through you. All that energy . . . All that . . .”

“Love?” Dominic asked.

Alyx shrugged. “That’s what they think anyway. They yell it at you, ‘I love you, Alyx.’ Even the dudes. But they say ‘man,’ instead of my name. And I’ll tell you something else. Those fuckers will eat you alive. I mean really. They want to own you. You need body-guards and shit to keep them away.” Alyx shook his head. “Nah. That’s not love.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. They want you to see them. Every goddamned one of them. And you can’t.”

“But you touch them.”

“Just the ones with the really great tits.” Alyx chortled into his robe.

“No,” Dominic said. “I mean your music, your voice—it must have touched them, or they wouldn’t feel that way about you. I mean, even if it isn’t love, it’s something. You’ve made them feel something.”

“Yeah? My songs weren’t great art, you know. Mostly about girls and being angry.”

“But they worked.”

“This some lame-ass shrink trick to make me feel better about my sorry-ass life?”

“Did it work?”

“Fuck. It’s just a line: ‘You touched people, man.’ Doesn’t make me any less a fuckup.”

“How things look depends on where you sit sometimes.”

“So I should just sit in a happy chair and see my life as being this great, meaningful thing? Like I mattered?”

“Why not?”

“ ’Cause it’s bullshit.”

“So you’d rather have a fifth of Jack?”

“Fuck, yeah.”

“Because that’s more real?”

“Fuck you. I know you’re fucked up, same as me.”

“No, I’m fucked up different.”

“Whatever. You’ve just got better drugs.”

Dominic leapt to his feet. Adrenaline stung his palms and feet.

“Shit, dude,” Alyx said. “What’s got you by the throat?”

“My bag.” Dominic’s mind raced backwards through time. *Not at the abbey. Not at the tree. The river.* “Fucking Lethe,” he whispered.

“What?”

“My laptop,” he explained. “I’ve been making my damn diary entries in the journal Gaehod gave me, but all my work, my lab notes. My latest batch of—” He turned back to Alyx, bruised and ghostly in the armchair. “For Christ’s sake, when my breakfast gets here, eat it, okay? I have to go.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“Okay,” Dominic said, and set off at a dead run. It was a pace he knew Alyx couldn’t match at all, but he was still surprised, turning over his shoulder, to realize the rock star hadn’t budged. Dominic ran, uncertain he remembered the way back to the garden, desperate to get there. He had traveled all over the world, into dangerous places and exalted ones, and never once forgotten that bag. And it had never mattered more. That bag held the last few AEDvIII.0 capsules and their chemical formula. Its loss would be apocalyptic.

The hotel sounds like the house of war—silent as divorce and dissolution—thundering soundlessly with what’s left unsaid. I stand in the old man’s doorway.

“Did you tell the new Reborn that you might close Hell?” I demand.

“Yes.” Gaehod beams down at me from his unsteady perch, seated atop a teetering stepladder in a butler’s long starched apron.

“Is that true?”

“That I might disband the hotel? Yes.” Gaehod plucks another book from the towering shelves that line his chaotic study and adds the tome to the precarious stack balanced on his up-drawn knees.

“You can’t!” I struggle not to scream.

“I was thinking I might open it to the public.”

“That’s the same thing as closing it,” I cry. “That will ruin it!”

“Archeologists could excavate it, bring the past into the light.”

“We will all die! We can only survive underground. Gaehod, I need this place!”

He beams warmth down on me. “Have you found something here that pleases you, my dear? I am so glad! I would love for you to tell me about it, but first, come help me a moment won’t you?”

“No! I haven’t found anything here that pleases me.” My voice makes a detestable shrill. “I’ve only found things that irritate or depress me.” I stride across the litter of the old man’s office—mounds of books, towers of letters. “I came here to escape. I came to learn from my sisters how to be the proper kind of damned—cool, cynical, aloof—but I find even they are not free from tyrannical hope. Each of them is trapped in helpless quests for something. They believe. They *still* believe. And as long as belief clings to desire, there is no escape from hope.”

Gaehod nods cautiously to avoid toppling his precious books. “Hope cannot be sheared as swift as wings.”

I grasp the rails of his delicate ladder, forcing him to steady books with one hand, and his diminutive body against the bookcase with the other. “I haven’t found what I’m looking for, damn it, because what I want is an end to searching.” I shake the steps beneath him.

“Get a grip on yourself, my dear!”

“Why? I have a grip on you.”

“Impossible.”

I give the ladder a vicious rattle.

“Self-possession is freedom.” Gaehod smiles, clasping toppling books against his narrow chest.

“Everyone has something to clutch,” I rage. “Vivian claims the pleasure of her victims. Ophelia wants to be possessed. Sylvia is possessed—or was until she killed the girl. Blood communion for Sylvia, blood sacrifice for Vivian, blood brothers for Ophelia. You and your damnable books. I want out of this hell of blood and possession! ”

“I think Dominic feels much the same way. Which is why he is encouraging me to close the place down.”

“I’ll kill him,” I say. And I mean it. I would enjoy that.

“Why?”

“I don’t want to hide who I am.” I climb the ladder toward him. “I don’t want the reciprocal pretend love of my sisters who only listen so they can talk, who only kiss so they’ll be kissed. I don’t want to only use and be used.” I am standing one rung below him. The ornate, carved ladder shudders and pitches under our combined weight.

“And you are ready to kill, which you have never done, not in the name of something you desire, but only for what you do not want?” Gaehod is calm on his reeling ladder.

I claim the last rung between us and face him squarely. “It is only over what is unwanted that battles are ever waged.” My height more than makes up for the difference in our positions on the sea-sick ladder. He presses the top third of his toppling tower of books into my unready hands. “Do you want to serve your sisters?” he asks.

“What’s the difference between serving them and being used by them?” I am balancing, hands full of books.

“The same as between holding a belief and having an idea.”

I climb down the ladder backwards.

“These are all cookbooks.” I say.

“I, for example, have the idea that L’Otel is no longer necessary.”

“What the hell are you doing with cookbooks, Gaehod?”

“Here, love, take the next stack from me,” he says as soon as I touch down. I climb the ladder and retrieve another portion of the books that threaten, at every movement, to unbalance the old man and send him, his heavy books, and his light ladder clattering to the ground.

“The surface world has grown very tolerant, from what I understand.” Gaehod piles the slim *Twenty-Four Rose Petal Cakes for Weddings* and the massive *Traditional Cross-Quarter Feasts* onto my precarious stack.

I deposit them with the others and sink into the worn pink chair by Gaehod’s smoky fireplace. “Not tolerant, really,” I tell him. “It accepts a broader range of beautiful, but it still loathes ugly.”

“And love?” Gaehod lifts another book from the towering shelves. A low pneumatic moan registers the energy released.

“Adultery is still rampant, but now they tell each other.” I tuck my legs up into the chair’s thin embrace, willing to spill some of my collected vitriol on humanity in general since I can’t pour it over one man in particular. “Having mistaken the ideal of fidelity for an achievable goal and being therefore bitterly disappointed, today’s modern couple settles for cold reality. They show themselves to one another, naked in fluorescent light, every vein and pimple exploited. It’s ugly. I miss the eras when every woman strove for beauty and thought herself the only secret sinner in a room. Shame is sexier than truth. Exhibitionism is not honesty.”

“And evil?”

“Nope. They’re still perfectly okay with evil as long as it looks good.”

Gaehod grunts and climbs down at last. “All frosting and no cake. Would you like some?”

“What?”

“Anything, a little snack? You look famished.”

“I have not fed.”

“No?” He regards me shrewdly. It embarrasses me, for him to see me needy. “Do you want Dominic?”

“What, for a snack?” My laugh rings too harsh.

“We were talking about what you did not want. I would like to understand what you do.” Ever the innkeeper, the old man drops another square of peat onto the fire and pushes the kettle into the flames.

“He wants me,” I say.

“Naturally.”

“He can’t see me. Desire blinds men.”

“Really? I think it rather sharpens my eyes.” He regards me again, steadily. “I think I see you very clearly,” he says, sitting cautiously into the armchair on the fire’s other side.

“But you don’t want me.” Weariness almost swallows my voice. I must feed, and soon.

“I want your happiness, your enjoyment of my hotel, your pleasure in my company.”

“Yes, you love without desire for possession,” I say, “but what does that kind of love cost you, Gaehod?”

“It’s true.” He chuckles and rolls down his sleeves from the garters which have held them above his delicate elbows. “It’s very painful. Sometimes I want to check out of my own hotel.” He looks terribly old to me, pulled into his tattered chair. “Who knows”—he buttons his cuffs—“perhaps young Dominic is right. Disbanding the hotel would certainly be easier.”

“But it’s not what you want.”

“Do you know what I want?”

“I’ve heard the stories of how you made this place, created our entire network, carved this hole. You made it all out of your desire.”

“It was more than my desire.” The kettle starts to rumble and Gaehod turns his penetrating eyes away from me to tend it. “I know tea can’t feed you, but would you like a cup?”

I nod.

“I remember when I could go months without the taste of it,” I tell him. “I could sacrifice, suffer, and be willing to dissolve into nothing but my own need, believing that love would save me. For eternity, I have believed that each new time would be the time I would find my way back up.”

Gaehod nods and pulls himself to standing. “And did you ever reach the heavens?” He stretches on tiptoe for a pale blue canister high on a sagging shelf.

“Sometimes, for a moment, but I always fell back down.” I reach the tea tin for him.

“Perhaps that’s all we get—the glimpses.”

“I’d rather knife out my eyes and keep them with my wings,” I tell him. But the ferocity exhausts me. I sink back into the frowsy pink chair, dizzy.

Gaehod pries the lid from the tea with a butter knife and inserts his long, pointed nose into the jar. He closes his eyes over the scent, and his voice, when it comes again, is twisted to nasal by the muffling metal. “That might be easier.”

“Easy is what I’m after,” I say. “I want numb. I want my sisters to sharpen my edges. I want to feed. I want desire without choice.”

“That’s not desire, that’s craving.”

“Then I shall be the angel of craving. I never had any desires of my own anyway.”

“My dear.” Gaehod spoons a measure of coiled dry leaves into a red clay pot. “You have no lack of desire.” In goes another spoonful. “You’re filled to the brim with it.” And another. “They spill

out over your lashes and your gums.” Another and another spoonful of tea drop into the pot. “What you lack”—he clamps the lid—“is experience with choice.”

“Gaehod, I’m damned. Choice has been taken from me.”

“Quite the contrary, I think.” He hands me the pot and sits back down. “But we’ll have to see, I guess. Dominic is a persuasive young man. Very confident. And I am an old man, full of doubt.”

“But you know so much.” I wave my pale hand at the whole chaotic wealth of Gaehod’s library and writings, of the papers stacked on the floor and the books piled on the shelves, of the years collecting and studying.

“Knowledge is only the beginning, my dear. Every fool knows things.”

“A fool knows things by mistake, without choosing what he knows.”

Gaehod moves the whistling kettle from the fire, but makes no move to pour its water into the pot I’m holding. “Dominic says that he can bring proof to knowledge. I am not so sure I can offer the same for what I think I know. Perhaps the new magic is stronger.”

“The new magic isn’t magic,” I tell him. “It leaves magic out. And that is why the old ways win. Don’t do this to me, Gaehod. If you destroy the hotel, you’ll take away the only place I have to bury my hope. I don’t want to be strapped to a corpse for all eternity. Gaehod, all I’m asking for is a grave.”

“Anything can be a grave.”

He says nothing else, watching the escaping steam rise from the open throat of the cooling kettle. I search the wayward tendrils for inspiration—for persuasion—I have to make him change his mind. I turn the knife around.

“We still need you,” I say. “And it’s not just us, not just the ancient stained. This new millennia is damned in new ways. They need you even more than we did. We, at least, understood our damnation. They think it’s all bad chemistry or worse luck.”

“Dominic says the contemporary damned have everything they need in the surface world.”

“Except redemption.”

“They don’t seem to be looking for that.”

“They wouldn’t know where! Nobody reads the old texts, nobody knows their own lineage. You should be reaching out to them, not shuttering our gates! They need us.”

“Stories, not science?”

“Yes!”

“Myth, not medicine?”

“Look,” I say, “we throw magic in the face of logic, and magic wins. Irrational desire still thrives in reasonable minds. Desire for money has scientists swearing cigarettes don’t cause cancer. Desire for God makes teachers spout Intelligent Design. Desire trumps reason every time. The mind has no chance without the body. I can prove it.”

Gaehod still says nothing, but turns his deep eyes from the fire to me.

“Test me!” I beg.

“Yes,” he says at last. “I can put this burden on you, since you have asked.”

I start to thank him, to revel in victory, but his delicate face bears no trace of fondness for the first time in the hundreds of years I have known him. It terrifies me.

“The test must be for you both,” he says. “He wants to study you. You want to devour him.”

“I win,” I say lightly. “We eat before we understand.”

“Dominic will ask you to go to Dublin for neurological testing,” Gaehod says at last. “If you go, if you even enter the hospital there, modernity wins and I will open the hotel to the public, and publish all our pasts.”

I clamp my lips so hard against a grin that I taste ichor. *Don't go to Dublin. Refuse to be examined.* There has never been an easier trial.

“However,” the grim old man continues, “if you’re right, if Dominic surrenders to desire, we will not only continue underground, but will also begin a new program of outreach for the twenty-first century’s undiscovered damned.”

“I broke his skin this morning. He has already fallen.”

“No.” Gaehod’s crystal eyes are cold and distant. “You may freely eat of every willing guest in my hotel, but of Dominic’s blood you shall not taste, for in the day that you drink from him, one of you will surely die.”

I am angry. “If he did not want or fear me, I could not pierce his flesh. How else do you expect me to prove his desire?”

“He must kiss you in the garden.”

“You want me to kiss him, but not feed, hungry as you know I am?” Dominic is right. The old man is nuts.

“Sometimes to deny a craving—just because it is craving—is enough for strength.”

“I’m not Sylvia,” I shout. “I never get lost in the flood. I hate that they want me!” I am on my feet, towering over him.

“Then bring me his kiss. It will mark him for me.”

“Kiss him, but don’t dare ask for what I need. Sounds like every marriage I have ever seen.”

“Be kissed.” Gaehod stands slowly and takes the teapot from my clawed hands. “He’s in the garden now.”

“I will starve into shadow before I see your beautiful hotel opened to the undamned.” I spin on my still-muddy heel and stalk across the wreckage to the door. “It doesn’t matter what Dominic

knows. Without desire, knowledge has no meaning. All meaning comes from down here. Without it, there are only facts and death. More than wanted, I will be believed,” I shout at the old man, my hand on the door.

“Belief is a choice.” He pours steaming water into the red teapot.

“He will choose me,” I whisper. And I leave him there.

I know it will hurt to feel Dominic’s lips again and not taste him. I remember them in the moonlight last night, and how they tempted me, but I have not kissed him since the first night when we left Pandemonium to walk the spiral hall. I have always hesitated to hurt him. *Curious.*

I will find him in the garden. He will kiss me. I will not taste him. My sisters will know I have saved the hotel and keen my secret teeth for me. I will go to the Quarry and hunt and feed full-tooth. Then, I think, I may find Dominic again. He will be disappointed that Hell will not close. Perhaps I will comfort him. But now, I must catch up with him before he leaves the garden, or my home and my family, my hunger, and my last hope for hopelessness—for acceptance—will be swallowed by my own demand that Gahod test me.

OVERTHROWN

Dominic found the bag where he had left it when he had fled the vampire sisters and their pale and perfect flesh in the bright darkness. The garden was quiet, its brilliant gloom forcing all colors into lurid against the muddy light. The black river flowed through the silence, and the fruit trees leaked their scent against it. Relieved but exhausted, Dominic dropped to the ground and unzipped his bag.

Everything was in place. He took a brown plastic bottle from a small locked case and swallowed a capsule. The AEDvIII.0's effects appeared to last about forty-eight hours, an excellent burn rate. He had taken one before his trip to Pandemonium two nights ago. Except for that fucking snake, this formulation seemed effective in keeping the delusions at bay. He intended to go back to that tree and explore. He wanted to rule out animatronics. But no memories of distant times or women had haunted him even when, foolishly, he had taken Olivia's cool hand in his, touched his face to her smooth temple, kissed her supple wrist.

Dominic slipped his laptop from its battered bag and settled himself against the same tree Sylvia had reclined beneath, her flawless breasts exposed to tempt him. Funny how they had not, but he knew he would not be so strong against Olivia if she pulled her buttons down. If she had turned toward him in the moonlight last night, in the ruined stones and caressing breeze, he would have kissed her. Her mouth, ripe and inviting, had opened for his finger, sucking, drawing a longing from him that tugged again between his legs, remembering.

Dominic steadied his back against the tree and fired up his machine. He would take a few quick notes on the efficacy of the AEDvIII.0s and then go upstairs to bed. He was too old to stay up all night and not feel it the next day. He blinked his eyes against a jungle vigil in complete silence, alert all night, his arthritic hand, curled unmoving around the shaft of an ancient spear. The pills should kick in soon. His computer chirped and, looking down, he chuckled in the stillness. Hell was online. He had mail.

To: D_O@mindlab.edu

From: MadaleneWright@MadaleneWright.org

Subject: Status

Dear Dominic—

I understand from Dr. Dysart that you arrived safely in Ireland. I am glad. Likewise, I am pleased to understand from him that I was not mistaken in my estimation of your tact. His statements to the media have focused on the general relationship of memory and delusion without reference to specific behaviors or symptoms. I am grateful.

Dysart tells me that he is in the procurement stage, outfitting a state-of-the-art lab, and collecting what he needs to conduct experiments. I assume that you are actively engaged in much the same

sort of work—collecting in order to experiment. I look forward to hearing, in the next week, how many and of what. Let me know if you need any additional support.

Warmly—

Madalene

Email seemed so far away, farther than an ocean and five time zones. Dysart and the Ps, the lab, the science, things he could measure on a screen, track on a graph, the weight of his clandestine alliance with Madalene, the damage she could still do. And the email was date-stamped April twentieth. He had forgotten how time elongated underground. He'd barely settled in. Barely unpacked. "*Dear Ms. Wright,*" Dominic typed, "*I am in Hell on your behalf. Nagging is redundant.*"

He deleted the email. How could he communicate anything across this gulf in time and power, reality and distance?

"Dear Ms. Wright, You sent me to Hell, same to you."

He was almost tired enough to send that. He erased it instead. He was too politic in this lifetime. Where was the hunter?

Soundlessly waiting in the Bengali forest.

Dominic pressed the corners of his lids against the hard bone of his nose until chessboard vortices spiraled in front of him. He stared at the empty email reply window. He was exhausted. The flight, the drive, the hotel, the nightclub, the bike ride, the abbey, this unfamiliar ancient home, the garden, all conspired against him. He hoped Alyx would eat his oatmeal.

"Dear Ms. Wright," he typed sleepily. *"We can stop our search. I have formulated the answer by mistake."* Olivia's boundless eyes swam against his burning lids. He groped for the feeling of her lips around his finger, the erotic pull of sliding into her mouth's black welcome, the challenge of her eyes. She made him work, made him think. She was what he needed, if not what he had sought. *"Everything is here . . ."* he typed, eyes closed, *" . . . very dangerous."* The grass was soft and the air hung warm and utterly still. There was no sound in the garden, no birds, and even the leaves and river were silent. His fingers slipped from the keys. He was drifting, seeking Olivia's face again. The laptop fell sideways from his legs. He pushed an eye open to see the email was gone. He hadn't meant to send that. He would need to send a follow-up to Madalene, but later. He was sliding, almost sleeping.

"Kiss me."

Olivia stood, towering over him, one black, boot-clad foot on either side of his body. Dominic followed the lean curve up her thighs to the red corseted dip at her waist, and back over the swell of breasts to her face, looking down. She lowered herself over him and tucked her feet beneath her, legs spread across his hips, her hands on the tree trunk behind him. "Kiss me," she said again.

"Why?"

"Because I know you want to."

Her lips curled in a tempting half smile, mocking and tender, inches from his mouth. Without willing it, his hands caught at her hips, his thumbs resting in the soft places just within the bone, his fingers splayed over the giving rounded flesh. He gripped her. Beneath her straddling legs, his cock quickened. She leaned closer, pressing the weight of her body against him. Her breasts,

soft in red velvet, brushed his chest. She tilted her head, her lips parted in invitation. Her breath came, soft and cool, against his scorched lips.

“No,” he whispered. He closed his burning eyes against the beauty and softness, felt her breasts and open legs, her parted lips almost touching his own. Yes, he wanted to.

“I want to ask you something,” she said, and settled herself, open-legged against him. “Open your eyes.”

He tore himself away from the pure sensation of her body near and open over him, unresponsive. Her lashes were dark against the white of her cheeks and the gray of her eyes ran deeper than the soundless river he had fled.

“There’s something about you I don’t understand,” the dark beauty mused, “and it’s been bothering me since I met you.”

“What’s that?” His hands still held her hips, could grind her open thighs against his iron cock.

“My body conforms to desire. If a man likes tall girls, I get a little taller—couple inches, no big thing. If a woman likes tiny breasts, mine shrink. If he likes a full ass, mine swells. All that matters is that they want me.” Dominic willed himself not to look down. “It’s never such a dramatic change that it makes me unrecognizable one fig to the next, but their desire distorts me, molds me to their tastes.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah. But here’s the thing”—Olivia leaned in again, her perfect lips against the unshaved roughness of his jaw, her voice a welcome invasion—“with you, I have not changed at all. So either you think I’m perfect just the way I am”—her lower lip grazed his earlobe—“or you do not desire me.”

Dominic slid his hands from her hips to her narrow waist, fighting the urge to crush her body against his hammering chest, to wrap his arms around her slender torso and pull her hard against him. She sat back from him a little and looked into his face. “And I honestly can’t imagine either is possible.”

His hands felt huge on her lithe waist. He did want her, wanted her ferociously, but he owed her the reason he could not tell her so. “Olivia, I—”

How could he explain his madness, make her understand what he could not accept?

“Standing out at the abbey with you last night, I felt . . . I can’t want you that way. It would deny everything I believe in. My work would stop making sense. I couldn’t love you and keep my job. I’m a neuroscientist. You have to understand. It’s who I am.”

He slid his hands up the smooth cloth that encased her, feeling the long column of her back with shaking fingers, holding the curve of her with the palm of his hands. “Olivia, you . . .” He was making a mess of this. Why couldn’t what he felt be illustrated in an elegant wave graph? “When I look at you, I don’t see an available woman, desirable or otherwise. I see someone in pain, enslaved by their illness, driven by compulsion or delusion, someone who isn’t free to choose me.”

“Free?”

“Right.”

“And do you think that you are free?”

“I’m trying to be.”

She moved so swiftly he barely saw what she lunged for. She hung his pill bottle between them.
“This is freedom?”

“That is medicine.”

“What does it do?”

“I don’t know yet. I hope it may curb delusion.”

“Yours or mine?”

“Mine.”

“Can you still see me?”

He smiled grimly. If she noticed the aching erection she straddled, she gave no indication. On her slim thighs, his hands, large and freckled, stroked the soft fabric covering her perfect legs. “I don’t think for a moment that you’re a hallucination of mine. My fantasy lovers are all”—he glanced into her quizzical eyes and grinned—“much more compliant.”

“Then what do you see that you think is not real?”

“Right now?” He looked around at the dark garden, sunlessly shining. “Nothing, really. But I’ve been taking my medicine.”

He meant it as a joke, but she didn't smile. "Dominic, you want me. I can smell it."

He nodded. "I know. I do. Out at the abbey, even at the nightclub, something about you speaks to me. Or would, I think, if I let myself listen. I have to keep stuffing cotton in my ears. It's not easy."

"I'm an angel, not a siren."

"I know, but if I kissed you right now, and yes, I want to . . . If I kissed you, it would mean giving up on everything that's held me together since the last time I was in this insane place. It's more than just my work that would stop making sense. It's me. I can't want you in the way I want you." He was choking, blind, staring at his hands on her thighs. He bowed his head.

"It's a choice?"

"It has to be." Her lips touched his hair as it fell over his eyes. If he opened them, her breasts would be all he could see. Even against his clamped-shut lids, their white perfection swam before him. He heard the rattle but didn't recognize the sound until she had swallowed and tossed the pill bottle back into his bag.

"You shouldn't have done that." His voice was caked with despair and desire.

"I thought you wanted to heal me."

"How many did you take?"

"I left you some."

“You know that’s useless to me clinically.”

“I didn’t do it for you.” She stood up and walked away from him, noiseless across the dark grass. He sprawled against the tree trunk, exhausted and taut, relieved and aroused. If she suggested a swim now, he would be lost. But she stayed silent, and his thrashing mind began to steady.

“I think Gaehod will close the hotel,” she said at last.

“That isn’t what you want, is it?”

“No. My sisters will be angry.” Her voice was expressionless, her face marble.

“Vampires get angry?”

“Twice, to date. But it could be good for you. If Gaehod opens the hotel to the public, my sisters won’t be able to stay. I think you might convince some of them to follow you to Dublin.”

“I thought you said they’d never participate in a clinical trial?”

“You’ll need to set up a place for them to stay, with underground storage, and tell them the rest is a game, a novelty. Boredom is our contagious cancer.” She turned away from him, standing by the fruit tree branch he’d reached for only yesterday.

“I’m certain I could devise ways to make the tests interesting.” Dominic’s mind was sailing ahead. If he could get out of this damned hotel, back into a city with trains and bookstores, if he could confine the madness of vampires and curses to a laboratory and the daylight, he might yet

fulfill his promises to Madalene and his obligations to Dysart. Maybe then he could wrap his head around what this pale, perfect woman did to his heart. His eyes ran up the slick columns of her legs and across the narrow expanse of her red-cased back and flowing hair. "Would you come, too?" he asked quietly.

"No."

He stood up to take her by the shoulders and turn her to him. "Why are you helping me?"

"I want to." She almost smiled. "That's my choice."

Touching her again was a mistake. The clear sanity of his Dublin plans blurred in the depth of her melting eyes. She closed them wearily.

"You're tired, aren't you?" he asked.

"No."

"You look exhausted."

"I haven't eaten." She swayed slightly and without thinking, Dominic pulled her tiny body to his. She leaned against his chest and inhaled. Her breath, as she released it, shook her in his steady arms. He wrapped her more closely against him.

"Olivia, why did you take that pill?"

“I was curious.” Her body, pliant but strong, molded against his, making an almost audible hum in his ears. Her slow hands traced his back from waist to shoulder. “I’ve never been curious before,” she whispered. Her fingers were learning the shapes and contours of him, pressing into tender places, he could barely hear her.

“Why haven’t you eaten?”

“Vampires can only feed on blood that wants or fears them.”

“You could have fed on me,” he whispered over the roar of desire in his ears. “I want you.”

She lifted her head from his chest to gaze at him. “I can smell it on you, so thick. But if you can choose, then so can I.”

He took her face in his hands, cradling it, fingers in her hair again, his thumbs on the porcelain richness of cheekbones. Her lips, so tempting, trembled. She was hurting, and he was slowly starting to understand. “You chose not to?”

“Hunger is the only thing a vampire feels, a yawning emptiness, that drinking does not fill, but numbs. It’s like a gash you can’t suture, but inject with lidocaine. I didn’t feed on you last night, and the emptiness got bigger than I have ever known. But without your desire to numb me, something new started to happen. I think I have started to feel my self, under my hunger.” Her tidal eyes held his, her voice the only sound in the garden’s dead world. “Under my roaring hunger for you to want me, under my shrieking need for your blood to keep me warm, I’ve started to hear”—his thumbs grazed her cheek—“the whisper of my own desire.” Her body, so alive against his, made his dull thighs and shoulders, his blunt chest and belly ache.

“I want you,” he whispered.

“And I want you.” Her lips scarcely moved with the whisper of surprise and discovery. Her fingers clung to his back, her body held to his, but it was her eyes he could not bear to leave in the blue light of tears shed and blood. He rubbed the balls of his thumbs against the twin wet places on her cheeks.

She closed her eyes, a pained furrow between her perfect brows. “I have only eaten choices,” she murmured, silent as prayer. His thumb touched her swollen lips feeling, more than hearing, her words. They ran in torrents through him. “I have always taken. When I make the tiny cuts with my teeth or nails that go unnoticed, when I drive my teeth on those who flee me, I steal.” The supple flesh pursed under his reluctant touch. “It is why Gaehod chose the sign he has. A kiss must be given.”

“You asked me to kiss you.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Ask me again.” His voice was raw with his hunger.

Beauty does not belong to me. It comes with damnation. My flawless body stands against his mortal one, bathed in our desire. If I do not walk away from him now, he will kiss me. Gaehod will not close the hotel. My deathless sisters will be pleased. If I open my aching mouth to his hunger, I could drown my agony on his need. He will feel me strike, and my raw quills, unkeened for weeks through indifference, would hurt him. But he is brave and will stand it. I slip from his hungry, seeking fingers on my cheeks and lips, and walk away.

“Olivia!”

I do not turn back.

“Olivia?”

“Come with me,” I say. But I do not turn back to look for him until I have pushed the gates of the garden wide. He stops to gather his things, the computer on the grass, the pill bottle, a notebook. I wait for him, dizzy with freedom or need.

There is one thing I must understand.

“Where are we going?” The bag hangs across his strong chest, his broad shoulders easy under its weight, his bright blue eyes burning wild in the garden light. He has not shaved since the last time I led him out of this garden to the bikes and our night drive. Bronze stubble roughens his face, clouded with sex and doubt. But striding toward me, he looks fierce and elemental, a force of desire and rage beaten against powers stronger and darker than he sees or can understand.

I want to discover, once and for all, what happens when he looks at me.

He walks wordlessly beside me down the silent halls. We pass black metal and vaulted wooden doors. When I stop before a dull gray one, he only waits as I push my flawless fingers into the narrow seam beside the lock, and slide an elongating nail between the jam and tumblers. He holds the door. The smaller, dank hallway smells of mold and earthworms, of cellars, graves, and abandoned wells.

“I keep forgetting we’re underground,” he whispers.

The corridor ends abruptly, rounding a curved wall, to deposit us at the foot of a cavernous space. It is dark and airless, nothing like the chill humidity of the grand hall. It soars dustless, limitless and black.

“The gas will come on when we take the floor,” I tell him. I hold his hand, warm and human, and step into the void. The ceiling ignites in blinding banks of flame, but I keep walking. When I

stop, and when he can see again, we stand in the center of a vast Art Deco ballroom whose inlaid black-and-white floor sweeps away in dizzying patterns on every side. The ceiling soars stories up, supported by colossal carved titans whose rippling bodies of living stone bear the weight of the entire hotel above them on strong, blind backs. On every wall, broken only by white columns, mirrors reflect us back to our dazzled eyes.

I leave Dominic standing and walk to touch the old, cold silver surface. Looking at me from the glass is a woman I have never seen. Familiar, yes, like the myriad faces I have seen when those who want me gaze on me. But different somehow, and purely my own. This is my native face. Then I see him. He stands where I left him, pale and still. His artist's lips make a hard, thin line, of anger or fear.

"Why can't I see you?" His voice is a cold hammer.

"I'm here." I turn from the mirror to face him. His logical eyes search the glass behind me.

"What the fuck!" His broad hands are balled into fists and his fierce teeth are set. "I can see you standing right there in front of the mirror, but I can't see you in it." I turn back to the glass. I smile at my reflection, and it returns the grin with a look of barely contained joy. It's all I can do not to laugh.

"I can see myself," I tell him.

"I can see myself, too, but only me. Why can't I see you? Is it a trick? Some insane game of Gaehod's? Goddamn it, that old man won't quit fucking with my mind." He looks about to tear it from his skull, dropping his bag in the center of the floor and driving the heels of his hands against his raging eyes. He strides to the mirror and cups his hands, peering into the reflecting surface. Then he yanks a pocketknife from his jeans and flips open the blade. He scratches the mirror's surface and swears.

I wander, half dreaming, happy, back to the room's center and gaze at my true reflection, turning slowly to see myself in a infinite line of smaller selves, each blessedly identical. He glances at

me and back at the mirrors. “It’s some kind of stupid trick,” he mutters, pressing his furrowed face against the plaster to peer behind the glass. He turns to me and scrubs his violent eyes again, leaning his taut back against the mirrored wall, facing mirrors on the other side, but looking at me. He shakes his head. “I don’t understand,” he says.

“You’re not used to that, are you?”

“To not being able to understand what I see? No. I’m not. I’m a logical man. I figure things out.”

“Have you figured me out?” I ask him.

“You’re a person, not a thing. And no, I haven’t. I don’t even try with women. They don’t make sense.”

“And now this room doesn’t make sense?” I am teasing him. It’s unfair, but I am in the mirror and feel millennia younger—lighthearted and giddy. He slams his hand against the glass. The massive pane ripples, waves in a frozen pond, but does not shatter, and Dominic hugs his hand against his chest.

“Fuck,” he says sheepishly. “That was stupid. Sorry I startled you.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No.” He walks right to me. “You nailed it, you know. I have to stop trying to make things make sense down here. None of it does, not even that it *is* here, a room this size, underground. The rules of the real world don’t apply.” He half grins and takes my small wrists in his large hands. “I have rules I make and rules I follow, rules I expect the world to play by, and rules I know it won’t. I have rules about women and about falling in love. Like one of nature’s laws, you can’t break it, you can only break yourself against it. But no rules work here. I’m falling and there’s no gravity. I’m reflecting and there’s no image.”

But I cannot hear him. His strong hands encircle my wrists. I see them in the mirror. I feel them on my flesh.

“Touch my face,” I whisper.

His hands slide up my arms, and I close my eyes to drink in the sensation.

My body has sensation.

“Olivia.” He shakes me gently by the shoulders he’s holding. “Olivia? Are you okay? You’re really pale.”

I am the Undead, of course I’m pale! I feel like laughing. I’m pale and dizzy, and a thousand other things no angel can be. He touched and I felt. I sway in his strong hands.

“You really need to eat, don’t you? You missed breakfast. I don’t know about those pills on an empty stomach either. Are you faint?”

I touch his jaw. Against my fingertips, the stubble is rough and masculine. I trace his hard cheekbone where the skin is taut and smooth. Manhood and strength tingle up my fingers and across my bones.

I can feel him.

“Olivia?” His hands slide to my waist and their descent radiates from my skin into the core of me. “What’s happening?”

“I can feel you,” I whisper.

“I don’t understand.” He makes his voice soft, like mine.

It will overwhelm me, the weight of his hands on my waist, the sheer heat of his body close to mine, the drenching smell of his desire and the unfamiliar scent of my own. I breathe in deeply.

Yes. I want. I can smell my desire. I have never wanted. I touch his softening mouth with uncertain fingers. I want him. The inviting flesh of his lips is giving and soft after the roughness of his jaw, and I run questioning fingers over it until he shudders.

“I can see you, here in my arms,” he whispers. “I can feel you touching me, but when I look,” his strong brows contract and his fingers dig into my waist. I moan to feel their hard demand, to feel him touching me. “But when I look into all the mirrors on all the walls, you’re not there. I just see my empty hands holding nothing.”

“I can see me.”

“I’m having a seizure.” He bows his head, defeat heavy on him,

“I must be getting worse. I have never had this kind of fully consciousness doubling before.”

“It has to be enough that I can see me.” I push my fingers harder against his inviting lips to feel the sudden barricade of teeth. I push between them, and he bites me lightly. “Let it be enough,” I ask him. He turns his face from me and my fingers slip from between his lips.

“Am I losing my mind?” he whispers.

“You’re asking me?” I mean it lightly, lost in the texture of his skin, trailing my nerve-rich fingertips from his jaw to where the stubble grows more sparsely, where the sinews of his throat stand out in stark relief. His throat. I feel the pulse, his hypnotic thrusting blood beneath it.

With something like a sob, he gathers me against him, against the heat and rhythm of his chest, within the circle of his arms and strength, against the hard unmoving of his legs and belly, and holds me tightly. “I feel like I’m losing my grip on everything,” he whispers into my hair.

“Maybe you never had it.” I’m drinking the smells and touch of him, the warmth and sounds, air in his breath, blood in his heart, enveloping me.

“I want to do everything wrong.” His voice is harsh and low in my hair. “I want to walk through those mirrors. I want to jump from the balconies. I want to be out-of-my-head crazy, raving, speaking in tongues. I want to give up on science. I want to allow irrationality and cruelty to win. Olivia—” He takes my head between his strong hands and turns my face up to his. His fearless, blue eyes dive into me. “I want you.”

He glances up into the mirror. The sound is strangled, a cry, a desperation. “I want to give up on everything I believe in, everything I know, everything I’ve served. I want to give it away. Give it to you. Olivia, why can’t I see you in the mirror?”

“You can see me in your hands,” I tell him. He holds my face in his powerful fingers, his trembling body inches from me, pain in his hard jaw and brows. “Close your eyes,” I whisper.

With his eyes shut, he looks innocent, and I touch his lids to watch them flinch. “It’s my fault,” I whisper. “I’m not real. Vampires do strange things with mirrors. Things I didn’t know.” I run my hands down the unyielding cords of his hard and scarless back.

The sensation that stabs through me as my breasts touch his chest forces a gasp from me. He opens his eyes in alarm. “I have always fed on man’s desire,” I tell him. “I have drunk desire and fear to keep me numb from the terrible gaping emptiness that is my damnation inside me. My emptiness, my numbness, my hunger, for your mortal desire, your sensation, your blood to feed me. Mirrors never showed me who I was, because I never knew.”

“If I knew you better could I see you?”

“To know and to see are not the same.”

“I don’t understand.” His fingers tighten on me in his confusion, hurting me, and I laugh with the joy of feeling that small pain. This is what hurt feels like, this hard insistence of bones.

“And how could you know me better, anyway, if you can’t see me?” I ask him.

“You could tell me.”

“Would you believe me?”

“I think I could, if you asked me to.” His face shows only courage in the pain he feels—in the face of his world falling in.

“It would be easier to believe I took your pill and we are both sane.”

“Nothing about you is easy,” he says.

“Damnation is easy.”

“You are not damned.”

“Illness is easy.”

“You are not ill.”

“I am desire.” I say. “Desire is never easy.”

He drops his proud forehead to mine, resting the weight of his head against me. His warrior’s eyes squeeze closed, and his breathing fills the space between us.

“Desire is suffering,” I whisper.

He swallows hard. “Then I am desire, too.”

His hands clasp behind my head and he presses his face against my hair. His naked voice is raw. “Tell me what to do.”

I shudder in his arms, and press my sensitive cheek against the grit of his. The tips of my breasts are alive, acute, beneath my confining corset. But pleasure courses down from them, between my legs, into my receptive belly. I could laugh or sob with the sensation. He turns his rough mouth against my delicate cheek, and the heat and softness of his whispering lips makes me cling to his back with immortal fingers.

“What do you want?” he asks me.

“I want my hunger not to hurt you.”

“I don’t care if it does,” he says.

And then his lips touch mine. The light feather of his breath sends torrents through me. He whispers “Kiss me” against the sensitive flesh that whispers back “I cannot.” But his lips open over mine. I hold to his hard back against the heat and hunger to open my mouth beneath his. I want to.

“I would believe in angels to kiss you,” he whispers.

“That is not who you are.”

“No.”

But the tender question of his tongue tips my starving lips with need, traces a line of raging heat around their swollen hunger. His mouth is slowly gathering mine beneath it in a kiss that takes my resolution with my strength. New pleasure, first desire, his lips lingering over mine, his body strong and hungry, mine runs liquid under it.

“I can love what I don’t understand.” He is almost pleading. I could open my lips and kiss him.

“Most mortals fear it,” I say.

“I am immortal then.”

And he looks it, eyes flaming into mine, hard jaw proud and hungry for me. One kiss. This is not the garden. I will not feed. I could allow myself one kiss, and it will be good-bye. Who he is cannot believe what I am.

Yes.

His lips are an adoring rage on mine, demanding and giving beauty and terrible hunger. I would choke on my cruel teeth to keep from hurting him, but I cry out when his fingers find the wingscars on my back. The tips of my warming breasts rake against his chest. Drenched in sensation, I wring a pure smile from the mouth that claims mine. It fills me. The soft curve of his beautiful lips cradles the soaring sense of myself expanding, swelling to fill the pure white ballroom, shining back in the ocean of mirrors, everything reflected back, and back again. Breaking in waves over us standing, holding to each other's body, each other's lips. Angels before the fall, love without sin, completion, perfection, joy.

This is not the garden.

Sylvia's psycast is ice in my mind.

How dare you fuck this up?

I close my eyes against my outraged sisters, circling me, to hold Dominic timeless away from them reflected in every mirrored wall, surrounding us. He hasn't noticed them.

Gaehod had us to tea.

His lips whisper a kiss that grows to screaming, open-mouthed, hard and searching, claimed and claiming. And I return the kiss, knowing my sisters advance. Knowing they see I do not feed. Knowing they will kill me for this.

We are going to try you for treason.

If the fall is to this man, I can love descent. But he will be broken by it, taken, unfinished, ruined, and in pain.

“Come with us.” I can’t see which of the rows of Sylvias is real in her phalanxed reflection.

“I will,” I say, but turn my back to her. I bite deeply into my lower lip, and fill my mouth with ichor.

“Olivia?” Dominic’s worried eyes are searching mine.

“It’s all right,” I whisper to him. “I need to go with my sisters now.” I kiss omnipotence and strength into his lips and tell him, “You’ve got to get out of here! The minute I leave, go to Gaehod and tell him to get you out. They will kill you. Swear to me you’ll get away.”

“All right.”

“I have to go now.” I kiss him a final time in a communion of scoured souls.

“I don’t want to lose you,” he says.

“I was already lost.”

“No.” He pulls me closer, and my sisters’ footsteps quicken.

“Stop believing that. It’s a choice, remember? Every belief is something we’ve chosen.”

“Is it?” Sylvia and Vivian each have me by an elbow now, almost carrying me toward the door. If I struggle they will lift me, and I don’t want to frighten him. He must think I am walking away. He bends to pick his bag up from the ground and the beauty in the gesture breaks through the strange, hard fingers in my now-feeling flesh, the new sensation of bruises and nail bites. I could savor even these if his grace bending and slinging the bag across his hard man’s chest did not tear at me even more strongly.

He stands uncertain. He wants to call after me, but does not think he has the right. He watches me go, tasting doubt, eyes questioning. “Why did she kiss me?” he wonders. “Did she feel what I did? Do I love her?”

If I could answer, if he could hear me psycast: *I am with you still. Your angel. Your love.* But reason deafens him, and the noise of vampire shoes on the inlaid dance floor, and then in the concrete hallway, rounding away from where he stands. I catch a final glimpse of him, walking toward the mirrors once more, to try to understand.

Dominic checked again behind the mirrors. *Nothing.* No projector he could see hung from the ceiling above, nor was the glass warped. It simply didn’t make sense. He made a complete and careful circuit of the room before he noticed her—a pale, diminutive thing—trailing black gauze and diaphanous lace. She, at least, looked the same in the mirror as on the periphery of the dance floor, where she lingered, watching him. Dominic nodded to her, and went to gather his decrepit shoulder bag. He would go back to his room. Olivia could find him there when she finished whatever ridiculousness she had to with her friends. He wanted to see her again, touch her again. Kiss her.

“I’m Ophelia.”

“Hi.” Dominic extended his hand to the girl who now stood beside him. She seemed taller than she had been, standing by the door. Ophelia shook his hand with an amused smile.

“You’re very formal for a man my sister’s been making love to.”

“She kissed me. That’s it,” Dominic said, ridiculously defensive.

“Ah, but a kiss to mortals is the first volley of romance, with its promise of love and sex and babies—the kiss of life.” She stood too close to him, smiling. “For us, of course, a kiss is the first taste of something else, and can promise only the possible, distant child of death.” In a grotesque, childish gesture, Ophelia stuck the two pale middle fingers of her tiny right hand into her puckered, scarlet mouth and sucked them, staring. She had Olivia’s matte gray eyes, flat and deep. Perhaps they really were sisters.

“No,” he told her. “No, there was no vampire weirdness. She didn’t try to bite me. She didn’t even try to kiss me. I kissed her.”

“We saw.”

“You were watching us?” Dominic asked. The ghostly girl began to pace a slow circle around him. Dominic stood perplexed in the center of the dance floor’s complicated, radiating pattern.

“Yes. You shouldn’t have done that. Ollie shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why?” Dominic demanded. “Is dating against the rules at the Hotel of the Damned?”

“Dating is its own curse.”

Dominic throttled a laugh with a cough. That, at least, mapped to his experience.

“Why did Olivia have to leave with the rest of them? Why did you stay?”

“I stayed because I saw something in the mirror.” The girl kept circling.

“What?”

“I’m not going to tell you. But yes, that is why Olivia had to leave.”

“Because I kissed her?”

“Because this is not the garden.” Ophelia slid her cool shoulder against Dominic’s back like a cat. “She’s dangerously weak, you know. You could have helped her.”

It irritated Dominic not to be able to see Ophelia, to look her in the eyes while he talked to her, to be forced to keep craning his head over one shoulder then the next as she paced circles around him. “Olivia has taken an antipsychotic. It may have cut into some of the conditioned thinking you and your so-called sisters have instilled in her.”

“You gave her medicine?” Ophelia bristled.

“Is that against the rules, too? Are you afraid she might see clearly for long enough to get free of you?” Impatience defeated Dominic’s sense of obligation to be charming for one of Olivia’s friends. He wanted to grab his laptop bag and get out of the elaborate, airless, and distorting ballroom.

“Vampires can only metabolize blood. She’s in no danger. Not from your pills, anyway.”

“What do you mean? Is she in danger from something else?”

“There is always danger.”

“To Olivia?”

“To her. And from her.”

“What are you talking about?” Dominic rounded on Ophelia, catching her delicate shoulders to hold her still.

She swayed her enticing hips and smiled at him. “We’re going to kill her,” she whispered, singsong.

Dominic towered over the tiny vampire. His fingers curled into hard fists at his sides to keep from shaking her. “What do you mean you’re going to kill her?”

“I can smell how much you want her,” Ophelia sang.

Dominic's voice was a growl. "What do you mean you're going to kill her?"

"Your blood is full of desire and very powerful." Ophelia's delicate, pale fingers reached for his shoulder, but he violently shrugged her hand away. He was a scientist, a rational man, but the noise he made was animal. Ophelia watched him, a dreamy smile on her childish lips. "Do you want me?" she whispered.

"I'm asking you, for the last time," Dominic ground through clenched teeth, "what you meant when you said you were going to kill Olivia. You don't mean literally."

"Angels are literal by nature."

This time he did grab her. She gave no indication that he hurt her. He didn't mean to, but he had to understand. "Where did they take her?" he demanded.

The tiny girl shrugged. She made her eyes into large, innocent gray blanks in her pale, heart-shaped face. "The hotel's a big place. They could have taken Ollie to the Quarry. Or to Sylvie's room. Or the crypts."

"Do you know where they took her?"

"You could have me, you know."

"I don't want you."

"No. You want Olivia. I can see it in the mirror."

“What?”

“I look like her.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I do to me.” The girl gazed wistfully at her own reflection.

“Ophelia, I need to find Olivia. I’ll talk to the others and explain, but it’s time to get her out of this crazy place.”

“You? Take Ollie out of here?” Ophelia’s laugh reverberated like shattering glass. It bounced off the high ceilings and the distant walls, against the inlaid wood and plaster and mirrors. “You can’t find your own way out. How could you take a failing vampire?”

“You admit it, don’t you?” Dominic tried not to shout. “Olivia has stopped playing your game. She’s a failed vampire. She’s simply a woman, as difficult and complicated as that is. She’s not pretending to some divine, immortal status any more. You and the rest of them are scared shitless that if she can stop, you might, too. And you can, I think. Maybe. I could try you all on the medicine she took. But I have to get to her before anyone does anything stupid.”

“Stupid?”

“Without thinking it through.”

“Angels have nothing to do with thought.”

“No, of course not!” Dominic rounded on her. “It’s all faith with angels, isn’t it? Stupid, blind, ignorant faith. The kind of superstitious not-looking-at-things that gave us witch burnings and insisted on a geocentric universe three hundred years after Copernicus!”

“Goodness, you’re a passionate man.”

“I’m not. Not really.” Dominic took a steadying breath. “I’m a rational man, but I’m worried about Olivia. I want to see her. I need you to tell me where she is.”

“Mmm, and I need you,” Ophelia licked her blood-red lips, gliding up to him. “Let’s work something out, shall we?”

“What?” Dominic pinched his searing eyes against the bridge of his nose, incredulous. “If I let you pretend to drink my blood, or whatever kinkiness you want, you’ll tell me where they’ve taken Olivia?”

“I will take you.”

“Take me to her?”

“No.” Ophelia’s arms climbed like tendrils around him. “I will have you.”

“I don’t think so.” Dominic untangled her winding arms from his waist, but they twined like water plants around his wrists, tracing his arm’s snaking tattoos to his shoulders, pressing her cool, firm body to his. “I’m going to Gaehod,” His voice was a chained roar. “Move. I don’t want to hurt you.”

He noted the wooden dance floor gave just a little when his back slammed onto it, but not nearly enough. He lay still, gasping.

“Do you want me?” Ophelia, tiny and pale, stood motionless over him.

“No.”

“Then you will fear me.”

Dominic picked himself up gingerly. “Why, because you know jujitsu? I don’t think so.”

He hit the ground again. It was no softer the second time.

“Olivia!” He shouted her name, and it careened from wall to glass to ceiling to floor, echoing thunderously.

“She can’t hear you.”

Dominic sat up. “I’m going to her.”

Ophelia landed on his chest, her light body coiled over his, her cool lips against his ear. “Do you know what happens when an immortal cannot feed? When a vampire’s quills are too dull to puncture, and her sisters will not keen the edges for her?”

Dominic held himself motionless beneath the black-draped body spread like a bat against his chest. He needed her to say where Olivia had been taken, why she was in danger. Ophelia's tongue trailed from his ear to his jaw.

"Vampires cannot die. We fade. We lose substance, become invisible, formless. Without her sisters, a vampire is a hungry ghost of unmeetable needs."

For an instant, Dominic's vision blurred. Ophelia's eyes became surreal cesspits, black and bottomless. Her face spiraled in, a hallucinatory implosion whose mouth made a void, an icy, empty cosmic hole that swallowed time and light. Dominic shuddered.

Ophelia struck.

Her jaws flexed, Dominic glimpsed fantastically long fangs protruding from her rosebud mouth. Delicate fingers clutched his jaw to expose his throat. Her scream was brief but shrill, a cry before biting. She snapped her dark head back, whiplashed up, and slammed down on his naked flesh. Twin blunt pains stabbed his throat. His body convulsed in rage and disgust and he threw her from him. She sprawled across the inlaid floor and Dominic sprang to standing, horrified.

Ophelia curled into a puddle of black gauze. Her dainty hand clamped over her stained mouth. Hideous gulping sounds came from behind her pale palm, and scarlet streams ran between her fragile fingers. Dominic staggered back from her. She was choking. Blood poured in torrents from her, across her shuddering shoulders, down into her deep décolleté, staining breast and dress. He was a doctor, but he wanted to run. He leaned over the spill seeping onto the floor, and touched her heaving back gently.

"Ophelia, are you choking on your teeth? Where are you hurt?" Dominic sat on his heels and plucked at her fragile wrist. "Can you take your hand away? I need to find where you're bleeding from." She gulped frantically. Her wild, racing eyes darted over him, the room, the blood that ran down her porcelain wrists and arms. Dominic pried her dripping hand away.

Two terrible, ragged, broken incisors poured blood into her brimming mouth. Was she choking on the detached tips? The prosthetic teeth she had apparently broken on his throat must be attached, somewhere, to a bladder. Ingenious, really. Functioning properly, the pressure of her strike would trigger them to “bleed” against his skin for her to suck. It must be a large reservoir though, to pour out so much blood that she was in danger of drowning on it.

“Hold your head forward so the blood doesn’t choke you,” he cautioned, pulling Ophelia to her knees. But she shook herself free of his hands, and threw back her small head. Blood gurgled in her throat and overflowed her lips. She would drown herself in that position if she stayed there long.

She screamed. Head back, her tiny body twisted, her bleeding mouth forced inexplicably wide. Even the fractured bits of her false teeth seemed to shiver with the effort the long shriek tore from her. Pain shot through Dominic. He clutched his exploding ears. Ophelia gagged on the inhale, writhing. He caught her by the shoulders and forced her over at the waist. He would not watch a girl drown on stage blood before his eyes.

“Keep bent forward!” he commanded the crumpled thing. “I’ll go for help.”

“They’ll come,” she panted.

“What?”

“My sisters. They are coming.”

My sisters held me, wrists bound, in the Quarry’s lush darkness, but I was distracted from their questions and the threats against my life by the fascination of pain. The thin, rough twine on my tender flesh captured my attention. It hurt me, and I kept losing my thoughts in its invading cry. How do mortals speak and answer? Does not every hunger, every injury intrude upon them? I had offered but little in my own defense at trial. I am condemned. Again.

Now running jumbles everything. My hands are tied and yanked forward at Sylvia's urgent pace. I am weakening, but even I still taste the red horror of Ophelia's spriek. I stumble on the stairs. Pain is new, and I like it steadily less as it grows familiar. I trot after my swift sisters, struggling to remember what they have said to me since they took me from Dominic. Dominic whom I kissed without feeding. Dominic whom I have scarcely tasted.

"He's not the loophole," Evelyn had mocked me, lounging on the Quarry's backless sofa. "He can't get you back upstairs."

"I know," I told them. "I'm not trying to get there anymore."

It wasn't until I said it that I knew it was true. But my sisters like it here. They like their numbness and the craving. They want to stay in L'Otel Matillide and I have now denied them.

They begged me. "You must change the Reborn's mind," Vivian pleaded. "It should be easy enough. Men will do anything for love. Teach him he loves the hotel, does not want it exposed, will resign his position, will stay here with us. With you."

"I want no power over him," I told them.

"He has other desires," Vivian said.

Now Sylvia pushes me ahead of her into the glass coach. From Cinderella to the Witch of the North, this cursed, impenetrable transparency has carried women from safety into sex. I huddle on the red cushion and look away from the image of my baby sister, projected over every curved, interior glass, in the moment of spriek, choking on blood, collapsing against the inlaid black and white of the ballroom floor. Is Dominic there? Surely he's gone to Gaehod by now.

The glass sphere carries us to her.

We will reach her soon, Sylvia's seductive, Irish voice murmurs in my mind. She turns to me.
"It's a powerful desire, the desire not to die."

"But it is not love."

"We're angels of desire, darling. The desire—the hunger—to eat, to own, to live, it doesn't matter. It's only desire. Only you ever said anything about love."

"I love him."

"That's your funeral."

"I can't die."

"A woman who is not desired is worse than dead. You will be invisible, unfeedable. Make him want to keep the hotel, and we will let you live."

"I can't."

"You can't surrender desire's power over him. It's bigger than you are. Desire is advertising and industry, alcoholics, inventors, addicts, and mothers. Everyone, everything serves us."

"I have my own desires now."

“If you cannot make him want you, one of us can.”

And suddenly I know what’s happened to Ophelia. “No, you can’t,” I tell them. I stand up in the swimming bubble. “She’s broken her teeth on his throat because he does not want or fear her.”

I am unreasonably proud of this.

“I fed Ophelia to him,” Sylvia growls. “I will drain him myself. I swear it.” My scarlet sister only whispers the oath, but I know she will do everything in her unearthly power to keep it.

The glass bubble stops. I am rattling uncontrollably with fear and hunger now. We have made a detour. Not straight to Ophelia, who must be nearly void by now. We are on my floor. Sylvia and Vivian drag me into my own room. My red sarcophagus waits against the bare stone wall. I steady myself against the heavy carved posts of my bed, clutching its rich curtains for support. Vivian easily hefts the stone lid of my old crypt aside.

“Get in!” she commands.

I don’t move. I can’t. Terror freezes me. Vivian sweeps me into her cold arms like an infant and drops me into the hollowed belly of carved stone. I land with a sickening crush of wing and bone. Shivering convulses me. Shuddering obscenely in every joint, I will not give them the satisfaction of begging for mercy. They have none.

The red stone grinds closed above me.

Without the strength to shift it, without the quills to feed, I will stay here, eaten by my hunger, until I fade so thin I can move through stone and walls and, mad, invisible, and mouthless, roam Earth endlessly, never satisfied, more than damned.

Dominic's hands looked grotesquely large holding Ophelia's delicate head. When all the idiocy was over, he would have to figure out how the blood-delivery device worked and why it had malfunctioned. It created a dangerous choking hazard. He would write the manufacturer.

"Can you take these teeth out?" he asked. Ophelia shook her head. Dominic reached cautiously into her mouth to feel where the connections were.

"Holy shit!" He tore his hand away and almost dropped her head. The blood was real. Some of it at least. He had felt the hot arterial pulse against his probing fingers. If even a portion of the flood that poured unstinting from her delicate mouth and down his wrist into a spreading pool on the inlaid floor, if even part of that was real, this little girl would bleed out in his arms before anyone got there. She didn't need pretend sisters in fake vampire clothes. She needed paramedics and several units of plasma.

"Ophelia, I've got to slow the bleeding down. I'm going to reach in your mouth again and try to apply some pressure. Can you show me where you're bleeding from? These teeth you broke, are they surgically implanted? Can you guide my fingers?"

But she shook her ringletted head again. Careful to keep one hand on the nape of her neck, holding her forward to prevent choking, Dominic pushed a finger into Ophelia's mouth, feeling for the source of blood. It really did seem to be coming from the teeth themselves. He touched the jagged surface and pushed gently.

"Son of a bitch!" He jerked his hand away again. The broken places in her mouth were wickedly sharp. His own blood mingled with Ophelia's, real and fake. She might have further cut her tongue on the fractured edges, and he couldn't apply adequate pressure without tearing himself to hamburger.

"Ophelia?"

She turned swimming eyes to him. Fear stood in stark blue smears down her face. Blood had gotten into her gray eyes, and it pooled in their corners and clumped her lashes.

“Ophelia!” He needed her attention, and she was going into shock. “I have to stand up and take off my shirt so I can use it to put pressure on your teeth. You have to keep your head forward, okay? You can’t lie back, or try to scream again. Do you understand?”

She nodded, and Dominic sprang to his feet tearing off his linen shirt. He pulled his cotton undershirt over his head and balled it into a pad. He bent back to Ophelia, aware of the brilliant red stains on the knees and cuffs of his pants and of the blood that soaked into his shoes.

“Open your mouth.”

He pushed the T-shirt up against the broken places in the little vampire’s mouth. “Can you breathe through your nose? Good. Try to bite down. Gently. Good. You’re doing fine.”

“Ophelia!”

Dominic turned on his knees, crouched over her, to spot the vampire who had bared her breasts for him by the river. She and several other tall, gorgeous women swept around the corner and onto the dance floor.

“Sylvia,” he called to her. “I need you to find a phone and get medical help. Ophelia is losing blood rapidly. She can’t stay conscious much longer.”

Sylvia knelt beside Dominic and took Ophelia’s tiny body from his hands. She turned the pale girl’s face to hers and pulled Dominic’s T-shirt from between the pale and shivering lips. Ophelia gurgled in her limp throat as her head lolled back on Sylvia’s cradling arm.

“What the hell are you doing?” Dominic reached for Ophelia again, but found his arms pinioned behind his back. “She will drown on her blood!”

These svelte women knew their martial arts. He could not move his arms. Sylvia bent over Ophelia to kiss her bleeding, open mouth. Dominic struggled briefly, weak and slippery in the spilling blood, but soon stopped.

The red streams that poured from Ophelia’s lips, even with Sylvia’s lascivious mouth clamped over them, had slowed. Dumbfounded, Dominic watched the elegant redhead holding Ophelia’s delicate face between her strong hands. She seemed to be almost biting into the gaping, bloody hole of her sister’s mouth. But the grinding kiss was working.

Soft lips brushed Dominic’s ear, and the hard fingers on his arms softened. A voice he did not recognize whispered, “Sylvie is keening the edges. It will seal them, and they’ll regrow.”

Dominic sat back on his heels in the gruesome mess. Sylvia bit and sucked at her pale sister, whose body slowly relaxed under the assault. The blood running from between the women’s mouths slowed to a trickle. Ophelia’s breathing steadied, but she was still shaking, and clearly in shock.

Sylvia lifted her stained mouth from her unconscious sister’s. “Help me clean her!” she cried. The other women dropped to their knees around Ophelia’s body. A full-hipped redhead, whose heavy breasts swayed as she crawled, slipped from behind Dominic to join her sisters. He stretched his released arms. Sylvia resumed kissing Ophelia’s slack mouth while the women on either side took Ophelia’s fingers between their lips and sucked each blood-drenched digit. Ophelia moaned, and another sister straddled her narrow hips to deftly unfasten the closures at the side of her velvet bodice, revealing bloodstained breasts to suck. Dominic watched uncomprehending, then stood quietly. Sylvia met his interrogating eyes.

“Stay, won’t you? Our sister will be hungry when she wakes.” Sylvia ran predator’s eyes over Dominic’s shirtless chest, taking in the bare, muscled torso, the smooth, twining tattoo lines, and the blood drying in savage designs against his skin. She licked her smeared lips, a feverish flush climbing in her pale cheeks. But Ophelia moaned and Sylvia dropped her lips to her sister’s once more, kissing and sucking, hollowing her cheeks with the strength of the kisses.

Dominic slowly backed away from Ophelia's body sprawled in the blood she had spilled over the white and black floor. Kissing, sucking mouths and unbuttoning, caressing fingers danced over her pale body in a sticky tango of hunger and healing. She was moaning freely now, writhing against the floor and the feeding. Dominic shook his head. These girls would fuck a pack of cigarettes. What had seemed to him to be a perfectly obvious medical emergency was, for them, an invitation to a bacchanal. A statuesque blonde Dominic had never seen unbuttoned her shirt and reached behind her back for the clasp of her bra.

Dominic pulled off his blood-soaked shoes. The blonde's freshly exposed white flesh was already striped with blood. Her pale fingers, riding the generous swell of breast and nipple, looked almost as if she drew the blood from her own flesh rather than painting it on from the floor. Sylvia moved aside, and Dominic glimpsed Ophelia's pale, but finally unbleeding, mouth. The blonde leaned over her inert sister and touched a delicate, blood-beaded nipple to Ophelia's parted lips. Dominic watched the pale violet underside of Ophelia's tongue extend to lap, and the relieved smile that spread from Sylvia to the other sisters.

As if on cue, two more began to undress. Dominic took a soundless step away. The sisters lifted Ophelia's limp hands to their exposed breasts or throats or vulnerable thighs, and everywhere her fingers touched, long streaks of blood trailed her fingernails. Silently, slowly, Dominic backed away. Olivia had told him to leave, to go to Gaehod. Now he understood why. But Ophelia had said Olivia was in danger, and he needed to see her first. He had to know she was okay. They could go together to Gaehod.

Dominic stood in the hallway and swore violently. He had left his laptop bag and shoes in the ballroom. He was shirtless, and left a red trail of bare footprints on the cold stone floor. His jeans were stained, and his bare chest and arms were streaked in drying scarlet. His only way of reaching Madalene or Dysart—all his slim connections to the safe surface world—were in that bag. His medicine, his laptop, his notes, and all his work, soaking in Ophelia's blood.

Dominic looked up the stairs, in the direction of Gaehod, his eccentric teas, and his unflappable calm. Did that old man have any sense of the lethal kinkiness he harbored? Dominic looked left, down the stairs, toward the weird underground garden with the self-devouring snake and its apples. Dominic wiped his bloody hands on his jeans and held them out in front of him. All he had to hold on to was doubt. It would have to be enough. Dominic turned left. He knew what he had to do.

IN DARK

Every angel has a shadow; she keeps it buried with her wings. Its blackness is our oldest home. For millennia, I have slept in this hollow stone that mimics a cave, but when the sliding rock closes out light and hope above me, I feel fear for the first time. I am closed in my red tomb with my new senses. I feel where I have always slept. I feel the presence of what I have hidden, and the absence of light, the grinding crumble of my severed wings beneath me, and the deeper black of my crouching, hiding shadow.

Only a hundred and fifty years ago, I brought this sarcophagus with me to the New World by boat in a mysterious, heavy crate—an archeological find unearthed from ancient Greece—at least that's what I told the vessel's curious Victorians. I miss that era of talented amateurs busy cataloging beetles in systems as complex as the layers of lace and bone, fabric and leather they swathed themselves within. Interest in the natural world must never extend to their own bodies. The mysteries closest to home remained furthest from known. I fed, on that leisurely Atlantic passage, my maiden voyage, dressed in widow's weeds, from a husband and his wife in a sweet tangle of stolen silences and secret glances. Now, in my final, eyeless silence, I reach back for the comfort of that weak web, my closest to love.

Lady Anoria had become too fond, it seems, of a certain English princess. The scandal, had it ever been known, would have clouded the unsetting sun, and so the pale young lady had been married, quickly but well, and dispatched to the Americas before the princess, who would have stopped it, learned they had been discovered.

I met Lady Anoria's fresh husband on the first cold, starry night afloat while he walked the creaking wooden deck to smoke. I smelled his fear, even wreathed in its tobacco, and I hunted him. He had been seated beside me at the captain's table in the best salon, the mysterious European widow and the English duke. His new wife, he had apologized, was ill, but the table got on famously without her. Every man at it, except the duke, had wanted me.

I was not curious about him then, strolling on the chill deck alone, only killing time before another gentleman appeared to feed. But when I scented his fear, I fainted. It was my favorite trick in those decorous days, before ambulances and needles, to stagger weakly, already so pale, and swoon. A gentleman would take my tender arm to steady me, and my quilled nails could slip

between his gloved hand and cuff. So I fainted on the ship's promenade and the duke dutifully rushed to my aid, happy for the unfamiliar certainty of action. Gentlemen materialized from the refined night and helped him carry me upstairs.

They placed me on the divan in his stateroom, but when the duchess emerged from her boudoir, pale, tear-stained, and surprised, the gentlemen withdrew. Lady Anoria sat beside me and took my limp hand. I would kill for that touch to reach me now, where I am truly faint, but desperately alone. One was never alone then.

“Constantine, she's bleeding. There's blood under her nails!”

Fuck.

“I'll fetch a basin and a cloth,” he offered. “You should perhaps loosen her stays?” Feminine fingers touched the tight, high buttons at my throat, my body limp on the velvet chaise.

I smelled it on her wrist.

The scent is unmistakable. I opened my eyes. The new duchess was pale with grief, but a naturally rosy girl with blue eyes that were made to sparkle more than weep. From the pall of grief, a blush of simple desire rose, then shame. Poor thing. I moved my lips soundlessly.

“No, don't talk. You're too weak.” She inclined her perfect head to the prostrate stranger on her couch. “I can't hear you.”

“Closer,” I gasped.

“Constantine, she’s waking, bring brandy!” But she did lean closer, and I breathed in the woozy smell of feminine desire.

I have smelled my own today, and still I love the scent. It was too uncommon in those days. I had tasted only woman’s fear for years. The men swam with repressed desires though, and I had fed well on the dark-wood and button-shoe generation. But not on this, this ocean smell while we’re at sea. Not since the French convent, and my last darling’s visions and desire, sweet and red. Lady Anoria shook my shoulders gently and pressed her dewy cheek against my invalid’s parched lips. What I had pretended then, I am in earnest now. I touch my dry tongue to my cracking lips in the blackness and reach to feel Anoria again.

“Can I send for someone? Can you tell me your name?” she implored.

I sighed into the fragile curl of ear and inhaled the precious scent. The taste of it would be exquisite in her blood, so many tendrils red beneath the white ridge and lobe. My feeding edges raked the virginal skin. “Angel,” I whispered, “an angel.”

Duke Constantine was right to fear me.

Now, in my own deep terror, I reach again to savor Anoria’s slow confession, mixed with tears I had lapped away. My darling’s timid explorations with the princess were quickly surpassed. I fed from her soft throat, while Constantine paced and smoked. His new wife grew healthier, pale but smiling. She took the air, long strolls, arm in arm with her new friend. He should be heartened.

The voyage would have been tedious without a diversion, and I found the girl endlessly diverting. Such innocence tasted truly strange to me, and liberating. The spoiled child of privilege, and still somewhat ashamed, Anoria let me touch and remained untouched, savoring the heady mix of fear with desire. I taught her woman’s pleasure, desire’s death, and brought her to that dying again and again, with abandon, and with hunger, and with finally what she swore was love.

I began to linger with my duchess, to allow her duke to find us drowsing in their wide, white bed, just to smell the fear on him. I would take his hand to taste it, too, sometimes. And thus I brought my ancient tomb from the Old World to the new, drunk on tides of desire and fear that reversed the tastes of an age where ladies feared and men desired, and illness filled the void that ambition and need left bare.

That Lady Anoria believed she loved me added dimension to my shipboard entertainment but, as the journey neared its end, it troubled me. I can always disappear. I can sink into the invisible eternal that mortals swim within and never see. Ask a fish what water is. Humans are more blind. I can always disappear, but the one-ton block of ancient red history, my past, my tomb that now imprisons me, would stay behind. Anoria could track me through my past into my future in the New World, and that must not be. I needed to get off the ship unremarked, but not unseen.

I invited the duke and duchess to dine with me one night, four days away from the New World's newest port, in my well-appointed, private chambers. I knew he would drink too much—he always drank too much—but that night I planned to do the same.

“Olivia, look at him!” Lady Anoria exclaimed as her husband tipped toward the floor. I had added a little something to the wine.

“Poor man. He is exhausted worrying over you,” I told her.

“Me?” Anoria laughed, flattered. She did not love him, but liked that he and I both hunted her. Vain girl. She fussed over her husband for her lover's sake, as though jealousy could touch an angel. But she almost swooned in truth when I grasped him by belt and cravat and hoisted him from the table to my narrow bed. I am too strong for a well-bred lady and usually conceal it. But I threw my lover's husband from us and took her, soft and eager, in my marble arms.

Without Anoria, without the sea voyage, I might never have learned to love plump women. Even into the present age, after the flappers and the hippies, I still relish the luscious curves of women who remind me of the swells and waves, of the sweet diving into flesh, crossing the sea. Those were more leisurely days. The transit between the Americas and Europe was an enforced respite, a month of gossip in a closed circle, a time apart and in between. There are no red-eye ocean voyages.

I arrived in New York well-fed, and have come home to starve. I smile faintly in my hungry dark remembering. But Anoria, who had been ill and pale with grief when she boarded the vessel in Bristol, must take a turn for the worse, now that New York would soon come in to sight. This would be our final time, and a time worthy of farewells.

I sigh in the dark interior of my coffin. What was the last time for me—the final last? I can't remember. I have fed from many, as I did on that long voyage, in sips and licks, tiny shivers of hunger stilled in the slicing kiss or raking fingernail, but how long since I had flexed my jaw and punctured skin? When was the last time I fed full-tooth to satiation, to stupefaction as I did that night? Not from Maria, damn the Quarry with its two-quart rule. Not this year, not this decade even. A sob of pure self-pity rises in my throat, but I push it down, remembering.

On that long last ocean night, I came closest to my centuries-old affliction, to my human loophole. I learned how secretly personal and diverse the patterns of flesh-pleasure are, how different from my French nun, how different from men, until I believed I approached feeling myself, so keenly did I map the ways my touch aroused her.

If her desire and sensation created angelic feeling in me, I pondered, could mortal desire and knowledge make angelic comprehension? Humanity is God's second chance. Could it also be mine? I wrung sensation from that ocean-borne English blossom, and believed humanity might save the angels.

But they can't. What I knew that night was no closer to real feeling, as I have felt it now, than what she felt for me was love. She was too unbroken for real love, nor had I brought her there to love her. I possessed her. It is as close as gods come.

Ecstatic to have learned both touch and taste, wild with what I thought I knew, I climbed aboard her. But my jaws unhinged before I reached her throat. She looked through her lashes, drowsy with sex, and jolted awake. Her eyes spread like an opened egg. Her lips parted to scream, and she tried to back against the avalanching pillows, but my fangs found her. I had wanted only desire in her blood, but terror came flooding sweetly in and I sucked more savagely in rage.

She writhed beneath me, spilling into me, her naked breasts and slippery thighs roiling, life pumping. Time stretched. It twisted and opened as softly as her sex, and I rode into the blood dreams on her futile fighting. I drank privilege and class, tutors, needlepoint, and summer homes. I drank her petty doubts and petulant denials. I drank the princess's secret reachings and the swift and sobbing marriage to the duke. I drank the carriage ride to our vessel and its strange, mountain name. And then I stopped. I could not drink the first night at sea, the glamorous stranger who fainted, or our days again. I did not want to kill her. I only thought I did.

The next morning, when the doctors had finished tending his wife, Constantine came to me. He confessed, in shattered sobs, his fear that last night, drunk, he had ravaged his new wife, forced himself upon her and destroyed her mind. She was too frail. I comforted him, stroking his hand, and agreed to tend his darling in her delirium. I nursed her (and from her) the last three days until we docked, keeping her just below the surface of waking. Then I left them to their guilty incompetencies. May their human frailty unite them. They each could have loved the other.

I claimed my cargo and took a train unnoticed. Anoria would recover swiftly, but would be too embarrassed and too weak to search for me.

I am weaker now than she. And more ashamed. I put my ruined hands above me and push at the rock. I cannot shift it. Its coldness shivers through me and slowly, seeping through the smooth rock, terror shakes me until not even the memory of Anoria can hold it at bay. I feel it. In the darkness all around me, in the airless space, I feel. The horror of my new ability rises against my calm. I have never been inside this stone when I could feel, and even the best remembered pleasures can no longer keep the newness of real sensation from me.

I feel the want of air, the lack of sound, and my sightless shadow, a stupid, mute, and restless thing, waiting. I hate it. It has no thought or feeling, it only is, which is why I keep it here. I crowd myself against the cold stone away from it, but it is shadow in darkness, a ghost in wind.

I feel it touch me. I am screaming.

Empty-handed, Dominic stalked the corridor, Cro-Magnon in his gait and rage. The garden's unbarred gate stood open, and he walked resolutely through it to the tree. He did not run. He did

not even hurry. With her sisters drinking vicariously from Ophelia's desire spilled out across the ballroom floor, Olivia was safe. Nothing rushed Dominic, but nothing could have stopped him.

He dropped to his knees before the tree, and grimly thrust his hands deep into the blackness at its roots. The snake writhed around his wrists and up his tattooed forearms in rivers of molten gold and red. He grasped at it, but the smooth body slid between his hands and around them, winding and pulsing. Dominic seized a closing coil and dragged it up into the garden's weird light. He threw the twist onto the grass and pinned it with the full weight of his body against the ground. Still, it flowed under his broad palms endlessly, like flood water beneath an old bridge.

"Come out!" he howled into the empty garden, into the slithering hole, but the mirroring darkness only whipped through his hands. He drove his bare heel into the snake's flesh to hold it, but it slithered ceaselessly.

Then the snake's cool voice came from a golden bough above him. "Ah, isn't that always the way?"

Dominic tore his gaze from the undulations beneath his knee and hands. How had the damned thing wound itself into the branches? The serpent flowed across bark, unperturbed by the detour its body took through Dominic's bare hands and beneath his naked foot.

"Isn't *what* always the way?" Dominic stood up panting, uncomprehending.

"Truth slips through your hands."

"You aren't truth. You're the devil."

"Are you prepared to explain the difference?"

Dominic took a step toward the glittering eyes, reaching for the shimmering head, and tripped over the coil at his feet. He sprawled on the ground. Softer, at least, than the dance floor. The snake wound around his ankles and along his thigh. Dominic struggled to stand, but could not. Cool, hard circles of sliding snake pinned his arms against his sides. Dominic shuddered. A slender, dank sliver licked the opening of his ear. He smashed his head against the ground.

“Get off me!” he shouted.

“You called for me.”

Dominic’s full strength strained against the tightening spirals that enclosed him, but nothing gave.

“Dominic, what did you come here seeking?” the snake hissed in his exposed ear.

Dominic struggled to breathe in the snake’s cold grasp. The intercostal muscles he needed to expand his lungs against the embracing coil seemed too small, by contrast, to the constricting mass.

The snake’s sibilant voice showered spittle into his ear. “Or did you only come to fight?”

“I came here to understand where the hell I am. I came here to make you tell me what this place really is,” Dominic panted.

Undulating against him, the snake’s body slowed, and the pressure on Dominic’s torso eased slightly.

“What do you think it is, Dominic?”

“I think it is the dangerous offspring of Gaehod’s extraordinary wealth and complete insanity.”

“A worthy pedigree. Madness has many children, but few grow more swiftly than those she births to power. This country is speckled with that brood. Have you done any sightseeing in Ireland, Dominic?”

Dominic struggled for deeper breaths. He was at risk of hyperventilating, and nothing would be more dangerous than to lose consciousness in the embrace of this snake. “Not much,” he answered.

“Been to Blarney?”

“No.”

“That’s a pity. You should try to see more of your world.” Dominic found he could almost free his right hand from beneath one of the sparkling, pinioning spirals. “I will. But first, tell me where I am now.”

“Why?”

“Because if I know where I am, I’ll know what to do.”

“Information is not toxic to indecision,” the snake observed. Dominic managed to push a thumb free. “Of course,” the whisper continued, “I could tell you something that would make up your mind about what to do next, but you could know the exact nature of this place, understand precisely what it is, how it is constructed, and still not know what to do.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“True.” The snake’s suspended head seemed to nod. “Sense is not a made thing. Not something you can construct from the materials you have at hand.” Dominic flexed his wrist and slipped his hand from beneath the rope of muscle that bound it. He opened and closed the fingers cautiously.

“All this industrious construction!” the snake whispered. “Such busy little beavers, making up your minds, building knowledge, forming conclusions. Your vast, pathetic aspiration is to take one more step down the path of Bacon and Skinner, but there are secrets down unblazed trails and constellations in undiscovered stars.” Dominic ground his free fingers into the soft earth.

The snake flicked its tongue against Dominic’s earlobe and slid its hard, round head down his throat toward the tree. “To see truly new things,” the snake whispered, “you need new ways of seeing. Every time you invent a new lens, there are new things to observe through it. Every listening device brings new sounds. What speaks to you now that you simply do not possess the tools to hear?” Dominic anchored his heel against the dirt. The snake’s head glided up the tree toward a low-hanging fruit. “What confronts you that you still do not see because you lack the way of looking? What do you do when you know there are unknowable things?”

Bracing himself against the earth with foot and hand, Dominic abruptly arched against the winding snake. He yanked himself free and, grappling an armload of the undulating coils against his bare chest, threw himself over the roiling mass. The snake’s forward motion stopped. It brought its eyes level with Dominic’s, squeezed closed against the effort it required to hold so much writhing strength compressed in his arms.

“Knowledge can’t give you what you want to know,” the snake whispered.

“The first time I met you,” Dominic panted, “you said you were more than knowledge, you said you were inspiration and insight.”

“That was hardly the first time we met. And you don’t believe in inspiration.”

Dominic tightened his arms, working every fiber of his strength. He squeezed the throbbing coils in his arms and felt the snake subtly deflate. “Convince me,” he choked. “Inspire me.”

The tremor that ran through the snake could have been a laugh or a shudder. “So you’ll wring inspiration from the devil?” it said.

Grunting with the effort, Dominic tightened his hold on the serpent yet again. The creature’s rippling body tangled with the static tattoos that spiraled Dominic’s arm until he had to look away from the illusion that his arms were snakes. “Go on,” he panted, “prove to me that inspiration is anything but the clever conjunction and realignment of things I already know.”

“You really don’t understand, do you?” The weight under Dominic’s body began to flow again. “Proof belongs to the surface world. You can prove facts. You can’t prove meanings. Wrong vocabulary, wrong tools. Your quest to have the world make sense, to force it to conform to patterns you already know, is an impossible desire. Impossible desires are their own hell, with their own angels, and angels—always—can get you closer to God.”

“I am so fucking sick of angels!” Dominic shouted. “I’m not a character in a goddamn fable, and I don’t want an allegory or a symbolic explanation.”

The snake laughed. “You are a man, like Everyman.”

“I just want to understand reality. That’s all. Not meanings, not interpretations, just what’s actually out there.”

“Do you, for a moment, think you have the proper tools, the proper framework, even the proper sensory organs to perceive, much less to understand, what’s ‘actually out there’?”

“I want to understand as much as I can.”

“And if you could understand more than you do right now? I have dropped apples on heads before Newton’s.”

“I understand Newton’s universe. We’ve transcended it.”

“Very good, ready for the next step out?” The snake’s bunched body spilled easily from Dominic’s arms. Had he ever had hold of it? He had thought he was winning, but now that seemed impossible.

“Did you know that snakes once had wings?” the serpent asked, flowing smoothly toward its tree again. “It’s true. We spanned the earth and sky, creatures of the material and etheric worlds—a perfect paradox. What do you call a winged snake, Dominic?”

Dominic scrambled to his feet, away from the hole the snake thrust its tail into. It must be nearly bottomless to house such lengths of slithering, and the garden was on the lowest floor. Such depth was hideously visceral to Dominic. It frightened him, which made him angry. “I don’t know,” he growled, “a dragon?”

“That’s right! Across the globe, God is not so universal in cultures and stories as dragons are. We could breathe fire when we flew, and water when we swam. We were everywhere once, with a foot on each side of a paradox. It’s why we’re footless now.” The snake slipped backwards into its hole. “That’s where you are now—caught against the actual nature of reality.”

Only the flickering tongue of the snake protruded from the bottomless pit it dwelt within—its tongue, and its even deeper eyes. Its voice was just a hiss. “But here’s the secret of the garden, my friend. Some of you can find in my wrack’s horizontal stretch, a vertical reach. Raise yourself to Eden before the fork in the road, the fork in the tongue, the forked pre-fall nondual, my poor, bare, forked animal. Make my wrack a ladder.”

The snake's voice was receding. Dominic lay on his naked belly in the grass, peering into the blackness. "Can you teach me how?" he asked and pressed his ear over the hole to listen.

The snake's voice was barely audible from the depths of the hole. "Push man into woman and find oneness once more," it whispered. "Lose yourself in another, and find yourself in love."

The sound I make reaches my ears and hurts them. It reaches nothing else. My quills are achingly dull, but I blunt them more with scratching, scoring the stone above my head, and screaming. Shadow brushes over my face, my eyes wildly staring, but it is just the dust of the rock I tear at, falling down on me. I cannot turn over; the space is too constricted, closing in with my shadow's deaf advance.

I gather my soul to spriek, twist my body hard against the rock, away from the creeping, rising touch of shadow, but I cannot inhale. I will breathe the shadow in. And my sisters will not come.

Please, I do not want to drown on my shadow. I want my slow starvation, my numbness, and my beauty back. I gulp the air in terror. Shadow touches my foot. I coil up my leg and twist to pull it under me. I tear again at the stone, feeling my flawless flesh shred. Shadow touches my scar-marked back. I spin to push it against the stone. It touches my navel. My torn hands flail, clawing, but it is only shadow. I cannot touch it, or fight it back, or block it.

It rests on my chest. I cannot breathe to scream again. It touches my breast. I am panting. My breasts have never known touch. I cross my arms across my chest, draw up my knees. It's on my breast again. I have pulled it closer. I uncoil and whip wildly at my body, to push my clinging shadow from me, but it ripples out from every touch, spreading over me like fire catching.

It touches both my breasts. I press my hands hard against the low roof stone and feel the cold rock against my palms. Feel the cold nothing of darkness upon each breast. I scream for Gaehod, and throw all my failing strength against the stone. I am flailing without control, coldness touching everything. I scream and scream for God.

Silence invades me.

Desire presides over many things. It is the guardian angel of ambition and adultery, of flirtation and assassination. It was worshiped once. A devotee of mine, a queen, was taken with her husband's slave, and bound to him. My splintering mind scrambles to remember her, the godking's wife, stripped and tied to a strong board, her legs pulled wide. They thrust a carved phallus between her thighs and forced a stone between her teeth. The pharaoh's slave they drugged to sleeping and they forced his mouth, too, and placed it over her, open mouth over open mouth, and used the linen mummy strips to bind them.

Twist over twist, they tied his arms around her, and hers across him. They wrapped them thigh to thigh, breast to chest, bound together, frozen lovers battling, and left them in the tomb to die. My worshipper's screaming did not wake her lover until the draught wore off. Terror, and then exhaustion, and then terrible thirst took them. And madness. And then death, the queen before the slave, who felt his lover's body finally become still, then cold, then rigid and swelling. It took three days. I will take millennia and still not die. I will only fade. Into a ghost, a shade. *Oh God—into a shadow!*

I am screaming again, bloodying my fists and knees and the soles of my feet against the stone slab over me. I must get out of here, away from that thing, this insistent darkness. The horror mounts and mounts and will not be denied. The shadow touches me, climbs over me, mindless, stupid, mute. It feathers across my breasts and elbows, seeps between me and the rock, against me, beneath my clothes. It insinuates itself between my toes and pushes down into my ears. I pound my head to shake it free, but it climbs between my hairs and pushes down my scalp. It slides over my closed eyes. It curls against my nostrils. It worms between my clamped thighs. Now I cannot scream or blink. It is poised against the hole in the center of my eyes. Why can I feel this? All the nights I slept with this black darkness and felt no fear. I asked for this. I asked for feeling.

I have felt him touch me. I saw him see me. And I did not feed. The spreek tears my throat unbidden. They will hear it and laugh. My angels do not love me. They rushed to save my sister, but even in their urgency, in the terror of her bleeding cry, they stopped to bury me. Does it mean I matter to them more that they attended to my death before Ophelia's? Does she matter to them at all? They will sharpen her broken teeth, grind down the jagged, bleeding edges with their own mouths, but they will drink from her while they do. Her blood matters to them. It's as close as they get to love.

I am cast out. *Again*. Damned and more damned, by God and now by family. I came here to be myself without apology, but even in Hell, I cannot be accepted.

No. He cannot.

I open my lips to say his name, and shadow licks them. This is how hope dies at last, thrashing wildly from stone to stone, on broken wings, in the dark, alone. My shadow touches me again, scrapes the smooth, closed place between my legs and digs at the hard center of my eyes. My shadow is the closest thing I will have to a legacy, the only thing I ever made. I feel its touch on my lips. I have tasted few things, and all on the blood of mortals. This is the taste of despair. I want to spit it out.

If I had kissed Dominic in the garden, if I had bitten him in the abbey, I would not have this in my mouth. I cannot close my weak lips against it. My jaws unhinge. It runs into my mouth, against my throat, too heavy to hold closed against it. It weighs against my tongue, pushes behind my teeth, pours over my gums and down my cheeks, distending my lips, pushing, pouring until I can no longer hold my throat closed against it. Retching, I swallow.

It is cold in me. It worms up from between my thighs, and down my throat, into my pupils, my nostrils, my ears. But it does not become me. It swallows me, but I am gulping, too. We flow into one another, and my starved body will no longer be denied. It eats and is eaten, desire and its disappointment, feeding. This will change me. And as my shadow's dark weight envelops me at last, I know how.

Dominic lay on his belly in the cool, black grass, seething. "Love? Love is the answer? Christ! If you think for a minute I'm going to buy that sophomoric bullsh—"

He was flying backwards as the snake shot from its hole. Its massive weight landed heavily on his chest, writhing over the sprawled length of his battered body, and it thrust piercingly sharp teeth into the depths of his ear. Dominic shouted with pain and felt blood well from the deep tympanic puncture.

“No!” the snake screeched soundlessly. “How do you make two into one? I just told you.”

The horror of the writhing body’s crushing weight pushed Dominic toward panic. He was losing it. Losing his grip, his sanity. The enormity of his isolation and abandonment shook him. Had the snake’s bite poisoned him?

“Fuck you!” he spat between clenched teeth, flat on his back.

“Not me!” The snake’s roar twisted through the blood in his ear. It reared up from Dominic’s chest, its smooth, blunt head swaying over him, questioning.

Did Dominic actually understand? He forced his eyes closed against the snake’s hypnotic dance.

“You get pretty close, don’t you?” The serpent’s sibilant voice whispered in Dominic’s mind as much as in his bleeding ear. “Touching heaven and gutter, orgasm-blind seeing self and other? Your recreational re-creating of creation procreates. Sex apes God, and creates life.”

“And pushes us into duality again,” Dominic whispered.

“Very good!” The snake dropped his head, its forked, black tongue flickering over Dominic’s bare chest. “Two made one makes a third, a child, who will be both yours and his own,” it hissed.

“So now even sex is a symbol?”

The sinuous snake danced, overtly erotic, across Dominic’s chest, but his mind clung to the intellectual puzzle the snake had dangled.

“Terribly elegant, don’t you think?” it whispered. “Powerful, and designed to get your attention.” The snake’s flickering tongue tormented the flesh of his bare chest, still pinned under the undulating coils, one loop of which now spiraled sensually between his legs. “Sex is the clearest instruction you’ll ever get from God.”

Dominic shook his head and wiped the blood from his ear. “That sounds like something the devil would say.”

“And yet you came to me to have your questions answered, when you could have turned the other way.”

“I thought you might tell me the truth.”

“So I have.”

“Your key to the secret wisdom of the universe is sex? You advise I go find someone to fuck, and all will be revealed?” But even as the words left him, Dominic knew that encoded instructions were often misread. He pondered the neurotoxicity of snake venom, feeling giddy with understanding.

“The advancement of knowledge, your fondest desire, eh? But no, I don’t give advice, just knowledge.” The snake slowed its helixed coiling up the tree. “To question what you think you know, not in light of new information, but in order to bring new information to light, knowing it will ignite and blind you, takes real courage. You have won a friend in me. I’ll tell you a secret as a prize.”

“Thank you. I’d shake your hand, but, you know.”

The snake stopped his spiraling and touched the tip of his midnight tail to its lipless mouth. “It’s enough for me that you were willing. It’s been a long time since anyone has given me their ear.”

“Van Gogh? Romans, countrymen? Besides, I’m hoping that maybe, if I can learn from you now, you won’t sneak up and bite me in the future.”

“No. But I promised you a prize, so I’ll add some information to your wisdom. Your angel is dying.”

“Olivia?”

The snake stabbed his blunt tail into his lipless mouth and swallowed and swallowed. Terror swam up Dominic, but he knew it would be useless to try and squeeze more information from the snake; its mouth was already full.

I swim in darkness. Eyes opened, eyes closed, it makes not a fucking fig of difference. I cannot see. Nothing to see. No one sees me. Around me, inside me, the night of my ageless sarcophagus has swallowed and penetrated me. It pushed itself inside me and pulled me into it until we are one.

I am always falling, but a strange new beauty clings to this descent. I am drowning and do not care to swim. Flying down, hair streaming into tragedy, I could almost welcome the familiar sensation of the plunge, through air and water, through stone and despair and into perfect love. The impact forces a sob from me.

Strange sensation—like a backwards swallow.

I am crying—angels don't cry—I am crying for the beauty of falling, for the night that holds me, and for the darkness I hold. For the stone, that cold and unforgiving womb of earth that traps me in what is real, in rock and bone, in death and love, all dead to me, the Undead.

All I have left of living is recollection. In memory, I trace the smooth planes of Dominic's face and the hard lines that scored it in the ballroom before he kissed me. Every place our bodies touched throbs again with cushioned stabs in the darkness. I close my eyes. In the warmth of memory, his kiss stretches, curling fresh fingers of pleasure into my imperfect flesh. It elongates, and I notice, for the first time, his teeth's brief grind of desperation before he kissed me, as if they seized and tore away some final veil between my mouth and his surrender.

He caught my shoulders first, to cushion the crashing of his hard body into mine, to not hurt me, to pull me to him without stopping. His strong hands grasped and clutched my body closer, nearer, until he gentled them enough to take my face. In the cold stone, I hear the shudder of his steadying inhalation. His stone-blue eyes pierced mine, dove in hard, then skimmed my face. Had he been frightened? Washed in sensation, I sway in his fierce arms and whisper his name, "Dominic."

I slide my ruined fingertips against my lips. The shiver of his passion, kissing me, trembles deeper now against my swallowed shadow. My body is taut as the strings of a lute, stretched so that even an artless touch can make the humming vibrations heard. He kissed me then, and the resonance of his hard mouth calls my hesitating fingers to strum clumsily against my shuddering flesh now. His beautiful lips barely brushed mine first, but that had been too much tenderness, and his next desperate kiss brought his mouth and tongue hard and seeking.

Careful, in my private darkness, I touch my new fingers to the soft velvet encasing my living flesh. I trace the memory of his strong, steadfast body against me. His demanding kiss opened my lips, my face in his trembling hands. I rub the crown of my full breasts beneath the silken cloth. His sweet tongue coursed through me, marking the keen height of my breasts, but I cannot find the same center of pleasure within them now. The fabric mutes my touch.

The stone's coldness against my twisting arm adds a chill shiver in the cramped black when I reach to find the back zip. I pull it down, and the boned and tailored vest jumps free. I had never noticed how hard it holds my body in. My freed flesh feels vulnerable without its borrowed hide, more responsive—open and exposed. I run my raw hands over my warm belly and across my breasts in a rush of pleasure just to be released.

Then I find his seeking mouth in memory again. I kissed just the softest lower lip then, and he made a little sound, a stifled groan, and opened his mouth to me. Turning his copper head, he brought our tongues and lips, mouths and bodies still closer, and my fingers dust the places where our bodies touched. The caress both surfaces the pleasure, and sends it diving to my core.

Some buried heart—long-dead or never animate—flutter-pulses deep below my waist. The wonder of it sends my eyes searching open in the darkness. *Remember!* His strong arms wrapped around me, pulling my body hard against his. My fingers pass again over the peaks of my new and naked breasts. His starving kiss plunges into me, and against my gulping shock and joy, true feeling runs through me, dancing over and behind my shuddering breasts.

Fear starts to prick in my throat with the drenching pleasure, too powerful, unknown, and unfathomable. My legs shudder with my breathing, staggerings of air. The new inverted liquid peak between my softening thighs reaches deeper into me. I whisper “Dominic,” my lips soaked in the swirling scent of pure potent feminine desire.

Impossible.

I taste the dark air again.

But it is. My own desire. My teeth and nails are blunt. I keen the edges and feel—not my own—but my shadow’s breaking through.

With shadow’s black, sharp teeth, I sink untested quills into my flesh. The first taste wracks me, sob and swallow, but desire fills my starving mouth. Scent tumbles into the sterile space, and sensation breaks in lapping shudders. I taste the fingers of the driver from Dublin, automotive oil and beer, and Irish cigarettes. Sweeter now than before, full of flavor and a strange new taste. I suck again. The tiny taste I had from Dominic the night I offered him an apple and cut his bold fingers with my dull blades. “Dominic,” I whisper again. He is safe on his way to Dublin now.

Drenching, worming newness comes in the tastes I have tasted, in the drinking I have drunk. This is pleasure, washing, illuminating. I taste strength and dawning power, and the bitter taste of my shadow mingled with what I have made and what I have taken, the blood of men and angels.

The blood comes slower to my shadow's feeding teeth. I withdraw the slender edges and feel them fold deep against my own quills, secret in my gums. I lick the broken place on my arm to savor the last sweet seeping from the closing holes, and the bruise ache in the flesh beneath my tongue. Sensation eddies and a soft smile floats across my lips, atop my breasts, and in the secret place shadow has left between my legs.

Desire, be silent. Run down my throat. I remind myself of its fading. Savor, and the taste of tea. I swim in perfection.

Dominic scrubbed his poisoned ear, impatient with the tickle of blood from the snake's bite. His hand came away sticky and red. Shirtless and shoeless, with blood on his hands and on his feet and chest, he looked around the dim garden wildly. Where was Olivia? Hell was vast. She could be anywhere within it.

Dominic racked his memory for everything Ophelia had told him about the way angels die. If she faded to the point where she could no longer feed, he could never get her back. Delusional or not, she was in real danger. He wanted to shield her from the macabre weirdness of her sisters and the hotel. Delusion and reality didn't matter—maybe they were the same—hell, maybe he really was what Gaehod said. It didn't matter. Finding Olivia was everything.

Dominic ran through the distorting garden light, almost hoping it was all real. He could give her all of himself that way, and find her again lifetime after lifetime. He could bear the endless returning, if he could find her in it. But he had to find her in this present first. The blood oozing in his throbbing ear was maddening. He bounded up the stairs from the garden, wiping his bloody hands on his jeans. At the top, he shoved his finger in his bleeding ear.

"Dominic."

It was Olivia's voice. He whipped around, looking behind him. Nobody. He closed his damaged ear again with a stained and tentative hand. Where was her voice? Dominic strode down the hallway, listening. Silence. Again he plugged his ear and heard her angelic voice, but more distant. He ran the other direction, down the stairs back toward the wide, barless gates. At the threshold, he stopped again and listened.

"Dominic."

She sounded weak—but closer. Dominic ran down the corridor, across the stained floor where his bare feet had tracked blood from the ballroom. He hesitated at that doorway. He heard Ophelia moaning, but not Olivia again.

"Dominic!" Sylvia's voice cut through him. "You owe my sister blood! Come feed Ophelia of your free will, or I shall bring you to her dead."

How the hell could he hear Olivia with that bitch screaming at him?

Dominic plugged the bleeding ear again and listened.

"I want." Olivia's voice was faint but constant.

Dominic ran. He ran full-tilt, following the disembodied voice of a dying angel in his punctured ear, ready to lay down his life for her desire.

10

DEATH

“I want,” I whisper, like a bell pounding the hours in me. “I want. I want. I want.”

I want Dominic. And freedom. I want to do things I have done and not noticed. I want to be things I have dreamed and not seen. I want to live. I want without reason, unseen, and by myself alone. “I want. I want. I want.” Tolling rhythmic as a bass drum, or a heartbeat.

I want things I cannot have, and the longing aches, vibrating through every shivering sinew stretched on my mortal powerless-ness to realize divine desire. I want out. Angels might be what is wanted and not what wants, but I know with certainty that I want the fuck out of my coffin. I want to stand up again.

Weighed down by my mingled bone and shadow, I reach slowly for the stone slab above me and push. With all of my old strength and new desire, I press up against the roof of my coffin. The stone is rough and dusty against my too-soft fingers. And too heavy.

“Help?” I whisper to the silent blackness wound around and through me.

I need help.

My angelic body is invincible, and my arms sculpted perfection in pure marble, but my back is a woman’s still, strong to carry and to bear weight that would break the arms of men. The idea comes like a sob, unbidden and almost too late. I twist onto my belly, brace my torn hands and knees, and set my spine against the stone. I press.

I hear the cold mass grind. Blood from my back pricks sticky against the rock. I scramble in the dark for something soft to pad it, cramming whatever my groping hands find between my yielding flesh and the unfeeling stone. I throw myself against it again, pushing hard away with the full strength of arms, legs, and back, groaning. *Move*. It must. It has to. I have to. There is nothing more.

Dominic's chest, blood-streaked and bare, strained against the air he gulped, hands on knees, doubled over in the grand foyer, ringed with a timid floss of cultured confusion. The only sound in the abruptly silenced space was the rasp of his raw panting and the pounding of his heart.

"He does it for the exercise."

Dominic blinked and rubbed trickling sweat away from his eyes. The crowd turned from him to Alyx, sprawled inelegantly in the same high, wingbacked chair, Dominic's untouched breakfast balanced on an impatient, spinning tray beside him.

Dominic shook his head. "Find Olivia," he gasped.

Alyx gathered the flaps of his bathrobe around himself and tugged at the silk necktie belting it. He lurched to his feet.

"Dude, you look like shit."

"Where's Olivia?" Dominic straightened and gripped his hands over his head, trying to calm his riotous heart and lungs enough to run again.

"Is that your blood?" Alyx steadied himself against the high chair's back.

Dominic glanced down at his bare chest and bloodstained pants. He shook his head. “Ophelia.”

“Never liked her,” Alyx shrugged. “Too skinny. Vivian on the other hand, all that leather, the whips . . .” Alyx gave a gleeful growl low in his ruined throat.

Dominic clamped his punctured ear again and heard, too many stories over him, the grotesque grinding of stone on flesh.

“*Sugar, sugar, sugar . . .*” Alyx sang, half sauntering, half falling across the lobby toward him.

“Help?” whispered his angel.

“Olivia!”

Alyx fell into a closer chair and shrugged. “Her room’s up there,” he said.

Dominic hauled the withered rock star to standing. “I have to find her,” he panted. “She’s in trouble. Might be dying—fading.”

From behind the purple lenses of his brass goggles, Alyx’s muddy eyes searched Dominic’s. “Look, I don’t know shit, but I know breakdowns, dude, and you’re about to have one.”

Dominic shook the man again. “I have to find her.”

“Check her room.”

“Where?”

“Seventh floor. Halfway between the first door and the next.”

Dominic nodded and filled his searing lungs to run. “Go get Gaehod, okay, Alyx?” he said. “Tell him to find Olivia. Sylvia is hunting for me, and if she finds me, she’ll kill us both.”

“Dude . . .”

“Alyx!”

“Yeah?”

Dominic scrubbed his bloody ear in frustration and froze, sickened by what he heard—the unmistakable sound of Olivia’s perfect body giving way, pressed, and breaking. But it was close. “Go get Gaehod!” he shouted at Alyx and stumbling, threw himself into running again, up the spiraling hall. Up and up, to her.

I brace my bleeding back, padded now with my velvet shirt and severed wings, against the stone a final time. Desire is immortal and impossible. The damned have no pleasure in memory, but I have eddied in its sweet appreciation. I have stroked my memories, stirred them to yawning and curled myself around them, drenching and sweet.

I grimace with pain, and remember Dominic’s unfurled hands as he stood leaning, laughing with me over the railing at L’Otel Matillide’s domed peak, looking down the spiraling stairs into the pit, into reception and the milling damned who did not see us, Reborn and Undead, watching them from above.

I stretch my bruised body, ragged from battering rock. I will fight it again, but not now. The pulling muscles howl under my dusty skin, and I reach for another memory. I want Gaehod. I want to see the insane old man who built this wild, vast mansion inverted in the ground. I want to sit again in his study—the belly of the beast, or the brain stem, drinking tea. For connoisseurs of blood and wine and poison, he pours out his little, stemless cups, every blend of leaf and herb unique. Right there, at the hub of Hell, Gaehod's wide-awake calm beckons, and I lap at the memory. It is all I have to drink.

Dominic was close. He struggled to calm the rebellious symphony of his screaming flesh enough to hear his angel caught in stone. He listened. A sob? A whisper. Here? He glanced up the long corridor and back again behind him. Doors lined the hallway. There were so many rooms, and any of them might hold Olivia. Dominic listened again, his bleeding ear against the door nearest him. Nothing. And then, a sound.

A sob?

No, but her voice, and he threw himself against the door.

Dominic is gone. He's safe and distant by now from this mad place, and though it breaks my new heart, I am grateful.

I make a sound like a sob, but it isn't. I loved him and it has set him free.

Maybe a hiccup?

Dominic saw me and loved me and it got him out of Hell. I have been his loophole. The sound comes again, and I know what it is.

I spent millennia searching for a mortal love to lift me to Heaven.

I have loved a mortal and been trapped by angels in Hell.

I am laughing out loud.

The antique brass lock gave way beneath the force of Dominic's shoulder and he tumbled into a dark room furnished in the standard Hotel of the Damned eclectic style. A lean and modern wardrobe occupied one wall with Scandinavian solemnity, while an elaborately carved Victorian bed, draped and curtained in patterned red velvet and exuberant silks, filled the far wall.

Urgency warred with caution in his still-hammering chest while he scanned the light and dark woods for some sign of Olivia. He spotted a blue and gold shawl draped over a massive red stone box that, at first glance, he had thought was part of the living stone wall. Could the sound he had heard come from that? He shoved the star-dappled cloth aside and ran his bloody palms over the cold stone.

"Olivia," he called softly, "are you here?"

I am screaming. The sound bounces back at me from the stone that holds me. Seconds distort like blood dreams and with a violent rebound. The full flood of Dominic runs over me. His kiss, his betrayal. He should be miles away. He must be safe. I accepted this endless black to get him out of Hell. Why is his voice seeping through the rock, calling to me, not in memory or dream?

"Olivia?" His voice is louder now, an invocation.

“Olivia?” A third time, “Can you hear me?”

I scream his name in rage and terror, forcing the power of both against the rock lid.

Dominic ran his bloodstained fingers along the rough seam of the dry stone lid. He ground the heels of his hand against the edge and pushed, but the rock was almost level with his head, too high for him to get a purchase on, and he could not bring much force against it. Adrenaline and will had dragged him here, dashing through Hell’s corridors and open spaces. Now they were poisoning him. Or maybe the snake. Neurotoxic venom could explain a lot.

Shaking, he leaned heavily against the stone that he had no sane reason to think imprisoned a woman whom he had no logical reason to believe was in danger.

Dominic’s shoulder throbbed from the impact with the door. He looked across the room at it, standing open, the jamb splintered where he had torn the lock’s strike plate away from the wood. His reptilian nature had driven him to this irrational behavior. It would take hours to make sense of it—to discover where Olivia was, what had happened, what it all meant. For all he knew, this barren place wasn’t even her room.

Dominic looked around. He opened the wardrobe too forcefully and the black beads of captured energy rained down its back and disappeared into the floor. The closet held Hell’s “outsider” uniform: black leather and velvet, high lace-up boots and heavy belts. No books, no papers. No name. Dominic pulled back the bed curtains that rolled on channeled cogs. He gazed down onto the bed’s pristine expanse of silk, hearing the gears still turning. In Hell’s biosphere, not even the energy of pulling back the curtains for the night was wasted.

My voice breaks. He cannot hear me. And I no longer can hear him. Has he left? My legs slip out from under me, my arms shaking. I lie still in my coffin, exhausted. My angelic strength and mortal will are gone. I am fading.

Dominic picked up the strike plate from the carpet and placed it on the graceful Art Nouveau table by the door. The elegant, bent-wood piece held only a strangely iridescent, beautifully curved teapot. Dominic glanced again at the massive stone box, and ran weary fingers across the pot's fragile, translucent porcelain. Modern in design, with a wide, shocking red horizontal stripe bold across the middle of the classic spout, belly, and handle, he knew without looking that the maker's mark and number on the bottom would be from one of the old houses.

Dominic put the teapot down.

His strong fingers dug hard into wood. The frame of Olivia's door groaned under the pull, like a bow bent to the arrow.

My angelic hearing pricks me.

I scramble to my battered knees again. The hard gasps of a man preparing his lungs to dive terrify me. *Dominic, what are you doing?*

Then footsteps, propelled from the doorway's slingshot, run headlong at me. Toward my immutable sarcophagus, a missile, a battering ram, runs to drive his mortal body against the lid and push it back to free me. If it does not slide, it will kill him.

Level with his eyes, the split in the stone Dominic held targeted for impact flashed like the teapot's red stripe. He ran toward it with all his gathered strength and speed. He gathered power swiftly, pumping his runner's arms wildly, although he planned to throw them over his head before he hit the rock. He would shift the lid or break his skull against it.

Olivia was inside, and he intended to set her free.

“I want him to live.” Pure desire now, I’m whispering on my knees in the dark not damned.

I throw everything I am and want into my bleeding back against the stone. The cold weight of the coffin lid yawns, tilts, and crashes down.

I uncurl, dropping my shredded red corset to the ground, stand, and spread my tattered wings.

The impact exploded red in Dominic’s gut and teeth. It threw him backwards. The sprawl surprised him as much as the shift.

But the stone had shifted.

He sat up, bloody and sick. Reality skittered across the floor-boards on clattering claws. Everything he knew or believed in was wrong. Above him, bare-breasted, wings spread, a ghostly angel shimmered through the pounding redness. The room lurched. Dominic struggled not to vomit. His forearms, where they had hit the stone lid of the sarcophagus, were already showing bruises. He touched his fingers to his head, and they came away bloody. He knew something about head trauma, but couldn’t remember what.

The angel stood over him, eyes unseeing, black hair pouring over her bare, white shoulders and across her naked breasts. Why was she shirtless? She held her pale arms outstretched. Behind them, massive, white wings spread, shimmering six feet at least, on either side. No Renaissance artist, no New Age airbrush, has ever done justice to the pure, unearthly sexual beauty of angels. Dominic blinked. The wings folded and restretched. Her hands reached forward. She swayed, and Dominic realized suddenly that she was in danger of falling.

“Olivia!”

Could she hear him? She trembled, her blind hands reaching. Dominic staggered to his feet.

“Olivia?” he called again, afraid.

How do you approach a blind angel? Magnificent, ethereal, erotic, her wings contracted against her unearthly body with hypnotic grace, their joints forming delicate peaks behind her ears. Her slender arms and shoulders seemed even smaller within the curved frame of feathers. Dominic took a tentative step. She swayed again. Her cloud-gray eyes—profound, but frightened—darted around the room, finally seeing where she was. Dominic squared his battered shoulders against the crushing pain in his head and arms, and stepped closer. Had she whispered to him?

A slender, long-boned hand reached forward, and Dominic took her gentle fingers in his own. Her perfect body tilted toward him and, fearing she would faint, he boldly wrapped his bleeding hands around her waist and lifted her away from the open tomb.

He carried her, trailing long wings, to the curtained bed and carefully placed her inert body within its arching frame. A ridiculous, childish longing yanked at him to simply climb into bed beside her and pull the curtains closed. But Sylvia would not be long in coming. There was no way to hide.

Against the blood-red silk of the coverlet, Olivia’s skin and wings shone pure white. Her black eyelashes shivered against her translucent cheeks. Dominic’s head throbbed with the dull pain of impact and his heart with the harder pulse of fear. The moment Sylvia could leave Ophelia, or safely carry her, she would come hunting him. And Dominic had no doubt she would kill him.

He blinked against the illusion that the complicated carvings on Olivia’s headboard and bedposts were moving. Tortured wooden sinners seemed to contort in burls of mud, wallowing in graven ecstasies. The centerpiece, an altar taken, no doubt, from a decaying Irish cathedral and refashioned for Gaehod’s hotel into a bed, held two carved naked figures standing, legs and arms entwined and whipped by devils in lurid medieval relief. Their bodies were being forced, by the repeated lashings, to pound one another endlessly. Their crime on Earth, their reward in Hell. But the figures held their faces a little bit apart, their eyes, fashioned of small blue stones, were

alone immobile in the writhing wooden mass. He must have knocked himself harder than he had realized.

Olivia's head fell to one side, and her black hair ran over her bare breasts and outstretched arms like clouds across ice. She was deathly pale.

"Olivia?" Dominic's hands felt too big to cup her delicate shoulders, but she must wake up. They had to move.

"Olivia?"

Her ashen lips whispered, and Dominic leaned closer to hear her.

"Olivia?" It was a soundless whisper against her flawless cheek, but she turned her face toward it and his lips met her cool skin. Without his willing it, his mouth touched the place beneath her soft lashes and lingered. She did not move, but the throbbing pain and terror slipped from his lips as he kissed her, and he reached a careful hand to her cheek to turn her face to his. Her pale lips rose like a bubble from the still surface of her lifeless face, and Dominic opened his mouth against them in a kiss that was almost a prayer.

"Olivia?" He spoke it against her mouth, unwilling to take his lips from hers. A slow inhalation lifted her breasts against his supporting arm. He closed his eyes and took her mouth again, a deeper kiss, drawing her willing lips into his, feeling the elastic tenderness of her flesh.

Everything he had feared and never faced, everything he had hoped for and never asked pressed into his fervent kiss, sliding and coursing against her. Her lips trembled under his, and opened. With a stifled gasp, Olivia was living under him, her mouth responding, her hands on his bare shoulders, and her breasts beneath his chest.

Dominic tumbled into a dazzling liquid fire. His body, through its lacerations and contusions, stretched beside Olivia to pull her pliant body against his battered own. Some nameless dread caught in his belly, but he slid his bloodstained hands between her back and wings and rolled over her, the bare flesh of his torso smothered against the rise and fall of her full breasts and sloping waist, and her mouth, under his, kissing him.

“You must flee,” she whispered. Her hands slid across his back, sending radiant shivers of pleasure across his flesh.

“We both must.” Dominic couldn’t stop kissing her to speak, but he forced the words against her lips. “Your sisters blame me for what happened to Ophelia, and they’ve already tried to kill you once. They won’t stop now.”

“I’m too weak.”

“I know.” It took every bit of Dominic’s long-trained and powerful will to take his lips from the mouth that drowned him, but he tore himself from above Olivia’s body to lie beside her again. He wrapped a protective arm around her, and cradled her against his body, pillowing her cool cheek in the hollow of his chest and shoulder. She turned her beautiful face up to him, but he forced his eyes away from her tidal pull. Instead, drawing her closer, he touched the sweet, swollen pink of her nipple. She shuddered. He traced the high tenderness with the ball of his thumb, feeling her body tremble against his, watching the flesh gather and harden until she moaned.

“I have never felt this—never felt anything—before you,” she whispered. Her eyes were closed, a look of painful concentration on her face.

“I know.” Dominic wanted to kiss her trembling breast, wanted to climb her desire higher, give her all sensation, every pleasure. It would be simple. He gently pinched the reddening flesh of her shuddering nipple, winding the fingers of his other hand into her hair to pull her face against his throat.

Her mouth opened against his neck. She stiffened, but he pressed her closer. Hard teeth caught on his flesh. He stroked her breast again.

“Dominic—” She pushed away, but he held her.

“Dominic, no!”

His desperate mouth was in her flowing hair. He held her face against his carotid pulse. “You have to.” His voice sounded strange in his own ears. “You are starving, and your sisters are on their way.” He knew it as the words left him. They were carrying the screaming Ophelia off the ballroom floor.

“I can’t. My quills are too dull. It would hurt you.”

“I don’t care.”

“The punctures would be huge—gashes.”

“I don’t care.”

Dominic felt Sylvia scream his name in the garden. She was hunting him, and her rage echoed painfully in the bones of his feet.

“I don’t know if I could stop in time.” Olivia’s voice was raw. “It could kill you.”

“Your sisters will kill us both.”

Her slender body convulsed against his, and then she was above him, hair spilling over his face, nipples hard against his chest. Despite the danger, the sisters prowling the black garden grass searching, Dominic's cock gave a primitive pulse against the fork of Olivia's legs opened over him. "You must leave here!" she pleaded. "I will go to my sisters. I will buy you time. Go back to the garage, take a bike, and get the fuck away before they scent you."

Dominic lay on his back against the red silk and smiled. Framed by her shimmering, outstretched wings, Olivia's white face and depthless eyes shone with a breathtaking beauty. He was willing. He wanted to. Not to flee, not leave without her—that was out of the question—but to die with her. To stay here, dreaming in the drowning desire to taste and touch and pleasure her. Until her vengeful sisters came and killed them both.

A hard, flat line caught his eye across the soft curling sweep of her pure white wings. He squinted at it. From behind her, the harsh outline of her exploded crypt shone through her torso and wings. She was becoming transparent.

"I'm Reborn, right?" he whispered. "I'll come back to you."

"You don't believe that." Olivia shook her head, black rivulets winding around her face. Dominic pushed a slender tendril behind her ear, allowing his fingers to trace the graceful sweep from fragile lobe to trembling chin. He raked the pad of her inviting lips, and she closed her fathomless eyes.

He drew her face toward his. "I love you," he whispered, his eyes clamped against the pain that choked him.

"I love you," he said again and kissed her soundlessly. He held her hard by the fragile slope of her waist. "I'm not leaving."

“Dominic!” She brought her lips to his. The delicate tips of her breasts touched his hammering chest. What he felt would strangle him, if he kissed her mouth again.

“Olivia, I can face it all again, but I have to know I can find you. You have to be here when I come back. If I die knowing that the memory of you will resurface for me, that I can love you again, then I’m glad for my curse. But, Olivia, God, Olivia, if you die . . .” A tear slid between their cheeks, pressed together, and Dominic could not have said if it was hers or his. “You have to let me feed you. It’s the only way.”

Olivia’s voice was choked. “Dominic, it may already be too late.”

“It can’t be. I love you. Doesn’t that have to change something?” The sob that shook her was almost a word. “What did you say—loophole? What does that mean? Olivia, is there something special about blood that’s freely given? About love?”

“I don’t know.”

“But there could be?”

“I used to think so.”

“Well let’s believe that now, okay? Let’s try,” he whispered.

The howl of outraged vampires shook the garden, half a mile below.

“Either you kill me or your sisters do, and at least if it’s you, you’ll be strong enough to fight them. And, Olivia, I’m coming back.”

“Can you? Will you?”

“I swear it.”

Her black hair rained around them, enclosing them in a torrent of silk and silent beauty. Her kisses lit separate fires in him, behind his eyes, deep in his belly. They ignited and lingered, spread and engulfed him. And he let them rage. He withstood a firestorm of kisses on his cheeks and lips against the flat of chest. Her fingers ran molten up his arms and into his hair. Then Olivia was standing by the bed.

“Olivia!” he cried.

“I’m not leaving.” Her voice was flat. Dominic watched the shadows of the room play across and—horribly—through her. “I’ll stay with you and I’ll do what you ask, but I need something from you first.”

Dominic pushed himself up on the bed. The sisters were stalking the lowest halls.

“Anything.”

“Make love to me.”

“I thought you couldn’t . . .”

“I don’t know if I can. But until today I couldn’t know pleasure. Before I . . . Before you . . .” Olivia peeled her pants off and stood before him naked. “I want to try.”

Dominic climbed off the massive bed to stand silently beside her. He took her face between his hands and kissed her again, long and painful and slow. If he came back and found her gone, he would not be able to live. He would hole up in this grotesque hotel and spend the rest of his incarnations in madness.

“You never felt pain before today either.”

“No.”

“It might . . .”

The vampires were swarming the lobby now.

“You just asked me to kill you.” Hysteria tinged her perfect voice. “You want me to drive my dull quills into your neck and drain your life from you in the remote hope that you’ll remember and find me again in however many years it takes you to reincarnate. You’re asking me to knowingly kill the only man—hell the only thing, mortal or divine—that I have ever loved. I want to feel this first.”

If she faded into nothingness in his arms while he made love to her, he would live and die regretting without end what he could not change. But she had lived since the beginning of time, inspiring what she could not feel.

Silently, he undressed. He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her to him. He kissed her smooth belly and ran his greedy hands up to her high breasts and down her slender back beneath the gorgeous wings. He stroked her, wondering at the supple texture and smooth, lean form of her. His thumbs pushed up the rise of her thighs to circle the silky nest of black hair that crowned them. He looked up, but her eyes were closed, her body swaying. He pushed his fingers between her yielding thighs and felt the ocean softness of her. His cock ached.

“Do I . . . ?” she whispered.

He slid a finger against the warmth and darkness. “Yes.”

He bowed his head to kiss her over the dark curls and stopped. Her sisters were climbing the stairs. And she was fading. A blue shadow, eerily like letters, played against the taut clear white of her flesh. Sylvia screamed, cursing him in the torn-open door of his downstairs room.

Dominic took Olivia’s waist in his hands, guided her to the bed, and pulled the curtains shut around them. Her face was pale, but when he kissed her, waves of desire poured from her against him. She wanted him, was alive to him, was giving and open and ready for him. Dominic was shaking. Whether from terror or desire he didn’t know, but he wanted her. He wanted to love her, to feel her, to drive his body into her, to lose himself in her, and find himself.

“I love you,” he whispered.

The room shuddered with the thundering of the last hallway door torn from its hinges. Between Dominic’s hands, Olivia’s shimmering face showed no sign of anything beyond an enveloping pleasure. Could she not hear her sisters? Her tender mouth pulled his in invitation when he kissed it, and her pale, beautiful legs opened. Trembling, he pushed his cock between her yielding thighs. If she was afraid, she did not show it.

“I love you,” she answered and closed her oceanic eyes.

Dominic raised his body back from the woman he knew he loved and with a groaning, convulsive thrust, gathered all his force, and drove his throat against her open mouth.

An arterial burst of footsteps ricochets across elongating time. I drink his flight, taste my sisters' pulse. Dominic, impaled on my blunt quills, lies motionless across me. His living blood presses into my teeth's hollow cores and down the back of my gulping throat. I do not want this. I do not want the ragged, leaking place in his skin, slippery and warm against my lips. I do not want Dominic sacrificed for such a wild and distant chance. But my feeding teeth are buried, and it would be easier to hold my breath to suffocation than refuse the pouring of his life into my parched mouth. My limbs, of their own accord, twist over his, pull his powerful body closer. I hold him, sucking. Killing him.

"Olivia!" Sylvia screams down the distant hallway, her voice an indistinct roar in the distortion of his blood pounding in my ears. Already my vision is darkening, sights as old as I am taking shape, tumbling into the blood dreams. I glimpse earthen walls, clay amphorae stacked and marked with indented tiny triangles. A mother's black eyes and strong, long nose. A whisper that rasps and growls. I drink in the oiled beard and brows of a proud brother, older, and revered. I see his handsome, dark throat brutally severed, then the brilliant flash of the dripping blade before young eyes. Then I see only the deep red I must stop draining. Dominic died young his first lifetime.

Through the darkness, I urge my sisters to hurry. They will tear him from my teeth. Perhaps in time to save his life. But they are hunting him by scent, tracking his steps searching for me. It will still bring them here, but not directly. He did not know my room.

I see eyes again in the red darkness—cold and yellow. I feel terror seeping and taste the keen ache of unmoving muscles. He stalks the feral eyes with other men in an impenetrable jungle night. Many of them died that hunt, but he is welcomed home to a grass-thatched hut and straw mat. A woman reclines upon it, her legs around his hips. Then her face again, washed in sweat. But there now—nestling against her breast—cradles a tiny head. His first child. Love dripping, and then drowning in a screaming agony of vomitus and blood. So much more painful than the sudden sword. Heartbreak drenches me.

I cannot stop drinking the endless blood dreams.

A mother's eyes swim through the red. They brim with love and close in death. Her lifeless face sinks into the rich stream and coils into parchment, rolled and tidy, resting on marble. He loved them, not as fiercely as the death-stolen mother, but that lifetime's loves were never that strong again—the devoted practice of medicine, a cool passion for thought, and the narrow hips of boys.

Through the reddening, his past slides again toward death, and I battle to slow my hard, convulsive pulls of hunger. My sisters are coming. Their footsteps in the closer hall are slower than his pulse, but more relentless. Their feet, his heart, drums, or horse hooves echo inside stone. A woman above him, her head thrown back. I taste sex. *Warrior, be thou summoned.* Her body initiates him. *Warrior, be thou safe returned.* A splintering blow shatters bone and prevents it.

Then wives—too many wives—and children with sweet liquid eyes who bow their faces to the ground.

A father, two masters—one artist, one owner.

A friend on horseback coils a lasso with nimble hands.

A blond wife-to-be running, and black blisters creeping over infant flesh he loves, as I have never loved skin and bone and blood.

An old man with terrible teeth and a doughnut, a ridiculous sweep of black, and my own desire-blinded eyes. *No!* My fingers reach to touch his copper hair, tuck a fallen piece behind his ear. I tear his throat away.

Gasping, swallowing, I lie against Dominic's limp body, his face still as a frozen stream, its freckles like leaves caught in early winter ice that would collapse if you put your heel upon it. Tears gather behind my eyes and surface. A sob comes as a low groan in the moment that the broken door to my room is torn away. I swallow the sound, too, and wrap my wings around my only and unbreathing, pulseless love.

Dominic poured into the insistent pulsing pull of Olivia's power over him, losing himself in her. Her swallowing matched the beat of his hammering heart, and he listened to the liquid sounds of

them together. Singing, his heart set the tempo, her hunger gave the harmony. It rose, and slowed. His pulse followed her lead, dancing against her lithe body, until he didn't know whether it was his heart or her mouth that moved his blood through him.

Even with his eyes open, he couldn't see. He was blind, and the urgent sounds of her sisters drowned in the aching beat of their bodies' shared pulse. All he could hear, all he could feel, was her. He was dying. Consciousness pulled away from the edges of him, exposing fathomless memories of love and suffering and loss. Why were they still there—the wives and children, and the other deaths? Delusional, even now, damn him.

What happens in the visual cortex when it is depleted of oxygen-carrying blood? When people refer to lives flashing before their eyes, were they witnessing a final electrical discharge, the simultaneous firing of every collapsing synapse? Buried memories rose from neurological graves to flow with his slackening pulse out of him and into her.

He wished he could see her. Love lapped at him, washed him with a heat that didn't warm him. He smelled ash. A particulate, scentless sensation filled his nostrils when he inhaled, but he clung to the warmth of Olivia's cold mouth on his throat. He remembered her in the ruined abbey, the way she had reached for the hair that fell in his face. She needed him. Needed this. That was all that mattered.

His breath was coming slower. Awareness shrank away from the cold peripheries. He had never been young. The loss of every love had weighed him down, but now he was light at least, the free-floating, tiny pieces of him dissipating.

He was loved.

He would be remembered, as he had always remembered.

He watched himself, the lover, float away from himself, the beloved. How could he say good-bye to himself when the extinguished cinders weighed nothing at all?

Consciousness cowered in the last places of breathing, the mind away from the brain, the self from the other, shrinking, reaching, yearning—not for the light—but for the ashes. He slid up the face of oblivion, falling faster than gravity, upward with the ashes.

Dominic stood up into the silence. There was no sky. The ashes had no air to float into, only the deepening quiet of an unbeating heart and an undrinking mouth, still softer and at one with the silence, without sensation.

She was gone.

He must remember her.

His body was gone.

He must remember.

Everything had gone into a silence made of ash. He must . . .

He was gone, and yet somewhere, he was there. His thoughts remained to note the memory motes dancing away. *Remember!* Memory makes us immortal. Like angels, immortal. Like ashes, what is left of what is burned. *Remember.* Time and thought flame out. Awareness out, and memory.

11

THE FACE OF THE VOID

The scream is a hideous crawling horror that paints my room in rage.

My sisters have come.

“The bitch broke out of her crypt!” Sylvia howls.

“How could she have had the strength?” Ophelia sounds near to fainting herself.

“The Reborn came to her rescue,” Sylvia snaps, and I hear my smallest sister’s unsupported body slump to the ground.

Vivian is scornful. “He could not have shifted the stone,” she says.

“What else explains it?” Sylvia paces wildly, her stilettos beating a ferocious tattoo against my floor. “He got away from us. He went to the garden. We tracked his scent here, and we find her coffin opened. I will kill him myself!”

“Shut up,” Vivian commands. “Where is his scent?”

From within my curtained bed, I scent the air with my hungry sisters. Even with my body pressed to his, there is no smell of blood from Dominic. I have drunk it.

“Fuck him,” Vivian spits. “Wherever he is, he’s dead. There’s no scent. What we need to do is find Ollie.”

My wardrobe doors smash against the wall with a splintering crack.

Sylvia swears again. Hard footsteps stride toward my bed. Through my transparent wings, I see Vivian’s blood-red fingertips penetrate the seam between the drapes and rend the curtains in a violent storm of falling velvet and the tiny brass rain of gears.

Sylvia, Vivian, and even Ophelia, swaying slightly, gaze down at Dominic, wrapped in my wings.

“God damn him!” Vivian whispers.

“He’s gone!” Ophelia wails.

I stare into the rigid faces of my sisters who look—blindly—through me and through Dominic in my arms. Ophelia collapses again.

“Where the hell is Ollie?” Sylvia demands.

“Listen,” Vivian orders, “even if she drained the Reborn, she can’t have got far. She was too damn weak.”

I examine their keen faces, each of my sisters listening to catch the sound of my desire. I smile beneath their eyes. They will not hear me. I am full angel now—without desire—soundless and invisible.

“Come here, you crazy bitches! I’ll kill every one of you!” The half shriek, half aria reverberates from my splintered doorway.

My sisters turn from me to glance dispassionately at Alyx standing, uncharacteristically erect, brandishing a broken table leg by the shattered hinges of my door. His hair is a wild tangle in his face, and his cool, ironic eyes roll wildly around the room, crazed—but sober. They pass over the bed, blind as my sisters’ are to Dominic and me motionless upon it.

Vivian laughs. “Alyx, what are you wearing?”

He shrugs his skinny shoulders, wearing leather pants belted with an obscenely wrought diamond-crusted buckle and rock star boots. “It was all I had. Now fuck off. All of you.”

“Oh no, a drunken rock star arrives to ruin all our plans,” Vivian sneers. “Go away, Alyx.”

“Wooden stake,” he counters, brandishing the splintered table piece at her. He looks ridiculous, mad, brandishing the ruined furniture, a man who could never face his own, prepared to take on all the demons of Hell.

Vivian walks up to him and scents the air for his desire. Noiselessly, from the bed, I do the same. If Alyx is still himself enough to want her, or sane enough to fear any of my almighty sisters, Vee, standing with her pale face against his stubbled cheek, will sink her teeth into his throat and silence him in four long swallows. Vivian is full of rage, and he is undernourished.

But I can glean no scent from him.

“What have you done with D?” he demands, meeting Vivian’s puzzled gaze.

“Funny you should ask.” She smiles. “We’re hunting him, too.”

“He wanted to help you guys. But you couldn’t see past your next meal, could you? If you’ve killed him, I swear to God, I’ll make you regret it.”

“He doesn’t want me,” Vivian murmured. “He doesn’t fear me, either.”

“He will,” Ophelia whispered from the floor. “I will make him.”

My ravenous sisters crowd around Alyx, scenting the air and running their fingers across the acute planes of his wasted body. Vivian’s long fingers unfasten his ridiculous belt buckle, and Ophelia sucks hard on two of his fingers. He looks dazed. Hatred he could fight, but what chance does he stand against desire? If he believes—even for a moment—that just one of them wants him, he will be lost. Vivian makes a low moan against his throat, tracing the fertile line between his ear and collarbone with her tongue.

I stand and gather Dominic against me.

With wary eyes on Alyx and my sisters swarming over him, cooing and licking, I take a silent step. If they move just a little from Alyx at the door, I will simply walk through it and away. Alyx’s grip on the table leg is slackening. He shakes himself like a dog, flinging off sensation’s soaking torrent. “You girls wanna have a little party, do you?” he leers. But there’s no scent of desire on him. He saunters toward my bed, his back to me. I hold Dominic close against my body. And we slip the other way.

“Why don’t ya’ll come over here with me? Take a load off.” Alyx steps over the broken curtain rod, its tiny gears at last spun down, and falls onto my bed. I take another step toward the door, with Dominic’s limp body, tattoo-lined, blood-streaked, and cold in my arms. I’m desperate to flee, to take him out of here, but I must not make a sound.

“Do you mock us?” Vivian’s voice is taut as a corset string, strung between metal eyes.

Alyx pats the bedspread beside him. “Come on, ladies.”

I step cautiously around the bentwood table by my door.

He’s stalling us!

Trying to keep us here—

Hoping to deter us—

To buy time for that Reborn to escape!

My sisters’ thoughts seethe like a miasma of swallowed rage around my transparent ankles. They turn blazing eyes through me to the decayed rock star sprawled against the elegant, understated crewelwork of my silk coverlet, red on red. He winks at them lewdly. “There’s enough of me to go around. Come on, girls, wouldn’t be the first time, if you know what I mean.”

Sylvia’s cry is terrible. My sisters close in on Alyx and I slip away through the shattered door with the lifeless body of my love. I have only one thought, one hope, but it is stained with blood. I run the few steps across the corridor as swiftly as I can with Dominic’s body still sheathed in my wings, and crash through the railing into the open space above the lobby.

We fall.

My wings unfurl. They stretch. The void beneath them catches their muscular curve, and our tumbling descent slows. I lock the muscles of my back and flex. It contracts my wings, and they beat against the empty space.

Again.

And we are no longer falling. I circle the air above the milling damned. They stare, pointing upward at the bloodied man, lost in the unbreathing sleep of angels, whose body seems wrapped around a phantom lover. His arms are draped across an empty space, legs caught by invisible ankles. *So this*, I hear one think, *is what my soul does on those perfect nights. I knew it traveled.*

But I am flying straight up now. Up and up toward the spiral of Hell's starlit dome, ascending into Heaven. The glass shatters and rains soundlessly down behind us, and I fly with him into the night.

A moment separated itself from nothingness in lonely, horrible isolation. Dominic braced himself. *Stay just one.* But another came behind it, stringing ash links on a chain, dragging him from oblivion. *Wait!* There is something buried there. Something he must return to. Or from.

But it was gone. Everything was gone. He was dead, and time rushed at him in torrents. He had no strength to shield his face from the minutes hailing into his open eyes. *Wait. Remember.*

The angel's eyes were bottomless as love. He struggled to reach them, and she put her red lips against his—like fire—but he kissed her, and closed his eyes to feel her mouth again. Stay here and now, nowhere and timeless. Dead, with lips on an angel's. *Wait.*

He pulled his breathless mouth away. "Olivia?" he whispered. Her depthless eyes met his again. He took her winged shoulders in hands he didn't know were his until they touched her. "Olivia, why are you here?"

“I love you,” she said.

“I died.”

“I know. I killed you.”

Her exquisite head dropped against his silent chest, and Dominic wrapped unsteady arms around her, quaking against the painful, waking bone and sinew of his body. His limbs convulsed violently. Olivia clung to him, waking his stomach and thighs where she pressed against them, too.

“Dominic, what’s happening?”

“I’m slipping.” Life was pulling on him, irresistible as sleep. He smiled. “I’m going back. I’ll find you again soon. Wait for me.”

“Dominic, no!” Her pale fingers ran across his face, down his arms in trails of flame against his skin, kindling him.

“I won’t remember at first, but by eighteen, I should be back to you, back in Ireland.”

A sob wracked her, and Dominic turned her face to kiss her once again. Her lips trembled beneath him, making him want to kiss her more strongly, more deeply, to smooth her tremors with the necessary force of it. She hiccupped.

It was a funny, human sound in his lifeless mouth, and he forced himself to pull away from her lips. “Olivia, I know it seems like a long time, but it will pass quickly. Nothing compared to how long you’ve been alive.” He pushed two crystal tears away from her brimming eyes with his ashen thumb. “And when I find you again, I promise, I’ll make it up to you. We’ll make love, finally. We will—”

“You don’t understand.”

She closed her boundless eyes against him, pushing a new rivulet of tears down the smooth plane of her cheeks as he stroked them. Every touch of her body, every kiss, pressed him back toward living, and yet he could not let her go.

He would return, in a new body, a new beginning. He was willing. All his life—all his lives—he had fought it, but now he was willing. He would go back, face the piecemeal agony at adolescence, the grueling, slow remembering, the irrational puzzle coming together, and he would find her again. He could face anything for her, with her, his angel.

He took her encompassing mouth with his again. He wanted to stay as long as he could, to comfort and reassure her, but he had to taste her mouth again. She opened perfectly to his kiss, a deep softness in her yielding to his insistent lips and tongue. Would making love to her here, in the aching in-between, drive him more quickly back into the endless cycle, faster back to his next rebirth? He should stop, but desire overwhelmed him. Her mouth welcomed his, not hungry, but sustaining; not forbidden, but divine.

She pulled her lips away. “Dominic, if you can’t find me down there, I’ll be here.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you can’t find me at the hotel—”

A woman's voice, distant and muffled, cried out in pain. "Mother," he whispered. Olivia closed her azure eyes.

"I'm an angel now," she said. "Full angel. I can't—"

But Dominic stopped Olivia's mouth. He kissed her against a strangled sob in his throat, and in his ears. He had died too late to save her. The woman wailed again. Was he that close to return?

"I won't be there," Olivia whispered. "I'm invisible there. I don't know if I can find you here, in the between, every time you die, but if I can, I will. Dominic, I love you."

Her hair was impossibly soft. "I'll come back and find you here," he promised.

Hospital noises drilled at his ears. A man's voice now, calm and rhythmic. He was slipping.

Pure horror tinged Olivia's pale face. "Dominic, you mustn't suicide. I know what happens to Reborn suicides, it's too terrible to bear."

Dominic ran shaking hands down the strong column of her back and bowed his head. He nuzzled her throat and spread his fingers across her back as if he could contain her. No, he wouldn't kill himself. He carried lives and heartbreaks, and experienced the terrible pattern of life and loss repeating now, but as a teen, it had come back in bits and pieces. It had been terrible. It was still. But to remember it all—the impossibility of escape, the inevitability of suffering—before birth, before speech? It destroyed the mind it housed and the shell-shocked children were all born mad. No, even to return to her, he would not begin his own end. She shuddered in his arms, and he pressed a lingering kiss on her delicate collarbone.

Pain seared across his face and chest, a terrible constricting agony, and he found his fingers back on her angelic face, tracing her brows, pushing into her hair.

“Olivia . . .” It was all he could manage. Her body clung to him, her fingers strong in the muscles of his arms, her supple legs wrapping his. To kiss her would push him farther from her, but what could he do but kiss her? He took her mouth again and again, almost savagely, and with each spasm that wracked him, felt her open more.

“Olivia, if you want me to stay with you here, I have to stop. It’s pulling me away.”

She gave a little sob, and he crushed her against his body. “I can feel you,” she whispered. “I thought I would be beyond physical sensation here . . . pleasure, pain . . . but it’s more acute, more intense.”

“Does it hurt you?” he whispered.

“No.”

He was grateful she didn’t ask him the same, because the pain for him was intense. Every place her body touched, he was branded by flame. Still, he kissed her and wrapped his searing arms around her. He braced himself against the tearing pain, to welcome the angel he loved, and would happily suffer to hold.

Light pressed blood-red against his open eyes. He was losing her face, vision slipping into a crimson and underwater glow. He gasped and clutched her harder, her breasts tender brands against the flesh of his chest. He caught one in his hand, and she cried out as though he’d slapped her.

The sound came muffled through the ashes in his ears. He dropped his hand lower, seeking between her legs. They opened readily and he stroked her. She took his mouth again, and he inhaled.

“He’s choking!”

A man’s face peered down. Dominic clamped his eyes closed, gasping, but Olivia was gone.

“Hello, son,” the man said.

Dominic squinted into the hovering face, the brimming eyes and terrible teeth.

Alyx looks like shit. He is folded behind the exploded door to my apartment, limbs bent at bad angles, bits missing. Not that I ever saw him look well. Still, death makes every face a mockery. My avenging sisters have gone. I listen for the sound of their hungers, but the hotel is quiet. I can’t hear Gaehod, but I never could. I’ve come back to the hotel to find him.

My bedroom is a war zone. The heavy stone sarcophagus lid is shattered, and chunks of rock lie everywhere—radical, natural shapes amongst the ridiculous, ornate carvings and silly Spartan lines. The curtains torn from my bed pepper the floor with gears and uncoiled springs, and the wardrobe doors lie splintered where Sylvia threw them. There’s nothing here I need. My wings flex tight against my back. I had thought I would grab a shirt, but I square my shoulders to lift my naked breasts high. I’ll go bare-breasted to Gaehod. I will stand before him, quill my angel’s wings, and plead. Every moment pulls Dominic farther from me.

“I always knew you had great tits.”

I freeze. I scent nothing.

“Who’s there?” I demand, loathing the quaver in my voice.

“Yo.”

Alyx is lying right above me, his narrow back resting against the ceiling, staring with considerable fondness at my bare breasts.

“Eyes, Alyx.”

His soft, brown eyes meet mine reluctantly. He looks younger than I remember, but real and solid, and floating down to stand beside me.

“What the fuck?” I ask him.

He shrugs, looking at his abandoned body behind the door. “Jesus, I was skinny. Why didn’t anybody make me eat?”

I pick up his broken body and carry it to the bed. His left eye is swollen closed, ringed with a purple so deep it looks black near his nose. I push a pillow under his rolling head. His nose is flattened to the right side of his face, and he’s missing his two left front teeth. The oddly pristine right side of his face looks only mildly surprised. It is anything but peaceful, and unsettling even to me, no stranger to death’s sculpting fingers. I arrange his stiff limbs as properly as I can, although I leave the left arm spayed out to the side. I could push it down, but the sound would be too much for him. He leans against my tomb, watching me.

“Ophelia,” he says quietly, nodding at his corpse.

I pick the heavy drapes from the floor and toss them over the bed’s broken rails to shield the poor, broken body from his eyes. I need to reach Gaehod, but I can’t leave Alyx here, alone with his ruined body.

“Ophelia did this to you?”

“Yup. I was having a drink in the lobby and Dominic blew in, acting crazy, looking for you. He said you were in trouble. Then Vivian and the vamp girls went by about ten minutes later. I figured they were hunting him. I wasn’t going to let that happen. But fuck, man. I’m useless. What am I going to do against a pack of pissedoff vampire bitches?”

“You came up here after them? Alone?”

“Yeah. Not that it mattered. Fuckers didn’t know where D was, either. He wasn’t here, so I tried to keep them from leaving. Vee just picked me up and hurled me. I don’t weigh much, I know, but damn . . . Anyway, the glass dome in the lobby exploded, and they all left to see what the fuck—except Ophelia.”

“She was too weak to follow them.”

“Weak? That bitch broke my arm with one hand! She crawled over to where I was trying to get up after being chucked across the fucking room and”—Alyx give me a wry grin—“had her way with me.”

“She drained you to get her strength back.”

“She seemed strong enough.”

“But she hurt you before she drank?”

Alyx shrugs, but I am sure of it. Ophelia is famous for the fines she pays to the Quarry in damages. She would have tortured him any way that didn’t waste blood.

“Hey, if I was into S&M, it would have been great.”

“But you’re okay now?” I ask him. “I mean you’re not still in any kind of pain, right?”

“I feel great. Better than I have in years.” He shoots me a wry grin. “Wouldn’t mind a drink, though.”

“No booze in Heaven, I don’t guess,” I say.

“Hang on, are you dead, too?”

“Yeah.”

“And Dominic?” I catch the masked despair in his eyes.

I just nod. And Alyx looks hollow, truly dead for the first time. He sags.

“I came back here to find Gaehod,” I say. “Maybe he’ll think of something.” But Alyx is staring at his mangled corpse on my bed, shaking his head.

“How fucking typical,” he says bitterly. “I wasted my life, and now I’ve wasted my death. If I could have stopped them—”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I tell him, but he doesn’t hear me. I sit down beside him on my destroyed tomb. “Alyx, I was here. With Dominic.” I have his attention now. “Dominic found me in my crypt. Broke the lid open with his head. My sisters couldn’t see him, because I hid him with my wings. I’m invisible to the living.”

“And to the Undead, apparently.”

I laugh. “Yeah, apparently. You are the reason I was able to carry Dominic out of here. They all closed in around you, and I walked out the door and flew away with him.”

“Jesus . . .”

“You saved him. Us, actually.”

Half a smile twists his beautiful lips. He looks at me clearly through cloudy eyes. “Where did you take him?”

“To Dublin. To the hospital there.”

Alyx makes a low whistle. “You gave up the bet then? The hotel’s gonna close?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” I say. I hate the idea of not having this place. I need it. The world needs it, no matter what Gaehod says about modernity and acceptance. I hang my head. How will Dominic ever find me now, when he remembers?

“Can they save him?”

“The hospital? I don’t know. I don’t think so. I believed they could when I took him there, but then I saw him here, where we are, he was being pulled away.” I swallow against the tears. “I think he died,” I say. “In fact, I think he might have been reborn already, reincarnated. I don’t know. That’s why I need to talk to Gaehod.”

“You saw Dominic here? In this room?”

“No, here, in Heaven.” Alyx looks so defeated that pity curls itself around my waist. “It’s overrated, don’t you think?” I elbow him gently. “I remember Paradise being different before.”

“I don’t think we’re in Heaven,” he says.

“We’re dead.”

“I know, but seriously, it’s me. What are the odds?”

“Maybe your final act of self-sacrifice redeemed you. That was a pretty noble thing you did.”

Alyx snorts with derision. “I don’t think so.”

But it doesn’t seem like much of a heaven. “Where do you think we are?” I ask him.

“I dunno. Limbo, the Beyond. We’re just *out there*, man.”

I’m sitting on the edge of my sarcophagus beside him, but he’s looking down at the floor between his shiny boots. His hands on the red stone are white beneath the bloodstains, and I rub

away a flaking coil that winds around his wrist with my finger. “I need to find Gaehod,” I tell him. “Do you want to come with me? We can ask him where the fuck we are and what we’re supposed to do now.”

Alyx shakes his head. “No. I know what I’m supposed to do now.”

I glance over at his ruined body on my cursed bed, and feel afraid for him. Mortals are so frail, so temporary, so . . . mortal. Gaehod translates *mortals* as *dying ones*, and so they are. And so they are afraid.

“Will you come with me?” he asks, not looking at me.

I start to say I can’t, that I have to find Gaehod in time, but . . . okay, if I’m honest, true immortal that I am, the one thing I’ve got plenty of is time. Dominic is dead. And even though it would help me to know what will happen to him now, there’s nothing I can do with the knowledge. And Alyx is alone for the first time, the way I have always been.

“Sure,” I say. “Where are we going?”

He stands, and I follow, past his poor body, through my shattered door, and into a dank and silent cave. Our backs are to the cave mouth, and we walk away from it, from the high moon and shivering treetops, to grope our way deeper in. The ground is craggy and sloped, and before too long we start to smell a faint, sweet smoke rising from deep cracks in the ground beneath us. We’re in Delphi.

“You must be looking for the oracle,” I whisper to Alyx.

His grin is crooked and he slips his hand into mine. “Just all my life,” he says.

We step across a wide fissure and almost trip over a little three-legged stool.

“Oracle?” Alyx calls into the still blackness.

“Pythia!” I shout, but only echoes come back to us.

Alyx sits down heavily on the empty stool. “Figures,” he grunts. “I didn’t tell you, but before you showed up, I tried to leave your room and ended up in this fucking horrible hot desert with a burning bush that wouldn’t talk to me either.”

I try to imagine Alyx standing in the sand, shouting at a flaming shrub, but it just makes me giggle. “I’m sorry,” I say. “It’s not funny.”

“Yeah, but it is, isn’t it? I mean, seriously, all my pathetic life, I’ve been trying to figure out what the hell I was here for—what I was *there* for—on the planet, I mean. I figured, when I died, at least I’d get to know. I never really believed in God. Not since I was a kid, when God was like Santa Claus, this old white-haired magic man who could bring you whatever you wanted if you asked real nice, who would make your wishes all come true. It was baby faith. But then he didn’t show up a couple of times, no matter how I asked. Figured he’d stopped listening, phone off the hook.”

Alyx shrugs. “I guess I still believed there would be answers when you died. You’d get to know what you were supposed to have done. Your destiny, calling, whatever. I thought I’d finally know why. He’d say, ‘This is the reason you were put on Earth. This was your reason for being,’ and I’d know if I had failed. Or maybe succeeded.”

He’s trying to sound casual, unconcerned, but his fingers grip mine hard, and his other hand is balled into a fist. His eyes scrape the walls and ceiling of the empty cave.

He shouts into the blackness over us, “I want to know!” He peers over the ledge into the crack in the ground. “Tell me!”

“Tell us.”

It’s a whisper that forms in my mind like a headache. I glance at Alyx, but he’s transfixed. He hears it, too.

“I don’t know,” he whispers.

“Tell us now why you have lived.”

It is a thousand whispers, brushing against my cheek and ankles, pouring up from the earth and down from above. “Tell us why you have lived. God only asks the questions.”

Alyx is shivering. I want to touch him, reach my transparent hand out to him, but the air is too heavy with whispers, and I can’t move. He looks at me. He is almost impossibly beautiful, his cheek and collarbones rising on the same steep angle, like wings.

“The purpose of life is to have a purpose for life,” he says softly.

I nod. I get it. But we’re dead. It’s too late for us to have a purpose. The dead have only what meaning the living give us.

“And the purpose of death is acceptance,” Alyx whispers.

“I’m not so sure about that.” I’m trying to joke, but I just sound strained.

“For me.”

“Alyx? You’re slipping.”

He smiles.

“Are you going to Heaven?”

He shakes his head at me.

“Is this Heaven?”

He shakes his head again. “No. This is just one of your deaths.”

I shudder. “How many do I get?”

“Only two.”

He hardly looks like himself anymore.

“Any idea when the other one’s due?” I ask him.

“You’ve already done that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Adam, the count, the duchess, all the way back . . .”

“No, they never knew me. Never loved me,” I say.

“Exactly.”

“They didn’t kill me.”

“You aren’t life, Olivia.”

“I don’t get it!” This is pissing me off. Alyx isn’t making sense.

“I saw them,” he whispers, vanishing, smiling, slipping away. I don’t know what the fuck he’s talking about, but he looks blissful. “I touched them,” he murmurs. He starts to hum, smiling, low in his throat, a perfect, clear note.

I close my eyes to clear them, and he’s gone. I close them again, and I’m back in my room, alone with Alyx’s broken corpse, ashen on my scarlet bed.

I don't get it. Of course this is Heaven. It must be. The place I've been trying to reach since Time trapped me in human form. I'm just not as happy as I thought I would be.

Alyx's body jerks violently, and I jump. I watch with horror, but there is nothing more. He looks childlike, laid out this way. Once, he had a mother who tucked him into bed. Now he only has me, poor bastard. I creep to the contorted form of the second friend I ever made, to pull the red curtains over him. He whispers to me.

I can't stop screaming.

Arms flailing, hands clawed and grasping, he struggled against the ash in his mouth that kept air from rushing in. He couldn't breathe. He coughed again.

"It's okay. You're okay. Try to relax." The ruined teeth smiled down at him. "Dominic, can you hear me? Blink twice if you can."

Dominic blinked. One. Two.

"Good. Can you talk?"

"I think so." His voice tasted rusty, of blood and disuse.

"Can you tell me your name?"

"You called me Dominic."

“That’s right. Do you know your last name? Or your birth date?”

“No.”

“Do you know where you were born, or where you are now?”

“Hospital?”

The old man chuckled. “I suspect you are correct on both points, my son, but I meant more specifically.”

Dominic looked around. He recognized things, knew the names and uses of them, but he could find no context to place around them—or himself. He shook his head.

“Today’s date?” The old man asked, brows contracting.

“No.”

“It’s April twenty-seventh. Do you know who I am?”

“A doctor?”

“Yes, but I’m not here in that capacity. I’m your friend. My name’s Francis Dysart. You and I work together in the U.S. But we’re in Ireland now. You had an accident.”

“What kind of accident?”

“Well, that’s part of the mystery, son. Nobody knows. You turned up in the emergency ward downstairs two days ago. You were a right mess, from the sound of it.”

Dominic struggled to sit up. Dysart helped him, gently supporting an elbow and raising the head of the bed with a lever. “A nurse walked into an empty examination bay, and found you naked on the table. You looked like you’d been hit by a car or fallen from quite some height. You had a fractured arm and depressed skull fracture, but—and here’s where it gets really interesting—no intracranial hematoma, no bleeding at all. In fact, your blood volume was dangerously low. They gave you six units.”

“Damn.”

“I know! Stranger still, with that much blood loss, they could find no internal bleeds, and the hypotension may actually have saved your life, since it prevented any bleeding into your brain from the head trauma. But you were very near to empty, and we still don’t know how that happened. Your head and forearms bore generous surface abrasions, but no lacerations large or deep enough to explain the blood loss. Dominic, do you remember what happened to you?”

“I don’t really remember anything.”

Dr. Dysart smiled too brightly. “Transient global amnesia isn’t uncommon in head injury with reduced blood flow, especially with coma. I’m sure your memory will return soon. I really should summon a doctor. They’ll be very eager to talk with you, now that you’re awake.” The old man studied him. “Dominic, do you remember the date?”

“April twenty-seventh.”

“So the amnesia is strictly retrograde,” the old man muttered. “Dominic, I need to ask you something important.”

“Okay.”

“You were . . . No, no, you *are* a brilliant young neuroscientist. One of the best in your field, and you’ve been working with me for the past several years on problems dealing with memory. But you and I have never really discussed the reasons behind your interest in this area. You’re a very private—I won’t say secretive—but a very quiet person on the topic of your past. I’ve never been able to get you to say much about your childhood or family. I have wondered, through the years, if you weren’t trying to forget something.”

Dominic said nothing.

“You should know that your mother has been notified of your accident and is on her way,” Dysart said, “and that several other people are here to see you.”

“Okay.”

“You’re not afraid of anyone, are you? Not in any danger?”

“I don’t feel afraid. Do you think someone did this to me?”

“We honestly don’t know, but the police have been involved. There’s certainly no way you could have walked into the hospital in your condition. Someone must have brought you.”

“Okay.”

“Dominic, you weren’t engaged in any kind of radical experimentation over here, were you? Something I didn’t know about? This isn’t an operation or a medication gone horribly wrong, is it?”

Dominic hated to see the old man’s face so scarred by worry, but no matter how he tried to push his gummy mind backwards beyond waking up to Dysart’s voice and teeth, he simply couldn’t see anything.

“That doesn’t feel very likely, but I don’t know.”

“Well, don’t let it worry you, son. These amnesias are typically short-lived. Your memory should start coming back soon. Although I imagine they’ll want to do another CT now that you’re awake. I wish I had thought to bring your old scans from our lab as a baseline.” The man was talking to himself, gathering his coat and hat, rummaging through the magazines on the floor. “Here’s another odd thing,” he said, turning back to Dominic on his way out. “Yesterday, out of the clear blue, your laptop bag appeared in your room. Just right there in the chair. Nobody knows who brought it. The ICU nurses didn’t see anyone come in or out. Nothing on the monitors. It looked as though someone had tried to clean it after you’d bled all over it, but it’s here, if you want it.”

“Thanks.”

“I’d give it to you now, but I don’t imagine you’d get a chance to unzip it before the doctors come in. But you’ve kept a photo log as long as I’ve known you. It’s online, I’ll jot down the URL. I didn’t find any clues in your latest pictures—mostly snapshots from the roadside by the look of it, but maybe something will spark your memory. Oh, and don’t tell them how long we visited. I should have gotten them right away . . .” Still muttering, the doctor let himself out of the tiny, glass-walled ICU room. Dominic watched him shuffle up to a central desk, but closed his weary eyes against the burst of activity the old man’s news caused. Nurses snatching up phones, doctors striding his way. He wanted a nap.

“Dominic, dear boy? Dominic, are you awake?” A slender hand shook his shoulder softly, but insistently. “Dominic? It’s Madalene. Can you spare a moment, my dear?”

Dominic rolled onto his back and opened his eyes. An older woman leaned urgently over the hospital bedrail.

“Oh good! I’m so glad you’re awake. My goddaughter’s waiting in the hall, so I won’t take much of your time. Just one quick question.” Dominic sat up and raised the bed’s head to support himself. He felt weak. Time to start getting some exercise. He stretched his creaky arms above his head and flexed the muscles along his spine. Madalene’s practiced eyes ran over his chest and down his legs. Had they been lovers? She glanced away discreetly. He didn’t think so. She pulled a chair up to his bedside and leaned in conspiratorially.

“Dominic, do you know who I am?”

“No.”

“I’m the reason you’re in Ireland. I sent you here on a mission, and I have reason to believe you’ve been more wildly successful than I would have dared to hope.” Madalene’s cultured voice was soft, but urgent.

“Radical experimentation?”

“Not really radical, darling. Just innovative.” She was clearly excited, nervous, and expensive.

“Are you the reason I’ve been moved to a private room?”

“Well, let’s just say that I’m not without influence here.”

“I didn’t think I was getting the usual treatment.”

“No. You’re getting the very best.”

“Thank you.”

“Not at all. If I’m right, and you’ve solved my little difficulty for me, you can become accustomed to no less.”

“I’m afraid I don’t remember the nature of your difficulty.”

“Really?” The woman leaned closer to Dominic. Her delicate perfume and face powder combined to gently waft the heady scent of pure wealth over Dominic. Whatever was on her mind was important. And secret.

“Dominic, you emailed almost a week before your . . . accident. In that letter you hinted that you’d made a critical discovery, but also that you were becoming alarmed by something. Since my goddaughter was sightseeing in the British Isles—she likes ruins, part of the whole Gothic thing, I imagine—since she was already here, I thought I’d pop over and, ah . . . encourage you. As soon as we touched down, I learned of your accident. I came as soon as I heard you were conscious.

“Last night, I stopped in, but you were asleep in the ICU. Apparently they’d been running tests all day. When they were moving you to this room, I picked up your bag to bring it with you, and a little pill bottle rolled out. I took a chance. You had used the word *formulated* in your email. I knew it was risky. I gave one to my goddaughter, and Dominic, she already seems to be improving. She’s outside right now, wearing a *sweatshirt*!” Madalene was trembling, and rested a thin, vein-spattered hand on his bed to steady herself. “Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve seen her in anything but latex?”

A different and beautiful hand shakes the little brown pill bottle before his eyes, asks him something, and he's trembling, too, aroused suddenly, hard beneath the thin hospital blanket.

"Dominic?" Madalene gripped his elbow, nails driving into skin. "Did you just remember something?"

"I think so."

"What? What did you remember? About my goddaughter?"

"I don't know."

"Dominic, do you remember the pills?"

"I remember someone taking them. She was beautiful."

"She is, but do you remember the formula?"

"No, but I'm sure I would have written that down. It would be on my laptop—"

Madalene pulled the bloodstained bag from a chair and placed it beside him in the bed.

"I know you need your rest, but please, Dominic darling, just as soon as you feel up to it, would you find out what you can about those pills—how many, how often, how long?"

He nodded.

“There were just two left. Is it possible that only one pill could be enough for . . .”

Dominic nodded again, and Madalene reached into her exquisitely tailored suit jacket to fish out a business card with another woman’s name. “Megan will be able to reach me wherever I am. Just tell her it’s you.” Madalene stood by the door, her shrewd eyes taking in the full length of Dominic’s body on the bed, and then every inch of his face. “I know quite a lot of your personal history,” she said in a voice raked clean of emotion. “Perhaps we can exchange notes? Your past in exchange for my goddaughter’s future?”

“Mrs. Wright—”

“Ms.”

“Ms. Wright, if I can do anything to help your goddaughter, I’d be happy to.”

“Just out of the goodness of your heart, I suppose.”

Dominic shrugged.

“Your heart was wiser when we first met.”

“I’d like to think it was always good.”

“Good is not innocent. Nor the other way around. But that’s the glory of your condition, isn’t it? You can think anything you’d like about who you used to be. You might be innocent *and* good. I could envy you that, my dear, if I weren’t already too old for new beginnings. Get well, Dr. O’Shaughnessy. I’ll pop in on you again after my tour.”

Ms. Wright pushed open the door, only to have it caught from the outside and held wide for her. A thin, graceful man entered and beamed benevolently at Dominic, who struggled to swing his legs over the side of the mechanical bed. Before he talked to anyone else, he wanted to stand up and try walking. Does every critical care patient become a confessor? People had been testing their secrets against him since he woke up, and this man, although he looked wise and gentle, an antiquated professor in tweeds and wool, also seemed about to do the same.

With soft hands, the man wordlessly lifted Dominic’s feet from the bed and slipped a slender arm beneath his shivering shoulders, supporting his weight easily. Intent on walking stiffly from his bed to the window, Dominic did not say anything or meet the man’s eyes until he had accomplished his self-assigned goal and sank, exhausted, into one of the elegant chairs that framed the window.

“I’m glad to see you upright, Dominic. You’re looking well.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not the case,” Dominic chuckled. “I haven’t seen a mirror since I woke up, but I know I haven’t shaved, and I can feel the sutures in my scalp. I bet I look like Frankenstein’s monster.”

The older man smiled. “You were always too handsome for your own good, anyway.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know anything about you.”

“No, of course. I’m sorry. I’m Gaehod. You were staying with me before the accident.”

“But I’ve known you a long time?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” Dominic shrugged. “I don’t remember.”

“How are you feeling, Dominic?”

“Okay. I had my first bit of a memory just now, I think, talking to the woman who was here before you.”

“Ms. Wright? Really?”

“Do you know each other?”

“I know her by reputation, but I’ve been having a very interesting chat with her goddaughter. Madalene wasn’t pressing you for information was she?”

“No. But the doctors say that the first seventy-two hours are critical. If I’m going to recover my memory, it needs to happen in the next two days. The prognosis drops dramatically after that.”

“Have you considered that you might be better off without it?”

“Without my memory? No. Why?”

“You could choose to see your amnesia as a gift.”

“A gift from whom? What are you, a priest?”

“From an angel, actually. And no, I’m not a priest. Far from it. But I could restore your memory.”

“You’re a doctor?”

“I’m an innkeeper.”

“So how is it that all the medical experts are telling me it’s simply a matter of time, whether my brain heals or not, and you think you’ve got a miracle cure?”

“I can’t really explain that.”

“Are you who brought me here?”

“No.”

“But you know who did.” Dominic studied the man’s serene face.

“It doesn’t matter. She’s gone.”

“There’s an awful lot you’re not saying.”

The old man smiled. “And an awful lot I could. But here’s a simple and conventional bit of wisdom for you. You’ve kept a journal as long as I’ve known you, and that’s a long time. I’ve brought it from your room. Read through it. Once you’re done, if you have questions, I’ll be willing to say more. But let’s get you back to your bed. You look about to slide out of that chair.”

Too weak to nod more than once, Dominic allowed himself to be steered back to bed by the old man’s deceptively powerful hands, and was asleep before he had been fully lifted in.

Dominic closed the red leather diary and put it back into the bag that Dysart had bought to replace his bloodstained one. His laptop, likewise soaked, was with Trinity’s computer experts for data recovery. Dominic stayed standing, enjoying the increasing strength of his back and legs. He braced a hand on either side of the window and flexed his arms and chest.

“The doctors say you’re much improved,” commented Dysart from the doorway.

Dominic pulled his laptop bag off the chair and gestured to the professor, who took the proffered seat.

Dominic paced. “I feel great, but I can’t convince them to let me out for a jog.”

Dysart chuckled. “It’s still too soon. But you’re sounding like yourself again, D—impatient as ever.”

“Well, you would know that better than I. It’s weird. You have memories of me and I have—not only none of you—but not even any of me. You have more of me than I do.”

“Your memory may still come back, D. We haven’t crossed the seventy-two-hour threshold yet.”

“But we’re getting pretty damn close, aren’t we?” Dominic prowled the space between the bed and chairs. “When I was first waking up, you said you thought I might have been trying to forget something.”

“I don’t think your amnesia is psychosomatic, D.”

“I know, but I think you might have been right. My landlord brought me a diary he found in my room. It’s clear I kept most of my notes on my laptop, but there are hints. I talk about an experiment I want to conduct. What if I can’t remember anything now because what I tried worked? I think the man I was wouldn’t want his memory back. I think he—I mean I—would have chosen amnesia over memory.”

“I don’t know, D. I suppose it’s possible. But we haven’t exhausted your medical options. I’d still like to see what some high-dose intravenous thiamine might do. Would you take my recommendation, even over your doctor’s? He disagrees.”

“I trust you, but you’re not the only person from before my accident to tell me I wouldn’t want to get well.”

“Who else has been visiting you?” Dysart’s rheumy eyes narrowed.

“Nobody I know.”

The doctor flashed brown teeth at Dominic. “But of course, you don’t know me either, do you?”

“No. So, it’s hard to know who to trust.”

“Trust yourself.”

“My present self or my prior self? Hell, can a man even have a self without a memory? I want my memories back to feel whole again, but everything I know about my whole self says I wanted to be rid of my memories. I don’t know what to do, and time is running out.” Dominic dropped wearily into the chair across from Dysart.

“You may not remember yourself, but I know you well enough to know that nothing I—or anyone else—can say will sway you. You’ve always been one to make up your own mind.” The old man heaved himself to standing and patted Dominic’s shoulder.

“You don’t have to go,” Dominic said.

“I also know you well enough to know when you’re done talking. You’ll think it through and make your decision. Get some sleep, son. I’ll be back in the morning. Visiting hours are about over anyway. I’ll go before they throw me out again.”

Dominic nodded, looking out the hospital window at the river. By this time tomorrow, if he didn’t do anything, his memory would be gone. Perhaps he should just let it go.

Alyx is right. Getting what you want is not the death of desire any more than not getting it is. I beat my practiced wings hard through the hotel lobby’s vast spiraling space, up through the glass dome I broke four days ago taking Dominic to Dublin.

Alyx didn’t want to die. He just couldn’t figure out how to live. All his talent went into his voice. He had none left for living, or for happiness. I wish I could have helped him, but what can the

Undead offer the living? I have no talent for happiness myself. Alyx, at least, had his suffering to call his own. Everything I have, I've stolen.

I'm halfway to Dublin before I know where I'm going. I will track down Gaehod tomorrow, but I want to see Dominic again now. Even his inert body would be better than this. I fly across the black country, over the cars and homes bleeding their light into a hungry dark that swallows even the brightest beams in time.

I find him standing in a new hospital room five floors above the ICU where I last saw him. He looks wonderful. Healthy and powerful again, in pajamas someone else has bought for him. He looks out the safety glass into the night. He cannot see me in it.

I wait until he sleeps. Then I climb into the metal-railed bed to rest my timeless body against his. He is warm and human under their white blankets, and he smells of mouthwash and dry ovens. I gaze into the thin, folded flesh of his flickering eyelids and kiss his slack mouth. He makes a low groan and turns his copper head away from me. I lift a sleep-heavy arm with its fine spray of freckles and tuck my invisible body against him. It is easier to feel him in imagination than to touch his senseless body beside me. I close my eyes and conjure him standing in the brilliant, gas-lit, mirrored ballroom. His lips are parted in my memory, as they are now, but I see them as they were then, open against a hunger he wars with himself to satisfy. I could stay like this forever, immortal and invisible, making love to him in vision, but he's a restless sleeper.

"He moves like that, in his sleep, because it hurts him."

It is Gaehod's voice.

"You can see it on the monitors—the spike in heart rate, elevated body temp. And yet he fights to stay asleep."

My winged back is to the door. I whisper his name, but Gaehod doesn't reply. Can he hear me? Or see me? Is he right about Dominic? I touch his unshaven cheek with my invisible fingertips. He moans.

“You’re hurting him, Olivia.”

I leap to face him, full of rage. Standing before him, slight man that he is, my wings outspread, I am taller, stronger, invisible, immortal, and divine. But he can’t see me, and even if he could, I wouldn’t frighten him into telling me otherwise.

“You carried him here, didn’t you?”

Yes.

“I wonder if it occurred to you when you did, or when you came back tonight, that it would cost us the hotel?”

What? I’m psycasting to him, but I don’t know if he can hear me. He pauses between sentences, but he may be just thinking of what to say next and not listening to me at all.

“That was the flip side of the wager, my beautiful daughter. Dominic would kiss you in the garden, or you would come here with him. Myth lost, my child. I’m closing down the old home.”

“No! You can’t do that,” I shout, forgetting he can’t hear me. “How will he find me the next time? Where will I go to wait?” The slow, steady bleeps of Dominic’s monitors are the only thing in the air between us. Sleeping easily now, without me, his strong chest moves in rhythm with life. I fold my wings around my still naked body and push a piece of hair back from his handsome face. It leaves an angry red wheal where my finger brushed the skin of his brow, but he does not wince.

“You saved his life, bringing him here, Olivia. Just as he saved yours. Only a symbolic gesture could redeem an angel. Only modern medicine can save a doctor. What we believe in heals us.”

But what good is my redemption to me if I can no longer touch him?

“Once, you sought a loophole. You believed that if a mortal could both see and love you, it would allow you to return home, escape the world of the living. Now, full angel again, you want to remain material. You’re the reason he came back, I think, although I’m sure the doctors would disagree. They feel quite heroic, having saved him.”

What do you mean?

“Dominic embraced the empty space, my dear. He put his arms around the hole. In loving something he could not have, he met the pain that let him know he was alive. It was that pain that woke him.”

Did he ask for me?

“He woke up here. And you, my precious child, are going to have to come down and live in the real world now, if you want to be with him.”

That’s impossible. I wouldn’t even know how. And where? There’s no hotel left. No place for me.

“Dominic’s memories are gone.”

He doesn’t remember me!

“He’s found, at least, a way out of the suffering his curse has caused him, lifetime after lifetime. You should be happy for him.”

How can I be happy?

“You should be happy for yourself as well. You both attained what you came home to find. Dominic, his past forgotten, dwells in a new world that is completely explicable. Any abnormalities in memory he may experience going forward are attributable to a previous severe head trauma. Everything he has experienced since waking makes sense. And you, no longer shaped by the desire of others, live in an abstract realm where your every desire is gratified.”

I was happier with the wanting than the having.

“You always held yourself aloof from life anyway, my darling . . .”

It never seemed real to me! I could not feel. It was a temporary place of punishment.

“And now you are beyond it.”

I want to come back.

Gaehod walks past me to Dominic’s bed and stands over him, gazing tenderly down at the sleeping man. I think everyone must have been in love with Dominic—Alyx, Gaehod, me. Are they as oblivious to my love for him as I have been to theirs?

Look up if you can hear me, I psycast to him, but Gaehod doesn’t glance away from Dominic’s still face. I shout his name, but I know he cannot hear me.

I have longed for this—total freedom from the needs of others, and the constant gnawing of their eyes, but now, without them, I feel like the separated pieces of me are coming apart. I squeeze my eyes closed against the tears.

Gaehod's study is dark and still, lifeless as my crypt. The constant fire he keeps on the low grate has burned out. Even the flames of Hell will die when we don't feed them. I look around the desolate room. Without Gaehod's pottering presence to tend them, the stacks of papers and books just look untidy. The room is haunted by him, his touch, his ordering on everything that, without him, dissolves into meaninglessness and chaos.

Sylvia stands over Ophelia in the Quarry lounge. Ophelia's hands are bound. She is howling, and her flailing whips the ropes loose to fly around her like fantastic garlands, which Vivian silently captures and reties. Ophelia's struggles rock the antique armchair to which they've lashed her delicate frame, and the clatter and roll of ball bearings and cogs make a mechanical hailstorm beneath her shriek. Alyx's only slightly larger body, gaunt and ungainly in its brokenness, lies on one of the modular, backless sofas, empty and meaningless as Gaehod's office.

"You had no right to take his life," Vivian accuses our baby sister.

"That right is not yours to bestow and take away," Ophelia snarls back.

"Enough!" Sylvia cries. "Carry her to her tomb and be done with it!"

"You have not that right either!" Ophelia chokes on rage and hysteria, hurling her bound body violently between the ornate arms of the carved chair. I am standing behind her, and although all my raging sisters turn their eyes in my direction, they cannot see me.

"We have the right to decide who is too broken to dwell among us." Vivian's voice is bright ice. "And you cannot fight us and win. So you must submit to judgment."

Even for angels, it devolves to brute force.

“We find you guilty of murder—”

“Hypocrites!” Ophelia shouts. “We are all vampires!”

“—murder most foul.”

“You know what we are, but not what we may be. Odin and Jesus on trees! See how the branches are breaking . . .” Ophelia’s voice trails into a gurgling wail.

“She’s insane!” Sylvia barks. “We can’t try her like this.”

“Bullshit.” Vivian grips our keening sister by the jaw and sniffs her lips. “She’s stoned on Alyx. I used to hit that fucker when I wanted a buzz. It wouldn’t take much. And she was weak to begin with. And drained him. Put Ophelia in her crypt. Let her fade away. She’ll never be any saner.”

My sisters nod. “*Sugar, sugar, sugar don’t you laugh. Driving is flying and the highway’s my whore.*” Ophelia launches into song, writhing against the ropes that hold her. “*Sugar, sugar, sugar take my breath. Your kisses are poison and I want to drink more.*”

I will be a ministering angel, while she lies howling. I close my eyes to bless her.

The moist night air at the empty abbey insinuates its chill through my self-less self in a way even the cold of the grave could not. The spectral cows don't see me, but unnerve me more than Gaehod's empty office or Alyx's corpse. My avenging sisters are carrying Ophelia to her grappling grave.

Above me, the Irish night seems endlessly heavier than it did when I walked with Dominic here. I circle the ruined building, trying to locate the glassless window he looked through to see a star as home, but the stones blend with the grass, and the walls with the night, and I'm afraid to walk along the boundary fence because of the cows. I must inhabit all this, partake of this, if I hope to love him.

It could destroy me.

I climb the bell tower's spiraling stairs to stand at the peak of the roofless church. It cannot hold me. How can anything?

I flex my wings. They stretch like a fighter's arms from the taut center of my back. Spread, they are so formed for flight that the light breeze tugs me into it. I lean my naked breasts into the air and raise my chin, my hollow throat stretched against the emptiness. My fingertips curl around the soft flesh of wing ridges, the muscles of my arm wrapping upward to lend the strength of bicep and belly, forearm and chest to the span of my extending wings.

I let slip. They beat. I am flying.

Flight is not a glide, but the muscular swim of a fluid body through living air. My every sinew and thought is lost to the tides of space riding me up and down, driving ascent and gravity, pulling and pushing me and the void I fly across. I leave Earth behind me. I am mastery, pure and potent. I am desire and denial. I am inner contradiction. I own my entire soul.

The Atlantic is cold and distant, swollen like a headache, folding wave on icy wave under me. I flew here once before, cocooned in metal, beside a prattling Persephone, winging our way home

to Hell. Now I will make the unfathomable my own, and be forever both buoyed and anchored by its breaking within me.

I pike my body, pull tight my wings around me, and make a comet of my cloud-light flight.

I plummet.

My body rattles madly. I cannot hold my wings. I am knocked backwards, see the moon-drenched sky receding, then thrown over again, wings torn back, torn apart, ripped from me. Blood flies into the space behind. Air drives into my lungs so fast it drowns me. Falling out of control, out of grace—I am free. Falling.

12

VERTIGO

Dominic threw the thin hospital blankets from his restless body in disgust, and jumped out of bed. He shook himself, touched a sore place on his forehead, and bounced on the balls of his feet. If his memory didn't start coming back today, it was likely to stay gone.

He was sick of pajamas. He was tired of sleep, of doctors, of the machinery of medicine. He plucked the irritating pulse oximeter from his hand and unpeeled the sticky electrode tabs from his chest with fingers that seemed to retain more memory than his mind. He spread his hands and looked at them. They were strong, but not callused, skilled. He had been a doctor. Dysart had told him so. And an athlete. He didn't need any confirmation of that beyond his body's indignation at his current lack of activity. He wanted to run.

"Dr. O'Shaughnessy?" His pretty, black-haired nurse poked her sharp face into the room.

"Good morning, Clare. How does a man get a pair of running shoes in this place?"

"Did you disable your pulse ox, Dr. O'Shaughnessy?" It was remarkable to Dominic how stern the Irish young could be. He grinned at the beaky girl and sat down on the edge of his knotted bed.

"Yes. Sorry, Clare."

"Were you having the bad dreams again?" Her brow constricted in concern.

Dominic nodded. The past two days had been a restless parade of visits and visitors. Specialists, nurses, scans, tests, and their incomprehensible results were interrupted only by the necessity of

rehashing it all with Dysart during visiting hours. When he slept, his mind tangled without context to make sense of it all.

“Your mum phoned from the airport. She’s on the ground in Dublin and should be here in another hour.”

“Could I please get some clothes before then?”

“She’s your mother.”

“Please?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you.”

Clare’s slender, tapered fingers re-clipped the monitor and pushed Dominic back toward the stack of pillows on his bed.

“Maybe your landlord can help. He’s so lovely. Came by t’other day. Maybe he could bring you some of your things.” She regarded the discarded EEG pads and shrugged.

“I’d like to see him today,” Dominic said.

“That should be easy enough.” Clare untangled the blankets from their frustrated ball on the floor. “I’ll ring him for you, it’s a local number.”

“Thank you.”

Clare positioned pillows behind Dominic’s back and the blankets across his knees with the obscure precision of a mother bird. “You should try and get yourself a wee bit more sleep. It’s not quite morning.”

Dominic gazed out the window at the raw, late April sky. “You’ll call him right away?” he asked.

“If you want me to. I’ll ask him about your clothes.”

“No, that doesn’t matter, just tell him to come as soon as he can.”

In the reflective pane of his gray window, Dominic watched Clare tuck the blankets at his feet between the plastic-cased mattress and the metal bedrail. She turned at the door and smiled at him. Her gentleness and warmth seemed fragile in the window’s cold glass. Dominic shut his eyes against the sky, which lightened into the faded night that passed for a Dublin spring morning.

I am sitting before I wake up, dizzy on the floor beside my bed.

“Are you all right?” an old voice calls from another room.

My throat is too dry to answer. I stagger to my feet and grope for the edge of the bed. Then I fall back to the floor again. I reach up to find the tiny stem of a bedside table lamp, and twist it. Electric yellow light opens the old darkness, illuminating my broad, tumbled, black-covered bed.

Shiny rock band posters on thin paper adorn the fresh plaster wall. I squint at a singer in bruise-colored dreads—but I can't place the man.

"Hello?" An old man is knocking at my closed door.

"I'm okay," I say, but I don't sound it. My voice is raw, and the insides of my mouth taste like blood.

"May I come in?"

"Sure."

He kneels beside the bed. I'm wearing sweatpants that are too ugly to be mine.

"Can you walk? It's important to get on your feet as soon as possible."

"Okay," I say. He wraps a deceptively slender arm around my waist, below the blood-sticky, damaged places on my back, and pulls me to standing. My thighs run water. My feet are heavy red stone. I push them across the carpet with my will.

"Vanity," I say, pointing.

He helps me reach the bench and I collapse on the little stool. I draw a slow breath to steady myself and look up. The large, round mirror balances on a low table with two drawers on either side. It's a modern piece of furniture, maybe seventy years old and painted a high-gloss black. I look into the silvered glass. Ringed with old makeup and fresh bruises, my eyes are the gray of the cold, early morning sky behind me.

In the other room, a cell phone rings, and the old man leaves me between the window and the mirror, watching myself.

“Yes,” he says into the phone. “I’ll be right there.”

I close my eyes and start to fall.

“Dominic, let me beg you, one last time, to reconsider.”

Dominic stood with his hands jammed into the pockets of the jeans Gaehod had brought for him. In them, and his own sweatshirt and running shoes, he was even more certain of his decision. He wanted his memories back, and he trusted the stranger seated across from him to do what his doctors were afraid to tell him had already slipped from probability.

But the old man looked tragic. “The restoration will be complete you understand,” he said. “I cannot pick and choose what to leave lost and what to retrieve. It will all come back to you. All of it.”

Dominic shrugged. “It doesn’t seem to be in my nature to be content with not knowing.”

“Yes, I was afraid of that.”

“How will it work?”

“You must make certain that we are not interrupted.”

Dominic felt a thrill of dread, but set his jaw. “All right,” he said. He had learned enough about himself in the last three days to be intensely uncomfortable taking the recommendations of a non-scientist over those of doctors and professors, but he had seen enough of memory, living without it, to know it dwelt in a landscape between science and something else. His doctors had done everything they could within their kingdom. He must venture into the other now.

“I must go and retrieve a few things,” Gaehod said sadly.

“All right.”

The old man wrapped a heavy cloak around his graceful shoulders, glancing distractedly around the sterile hospital room. “Objects and artifacts to ground. Signs and symbols are uplifting,” he sighed.

“What?” Dominic was seized with a momentary apprehension. What sort of bizarre procedure was this man planning? *Signs and symbols*? “What did you say?” he asked again.

“Nothing. You need such different things, arcane and mundane . . .”

“I do?”

“Not ‘I,’ ‘we.’ ”

“You and I?”

The old man stopped his preparations. He stood motionless a long time. Then he reached up and placed both his slender hands on Dominic's broad shoulders and looked directly into the younger man's eyes. "Once upon a time . . . No, never mind. There's a vast difference, my friend, between restraint and sacrifice."

Every time I close my eyes, I am falling again, so I get back out of bed.

My room is a TV set. Everything in it is new. I find a pair of jeans and a NYU sweatshirt in a wad behind the door. The soft, fleecy interior of the sweatshirt sits familiarly against my warm skin. I put on the only pair of shoes in the closet without a price sticker on the sole and twist open the plastic blinds. The window lets in anemic light and offers a view of the quaint, crumbling brick wall across a narrow alley from me.

The wall paint of the kitchenette and small sitting room is fresh as a murder site, sins covered, but not cleansed. Beside the sink, a stack of freshly scrubbed pots, terrines, gelatin molds, and a glistening steel mandoline drip dry on a kitchen towel. A small white and red teapot sits as centerpiece on the pretty kitchen table, which also holds a large glass mixing bowl in which dismembered roses float. A gleaming automatic coffeemaker, with a sleek pneumatic hum, discharges the last of a steaming stream of fresh coffee into a pressure-locked aluminum canister. I pour myself a cup.

Slender bottles of champagne, vacuum-sealed tins of caviar, and cheeses of every imaginable shape stand in neat rows in the stainless steel fridge along with several foil-wrapped packets I don't open. The dishwasher is empty. The pantry is stocked with gold seal balsamic vinegar, black truffle oil, and dried morel mushrooms. I tear the top off a paper bag of unrefined cane sugar and spoon some into my mug.

I deduce from the neatly folded blanket on the sofa that the old man had been sleeping out here when my fall from bed woke him. I sit on the springy new cushions and leaf through a magazine, but I'm hungry. Beside the door, a frameless mirror is mounted above an antique table of flowing wooden vines. It holds a single brass key on a slender chain and a U.S. passport. I put the photo up beside my face in the mirror. When I'm finally able to look away from my reflection, I take the handbag from the doorknob. It holds a camera, a thick wallet, a hand-drawn map and a blood-red lipstick. I paint my mouth in the mirror and smile at Olivia Wright. The brass key locks the door behind me.

The hard muscles along Dominic's spine were gripped so fiercely that when Madalene Wright burst into his hospital room, her interruption was almost a release. A child knows his mother before light or air, and every understanding of the wider world is anchored in that primary connection. An hour ago, Dominic had greeted his mother without context or history. Difficult though he knew mother-child negotiations could be, he had found being a stranger's son almost unbearably painful.

"Madalene, I'd like you to meet my mother." The tall, expensive woman at the door extended a hand to the short, practical woman by the window. She rose to take Madalene's gloved fingers in a small shake. Dominic recalled the gesture's origin as an above-elbow clasp between warriors evaluating for bicep strength and concealed knives.

"Maeve O'Shaughnessy," his mother said, easily stepping into the gaping chasm Dominic's absent memory had opened.

"That's a lovely name, Maeve, are you Irish?"

"My people come from here, but a long way back. It was my great-grandmother's name. Won't you sit down, Madalene?"

"No, thank you. I can't stay. In fact, I was only stopping in to say good-bye." Madalene turned a radiant face to Dominic. "My goddaughter is checking into a treatment program—we're all thrilled! But the program director has taken her passport, so I'm off now to see her get settled in. Then I'm flying back to New York on Monday to pack up her things and get her out of her sublet."

"An inpatient program?"

"Yes."

“Medicinally or behaviorally based?”

“I’m sure I don’t know, my dear. I really must be going. It’s quite a drive.” Madalene smiled benignly and swiveled to face Dominic’s mother. “So very nice to have met you, Maeve.”

“I want to thank you for all you’ve done for my Dominic.” Maeve smiled as smoothly back. “You’ve been so kind, the private room, the clothes . . .”

“Not at all. I am still indebted to your son. I’ll be back in a month to check on both our children.”

“Lovely. I’ll see you then.”

As Madalene left, Dominic’s mother turned back to him. “You know this program her daughter enrolled in, don’t you?”

“It’s experimental,” Dominic answered.

“You’ve always been drawn to the radical thinkers,” his mother smiled. “I remember the *Times* article about your Dr. Dysart. What was it they called him?”

“I don’t remember.”

“No, of course not. I’m sorry, darling. It was ‘enigmatic, brilliant, controversial and vilified,’ I believe. The same article referred to you as ‘Dysart’s charismatic and rambunctious assistant, who may just be the brains behind this genius operation.’ ”

“Why don’t you show me the next album, Mom?”

From an oversized suitcase sprawled across his hospital bed, Dominic’s mother extracted another leather-clad binder.

“I’m so glad Dysart suggested I bring these,” she said. In profile, she looked younger, her wild white hair could be stylish rather than harried. But Dominic didn’t know. He re-seated himself at his mother’s side, re-cramping his neck to read the Roman numeral on the book’s stout spine. “I’m sure he didn’t mean for you to bring them all.” He smiled. “It must have been quite a chore wrangling that many scrapbooks onto an airplane. Did you even pack clothes?”

“In my carry-on.”

His mother opened the third album to the first page, reading the dates inscribed, but ignoring the Latin notation in Dominic’s stilted, adolescent handwriting. “You would have been fourteen.”

“The year you gave me that Nikon for my birthday.”

“Well, you developed such an interest in photography the year before.” She leafed past the front page inscription, *Noli esse incredulus sed fidelis*, to the first archival-quality sheet of simple, English declaratives under photos. “My house: front door.” “My dog: Twin.”

“I never understood why you named him that,” Maeve mused. “Plenty of dogs have only two-puppy litters.”

“I know,” said Dominic, “but Thomas was different.”

“That was what your sister named him! Are you beginning to remember?” The unfamiliar lines of his mother’s hopeful smile told Dominic, in a language more ancient than his adolescent secret code, of the aging woman’s private struggle. *Be no longer unbelieving, but believe.*

“I think, maybe, I am.”

The famous teahouse makes liberal use of the peculiar Dublin physics that allow an almost infinite catacomb of vertical space within very concrete horizontal parameters. It irritates me.

Stairs wind up and down, and an arcane calculus based on whether you want tea or supper determines whether you sit above or below street level. Since each word has a different meaning in Ireland than it does in the states, I just tell the skinny hostess I’m hungry and go where she takes me.

My plump waitress addresses the gentleman seated across from me by name, calls me “luv,” and says she’s Kate. She drops off my neighbor’s ticket—handwritten on an unlined slip of notepaper—and deposits a plastic basket of Irish brown bread before me. She pats the back of my pale hand and says she’ll be back directly for my order.

I sink my teeth into the dense, moist Irish texture which eclipses flavor, and close my eyes. An open void swallows me, hurtling up through story after story of historic wood-floored teahouse. I tear my wheeling eyes open to meet my waitress’s concerned gaze. Her soft hand touches my sore shoulder.

“Are you ill, luv?” she asks.

“No,” I croak and clear my throat. “A little giddy.”

“You’re American,” she notes and I nod. “Jetlagged?”

I nod again.

“Flying sure can take it out of you.”

“Yes,” I say.

“Have something to eat. You’ll feel better.”

I give her fleshy hand a little squeeze. “Thank you,” I say.

She returns the squeeze and bustles away. I smile reassuringly at the business suit my waitress called James. His elaborately bow-tied silk cravat protrudes beyond the horizontal plane of his tuberous nose.

The soup, when it comes, is simple and rich. It smells of field and barn, carrot, barley, meat and—of course—potato. It is as Irish as Kate. She takes my empty bowl away.

“Do you feel better?”

“I feel wonderful,” I tell her and point questioningly at the bright blue bandage across her chubby thumb.

“So we don’t lose them in the food,” she chuckles and pockets the extravagant tip I’ve left.

I walk out into the late afternoon chaos and theater of Grafton Street, feeling fully nourished and grounded. I have one more thing to do in Dublin, and then only one place left on this earth I must go.

Dominic had stopped listening to Dr. Dysart, acutely aware of how little he knew about himself. He was nervous, and didn't know what indications were typical of him, what he needed to conceal. Only two hours remained of visiting hours, and Gaehod had said he would need at least ninety uninterrupted minutes alone with him. Dysart's blue eyes glinted with mischief through his spiny brows and Dominic returned the man's discolored grin, although he had missed the joke.

"I need to ask you a favor," Dominic said, and was surprised by how quickly his mentor's expression changed. Whatever humor the doctor had been sharing was as forced at Dominic's had been.

"Anything you need, my dear boy, anything at all."

"Thank you. It's a bit awkward, really." Dominic reminded himself what Gaehod had told him—a fiction as close as possible to fact was best.

Dysart's intelligent eyes betrayed no anticipation of what Dominic was about to say, and for a moment Dominic hesitated. He steeled himself. He knew very little about the man he had been before his still unexplained injuries landed him in the neuro ward of St. James' Hospital, but he was absolutely certain he was about to betray that prior self.

"Our lab hadn't been working on any medicinal formulae, had we?"

"Oh, some theoretical ones. You know how it is, speculation really. What compounds might be efficacious, what current drugs we might use off-label, or in combination, but we were several years away. Why?"

Dominic took a deep breath. There was only one thing he could trade for Dysart's guaranteed absence through the end of visiting hours. He lowered his voice. "I found some pills."

"What sort of pills?"

"Homemade capsules."

The old man's marbled jaw fell.

"I think I was taking them. Experimenting on myself."

"Jesus, Dominic!" Dysart sat as if electrocuted. "Could that be what happened to you? A chemically induced amnesia?"

"I don't know."

"Obviously, you'd suffered some external injury . . . the blood loss, fractures . . . but the brain scans have all been negative . . ." The old man chuckled. "Our own Albert Hofman! Who would have thought it of you, Dominic? You were always so obedient."

"Apparently not."

"No. How gratifying."

“I thought you’d be angry.”

“Oh, I’m sure I should be. And I certainly would not have condoned it, had I known. I would have insisted you stop. It’s professionally useless and personally dangerous, as I obviously don’t need to tell you. But I must say, my dear boy, I’m pleased by your daring. And your dedication.”

“There’s one capsule left,” Dominic said.

Dysart leaned in eagerly. “And you would like me to have it analyzed?”

“Do you know any place local that—”

Dysart sprang to his flat feet. It startled Dominic to see such mass move with such speed. He suppressed a grin. That had been easier than he had expected.

“Of course, son! I have a few folks over at Trinity who would love a chance to do me a favor. A phone call or two, and I’m certain we could find a lab willing to let me borrow a bit of space tonight. And if not, we’ll see what doors Madalene’s last name unlocks!”

“You know Madalene?”

“I’d be glad for an excuse to know her better.” Dysart winked and scurried away. Dominic pushed his feet into the new running shoes Gaehod had brought him that morning and went looking for Clare in the little gray and aqua nurse’s lounge. The time pressure squeezed his throat, and the minutes beat against his rib cage like an impatient pulse. Gaehod had been very clear. They must not be interrupted. Whatever weird ritual the mysterious old man was planning, he was very keen that they be left alone for the full ninety minutes he said it would take, and time is the last possession a hospital returns to its patients.

“Dr. O’Shaughnessy! Whatever are you doing?” Clare’s keen black eyes darted up to meet his.

“Going running.”

“Absolutely not.” She plunked her knitting down on the table and turned her chair to face her patient.

“I can’t sleep.”

“I can ask the doctor to write you something for that.”

“I don’t want pills Clare, I want exercise.”

“So you propose to just trot about my corridors?”

“Until I’m tired enough to drop.”

“I cannot allow that.”

Dominic leaned wearily against the cold, tile wall, closed his eyes, and listened to the little lounge refrigerator’s dull, mechanical keening. He waited. Frail and nervous though she was, Clare had clearly chosen nursing out of a genuine care for others. Dominic felt her eyes touch his face and he sagged deliberately, making his best play for her compassion.

“Clare,” he said, meeting her eyes at last, “I’m exhausted. There has been a constant parade of visitors and doctors through my room since I regained consciousness. And I’m certain that I loved my friends and family, but they all feel like strangers to me now.”

“I never thought of that. It must be like entertaining guests for you, rather than visiting with family.”

Dominic nodded. “And the doctors . . .”

“I understand.” Clare stood up. “You go back to your room now and relax. No running, but take a shower. Go to bed. I won’t let anyone disturb you. Not even the doctors. Not for a couple of hours, anyway.”

“Can you really do that?”

Clare’s dark eyes glinted with determination. “Aye, I can do that,” she said. “You get some rest, Dr. O’Shaughnessy.”

Dominic smiled wearily and walked to the door. “Why won’t you use my first name, Clare?”

“I remember who you were, Doctor.”

“And you use my title to remind me, is that it?”

Clare regarded him unblinking. “Go to bed, Doctor.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You have my personal guarantee of at least an hour to yourself. But I can only keep the doctors away for so long. They begin last rounds at nine. I can stall them, but I can’t stop them.”

“Thanks for taking me under your wing this way, Clare.”

“Never you mind. I hope it helps.”

Dominic glanced back at the nurse, but she had resumed her knitting and did not meet his eyes. He retreated to his room, to find Gaehod there, dressed for safari in white linen, already engrossed in his mysterious work. Dominic closed the door.

The old innkeeper had laid out an array of strange supplies on the striped plane of Dominic’s hospital bed. A slender Chinese calligraphy brush and an ancient carved bone flask waited beside seven neat piles of vellum, hide, clay, and paper. Gaehod was crouched over the red leather-clad diary when Dominic came in. He looked up, but seeing Dominic, gestured for him to sit, and began leafing through a clearly decades-older, yellowing, blue-lined notepad spidered in rough semi-literate scrawl. Gaehod made a final notation and looked up.

“Very well. I think we’re ready.”

“Okay.” Dominic squared his shoulders. “What do you need me to do?”

“Nothing, right now. I need to prepare the window.”

“Can I help?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Gaehod opened the hinged brass lid of the squat, bone pot and dipped the brush’s unevenly colored hairs into it. With careful strokes, he began painting the hospital window in minute, swooping red symbols.

“What does that mean?” Dominic asked.

“It’s a name,” Gaehod answered, preoccupied. Beneath it, he drew another symbol. Then, taking a step to his left, he made another sign a little lower on the glass. “Another name,” he explained without turning around. He drew four figures directly beneath the name, and moved left again and farther down again. Dominic was surprised by how beautiful each symbol was, and the way the deep red ink stayed completely opaque and glistening, but did not run or harden.

Gaehod worked counterclockwise, creating a circle of stacked symbols on the window. Each stack was crowned with a unique name, but in the columns below, Dominic began to notice a few repeated motifs, a pattern in the incomprehensible signs.

“What does that symbol mean?” he asked, as Gaehod finished drawing one of the more frequent symbols on the glass.

“It’s the sigil ‘heartbreak.’ ”

Dominic snorted. “I seem to have had more than my share.”

Gaehod consulted the next stack of papers on the bed and shook his roan head. “No. Below each name is a list of pivots, the points where a life turns.” He dipped the brush into the bone pot again and returned to the window. Dominic watched the stabbing liquid lines.

“They all look painful,” he said.

“Pain is a catalyst for change.” Gaehod bent to draw an abbreviated column at the lowest point on the window.

“Not all changes are good,” Dominic said, his lingering eyes on the brilliant red knife-lines of heartbreak.

“No,” Gaehod agreed, consulting the next stack of papers on the bed, “but even good change can be painful.”

Dominic watched the red ink clinging to the motley bristles of the brush. The cord binding them looked new, although the handle was ancient.

“Did you make that brush yourself, Gaehod?”

“Yes.”

“Especially for tonight?”

“Yes.”

Gaehod glanced at Dominic and turned to the hospital window again.

“Gaehod, is that my hair?” Dominic asked.

Gaehod dipped the brush in the ink and drew another name with another line of symbols. He worked swiftly, with complete concentration, and Dominic didn't interrupt again, watching the red circle close, searching for patterns in the columns and letter shapes.

"There's the symbol for heartbreak again," Dominic noted.

"Heartbreak is necessary to a complete life. You can't fall in love until your heart's been broken. You must stand on the splintered pieces to reach the first rung. Come here, Dominic."

Dominic walked to the glyph-crowded window, his heart thundering. Every animal part of him, brain-stem to fingertip, was alight with danger.

"It's time." Gaehod said. His face was deeply lined with fatigue or anguish, but he did not ask Dominic if he was certain he wanted to proceed, despite clearly wishing that he would not. "Look at your eyes in the glass," he said.

Dominic looked at his reflection. He looked ragged, unshaven, and weary. Then he met his own eyes and gazed into their unfamiliarity.

"Now look out the window," Gaehod said.

Dominic toggled his focus and saw the rain-polished roofs and streets of Dublin.

"Put your left hand on the top symbol." Gaehod's voice was soft, a subtle whisper, almost more in Dominic's thoughts than hearing. He touched hesitant fingers to the cold glass.

"See your eyes."

They were darker somehow, and his nose longer and strong. His face, lashes, and brows, where they bordered his vision, seemed younger, but unfamiliar still.

“Look through the window.”

The city’s spires and depressions, shades of darkness, profiles of commerce, swam into focus.

“Look in your eyes.”

Dominic’s focus switched, blurring for a moment, the red circle at the periphery of vision, but he did not blink, and black eyes met his gaze again.

“Look through the window.”

His raised hand on the glass kept him from falling into the night outside, where buildings, like trees, stretched endlessly up.

“Look through your eyes.”

The whirling red circle rimmed his vision and the glass, like water, rippling, showed him himself reflected, deep eyes, almost green, beneath long lashes, still unblinking.

“See through the window.”

Back again, the switching focus, dizzying, the lights shining, city smoking, shivering.

“See through your eyes.”

“The window.”

“Your eyes.”

“The window.”

Gaehod’s voice commanded. Dominic’s focus shifted. The red ring around him blurred. The night, his vision, his open eyes, the glass between them, everything began to dissolve and whisper, blur and seep. Dominic caught glimpses of different eyes, none of them—and all of them—his own, reflected back and across nights of cities and forests and towns.

“Sweep your hand in a circle across the glass.”

Dominic obeyed, his stiff arm twisting in the socket.

“Again.”

It was easier the second time, although he still did not blink his eyes. His palm slid frictionless across the cool glass. “Again.”

His arm flooded with the heat of movement returning, tingling up from his fingers, smearing the glass. He blinked. Staggered. *Shambhu, Bel-nirari, Gnith Cas.*

Brother! Priestess!

Gaehod's arms came around his violently convulsing shoulders. Leaning against Gaehod's maternal softness, Dominic backed numbly from the window. His arm fell heavily away from generation after generation. He stumbled against the edge of his metal hospital bed and let Gaehod ease his exhausted body down. *Antonius Musa, Huáng Z?ngx?, Venerio lo Grato.*

Mother! Ghita!

The man's tender hands pulled the blankets up, and Dominic closed his smoking eyes. The metal door whispered closed.

Dominic looked through the wiped-clean glass, ready to continue, learning nothing but the unique lines of cityscapes and faces. His searching eyes closed against the unending night, willing to keep solving nothing, fighting and building, with his stubborn strength against the vast and constant void of love and loss repeating. It had been so much, so distant and enduring. Heartbreaking. And yes, magnificent.

LEGEND

The heiress's godchild is divine. At least that's what my tattoo says. Okay, if I'm honest, it just suggests it. But true twenty-first-century girl that I am, literal is my only metaphor.

Dublin's tattoo parlors cluster into a few square blocks like American churches in a one-stoplight town. I began my pilgrimage late on a southwest corner and was turned away from the first four doors I entered. But Dani has tattooed over surgery scars before and only warns me about the pain. "You'll wish you were dead," he tells me. "The nerves are closer to the surface in scars."

He tells me to break the work into sessions, but I offer him twice his posted rate to finish tonight. It takes nine hours. We don't talk. He's grudgingly impressed that I don't make a sound while the needle drills scar tissue and bone, and he stops only to pee. He doesn't hit on me. I'm not his type.

It's early morning when Dani finishes. He offers me a pint, but I say I need to get on the road, and he understands. I had wanted to go to Glendalough, to see its famous bell tower pictured on the tourist guides, but I'm following the hand-drawn map instead, driving into the heart of Ireland on the small roads—unnamed on map or sign—that vein the land. Several times I stop and get out of the car to look around or just listen. I am absurd, as more of the landscape unfurls, hopping in and out of the car to stare at each new convolute and coil, somewhere between inspiration and idiocy. It seems impossible that the vampire bars of New York that I left behind so recently could belong to the same world I now inhabit.

I am waylaid again and again by the glory of this strange land. For miles, as far as I can see in any direction, the road I'm driving is the only sign of human work. I leave the rental in the road; there is no shoulder to pull over onto. In fact, there are no lanes—but there are also no cars. I'm staggered by the indefinite expanse and silence and beauty. This landscape could be anytime—the earth before mankind, the Garden before the fall. And yet, I feel at home inside it.

The Rock of Cashel is a geologically drastic stone outcrop burst from Tipperary's lush and gentle landscape. I imagine people have lived or worshiped from its lofty vantage as long as

there have been people, but I'm just glad you can see it from a long way off. This is where my map delivers me.

I spend an hour and a half systematically following every road that radiates from the rock. On the fourth of five roads, I chance upon a ruined abbey, late in the afternoon, a little off the road and across a field of grazing cows, dull and placid in the un-mystic sun. Behind the church, I discover two headstones, and stretch out in the soft grass to watch the prototypical spring clouds in the bright blue sky. Tomorrow will be May. There are more cold days to come, but right now, the sun is low and warm. I'm deeply relaxed, almost slipping into sleep, when it occurs to me that interred beneath me are men who buried their lust beneath their desire for union with a perfect god and so managed, their whole lives, to avoid sleeping with a woman. It seems cruel of me to lie above them now, so I get up. "May you sleep ever with the angels," I pray.

I am climbing the abbey's interrupted walls again, when I see a man across the field. Something in his confident stride suggests urgency. He is not wandering or exploring. He is pursuing. His shoulders are broad, and his hands ball into taut fists. He will not be brooked, whatever his search. I put my head over the parapet to watch him.

He's handsome, hair glinting red in the sunset's bloody light. There's something of the warrior in his lithe body, and he jumps the low stone wall easily. He stops at the ruined threshold. His eyes, blue as a sword's edge, run across the edifice, but he doesn't see me above it. He walks through the doorless opening in the wall I sit atop, into the grass-carpeted nave. He looks up, gazing through an empty stone window toward the cloudless, blue sky. I walk soundlessly down the spiraling stair.

"Hi," I say quietly, not to startle him.

"Olivia," Dominic whispered. He turned from the window and found her dressed for roaming the Irish countryside in jeans and a sweatshirt, wearing running shoes in the soft grass.

"Hi," she said again. She was slender and pale, beautiful in an unexplainable way, but almost shy, looking at him and then down. He took a step to put his arms around her again—at last, but she stepped away.

“Do I know you?” she said.

For the first time since he woke up in the hospital almost a week ago, Dominic felt afraid. How, after everything, could she be lost to him now?

“I’m sorry. I have a terrible memory,” she said. “Please don’t take it personally. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.” She shrugged prettily. “Too many drugs,” she smiled.

“Olivia—” He searched her flawless face.

She smiled gently—warm, but a little sad. “Tell me how we know each other?”

“You . . .” he whispered, unable to meet her oceanic eyes. “You’re my angel.”

She laughed, clear and brilliant. “Not at all. Just a concerned stranger.”

Rage welled through Dominic. If he could believe in God, he would hate Him for this. “No,” he ground out, striding away from her, away from the no-longer-moonlit abbey, away from idiocy, idealism, and undying love. He would have killed Gaehod in that moment, for convincing him to hope. Or Dysart for cautioning him against it.

“Wait!” She followed him to the boundary of ancient edifice and present pasture. “Let’s sit down. You can tell me everything, okay?” She patted the rough stones of the wall beside her. “The cows won’t hurt us, will they?”

“No. Olivia . . .” How could he tell her anything at all?

Dominic could not make himself obey her, and stayed standing, silent, twisting a small rock from the low wall between his fingers. “When I was fourteen,” he said at last, “I dug up two million dollars in Civil War-era gold on my grandparents’ ranch.”

“Wow! Weren’t you the lucky kid?”

“Maybe.” Dominic threw the stone hard away from himself. It bounded off the church wall and vanished into the grass. “Or maybe I remembered where I had buried it a hundred and fifty years before, afraid to be hung as a thief if anyone found that kind of gold with a black man.”

“Past-life memories?”

“Maybe. Maybe coincidence.”

“Which?”

He looked at her. The setting sun burned the sky above her, staining the clouds, and even the air between them, a honeyed red. Utterly beautiful, black wisps of hair blowing in silken shadows across her heavenly pale skin. She was asking him for more than his opinion.

“Both,” he answered.

Her smile reached into Dominic’s torment, and quieted a seething place.

“That’s not a very scientific answer,” he admitted, looking down from her soft beauty to his hard hands. He couldn’t bear her right now.

“And I’m a scientist. I’ve spent my adult life and most of the proceeds from that gold I found searching for testable, concrete answers to simpler questions, and all I can tell you is that the infinite reaches of outer space are well-mapped compared to what we know about the human mind. Each of us carries a vast and disobedient terra incognita inside our own skulls.”

Her bubbling laugh released something in the deep muscles of his shoulder. “Yeah,” she said, meeting his eyes frankly, “it’s unruly inside my head, too.”

The spectra of the setting sun framed her like a halo, making Dominic squint against the apocalyptic red. He sat down beside her, so that looking at her no longer blinded him.

“But we’ll figure it out eventually, right?” she asked.

“I don’t know. It’s possible our brains are wired in such a way that we aren’t capable of understanding how our brains are wired.”

“There’s something magical in that.”

“And even . . .” Dominic pressed on. “Even if science gets to the place where we know, on a molecular level, the mechanics of thought, it won’t tell us anything definitive about the purpose of thinking, or why, abstractly, we are capable of abstraction. Science is good with fact, but it’s useless with meaning.” He glanced at her uncertainly.

“Look,” he tried again, “it’s a fact I found a rotting box of stamped gold bricks. But what did it mean? Hell if I know.”

Olivia smiled. “It meant”—she poked him playfully on the arm—“that you’d never have to work again.”

“I gave most of the money to the place I went to grad school.”

She poked him again. “That means you love your work.”

“I love—” Dominic caught her hand midpoke. The sun was sinking, taking its warmth with it. The night would be cold. “I used to think knowledge and love were linked,” he said to her soft fingers. “I thought we could only hate what we could not comprehend, and that I loved knowledge.”

“But now?” Her fingers interlaced with his.

“Now, I think the opposite.” He bravely met her bottomless eyes again. “Now, I think, I love a mystery.”

“Love to untangle it? Solve it?” Her eyes were gloaming gray, the color of the darkening Irish sky behind her, and as vast.

“Now I love learning, not knowledge.”

“You love what you don’t understand?”

“I love not understanding.” Olivia did not look away. Dominic remembered her piercing teeth in his throat and the soft ashes of his death. He remembered her searing embrace in the place between consciousness and death, where every touch from her had wracked him, but where he fought to stay. He would shoulder his curse again happily—face infinite deaths, to stay alive to her. He looked at their clasped hands.

The last flaming sliver of sun sank below a distant hill, and Olivia shivered. “What about you?” he asked, his voice tight. “What do you love?”

She stayed silent a while, then lifted his arm by the hand she held and wrapped it around her slender shoulders. “I used to complain,” she said quietly, “that I wanted only impossible things.”

“But now?”

She rested her dark head against his shoulder. “Now, I think I want what I have.”

“You’re talking about acceptance, choosing things as they are?”

“No.” The night was darkening quickly. Dominic strengthened his grip on Olivia’s small body, tucking it against his own. He couldn’t see her face, but he knew it would be twisted in the delicate knot of brows and forehead he had seen before when she faced danger. “What if mysteries want to be understood?” she asked softly against his chest.

“If they were understood, they wouldn’t be mysteries.”

“I know.”

“So it’s a good thing the curious are inept, huh?”

“Love blinds them,” she whispered.

“Yes,” he said.

Yes, he loved her. And it blinded him. He closed his eyes, and could still see her angelic face.

“I actually did recognize you,” she said shyly. “I’ve seen you in the papers. You’re the brilliant American neuroscientist. My god-mother gives money to your university in America. You came over here to do some work for her, but were brutally attacked in the process. You’ve been in a coma.”

“That’s not who I am. I am Reborn, cursed through generations—”

“You’re not cursed!”

“And you are the angel of desire—”

“Dominic!” Olivia sprang from the wall to face him, her deep eyes reflecting the light of the just-rising moon. “Stop!”

“Olivia . . .” He hesitated. If he believed her, if he was just a scientist—and there was no proof otherwise, since Trinity had retrieved nothing from his blood-soaked machine—if he believed her, how could he explain the welter of emotions, desire and terror, tenderness and rage, scouring him? He stood beside her and closed his eyes.

Her long, cool fingers wrapped his still-bruised ones. “Why did you close your eyes?” she whispered.

“I don’t need them now.”

“When I close my eyes,” she said, “I get dizzy.”

Dominic peered into hers again. “Neurological?”

“A side effect of cult-deprogramming hypnosis.” She shrugged. “Or a very long fall.” Her steady gray eyes held his, her hands soft but strong in his own. She was asking him for something impossible. But he already knew he would give her anything. His life, his blood, his belief . . .

“That must have been very difficult,” he said stiffly.

“Yes.” She bowed her forehead to his chest, and Dominic put his lips against her smooth hair in a devotional kiss. “But no more difficult than what you’ve been through—the attack, the coma . . .”

“It’s been a hard month,” he agreed.

“But now?” she turned her face up to his. It seemed to be their question.

The moon, rising behind him, touched her upturned face with its ash fingers, drawing her in a monochrome of mystery and shadow.

“I don’t know,” he said simply.

“Do you need to?” Her eyes were moonlight, and he was tumbling into them.

“Not anymore,” he said. She blinked black lashes, and he was flying upward in her sheltering arms through shattered glass, bending to her raised lips and bottomless eyes. “Olivia . . .” He touched her elbows with his fingers, and she stepped toward him. The weight of her brought to ground for him was more than he could stand. It had been easier to die.

“Olivia, I know we’ve just met . . .” Tears stood in her eyes, dark puddles of gratitude in the night. He took a shuddering breath and tried not to clench his hands too hard around her delicate arms. “By one of those strange coincidences that put two American tourists at an obscure Irish abbey, but I”—her eyes were like the midnight clouds, deep and distant and they soundlessly spilled twin, twisting shadows down her moon-burnt cheeks—“but I think I’m falling . . .”

“Dominic . . .” She closed her eyes and swayed in his hands.

“ . . . in love with you, and I . . .” She opened her eyes.

Nothing in this world, beneath, or above it, could have kept his lips from hers. It was the only way to say it. Everything he could not speak, he said, and heard her confessions in the bones of his shoulders where her hands coiled, like Eve’s snake, over his back.

“It must be the moon,” she whispered, smiling.

She was better at this than he would ever be, better at straddling worlds, spanning truths. He pushed the tears from the warm, pale planes of her perfect face and curled his fingers into her black hair. And his second kiss said only one thing. When she drew her lips away, she slid her fingers into his hand and stepped over the wall behind them. He followed in the wake of desire.

“Where’s your car?” she asked.

“I don’t have one. I got a ride with a man who owns a hotel nearby.” Dominic’s voice was parched, inadequate to speak over his howling need.

“I’m tired of hotels,” she said, walking warily past the cows in the dark, holding his hand. “But I have the address of a great little bed-and-breakfast in Cashel.”

“Legends?” Dominic asked. He had reserved a room there a month ago, when he first made his travel plans, when he thought Gaehod might let him stay on the surface. He’d booked it for four weeks. They might still have a room in his name.

Thunder growled in the darkness, and Dominic looked into the fathomless sky, remembering the last time he had followed her out of this field to their waiting bikes. He had wanted her then, but had fought against it, furious with her delusions and with his own. He had wanted her then, and she had thrown it in his face.

She was the angel of desire. He had never had any choice but to want her. He wanted her still, wanted her now, but as the silent black clouds above them gathered rain to spill, he knew Olivia had been right then, too. Desire is an angel. It can get us closer to God, can raise us out of despair, out of Hell, out of death. Desire is immortal, and inherently impossible. As impossible as love, but Dominic loved her all the same.

The Rock of Cashel rises like a blasted tree stump across the narrow lane behind Legends Bed-and-Breakfast. I’m nervous, and slip my hand into Dominic’s when he gets out of the car. Now that a lifetime of waiting has ticked down to hours, I find it blotched with doubt and anxiety. What will it be, finally, to open my arms, my lips, and my body to love?

Dominic is hungry, but it is ten o’clock, and I don’t know if we will be able find a restaurant open in Cashel. I only want to touch my lips to his again. His full-moon kiss in the abbey’s black grass had tasted timeless, of gardens and memory, of lilacs and the cool, sudden spring rain that made us run together, laughing, the last few yards of cow pies and cold iron gate to my car. I slipped once, but he caught me, and the smell of warm field and wet night stayed with us in the rental car’s sterile plastic interior.

Huddled on Legends' doorstep now, he puts a protective arm around me and knocks a second time. An American voice shouts, "I've got it!" from behind the wood and brass, which opens in a gust of peat smoke and candlelight. I step in at once, past the heavysset man holding the door wide, but Dominic is rooted at the threshold.

"It's him!" the man shouts over his thick shoulder, "Dominic's made it! Come on in, my boy, I can't tell you how good it is to see you!"

Dominic doesn't move. He's staring at the jowly face before him with something between shock and terror. "Why are you here?" he asks, soft and dangerous.

"Dominic, why don't you come inside?" I plead, "I'm sure . . ."

"Francis," the man supplies for me.

"I'm sure Francis can answer all your questions."

A slow smile cracks Dominic's handsome face. He takes his searching eyes from the corroded face and looks straight at me. "Somehow, I don't think so," he chuckles, but he steps into the cozy entryway and claps the man's meaty back. "Professor Dysart, this is Olivia."

I smile and say hello, and together we follow our enthusiastic escort through a deserted bar into a small dining room. A cheerful cry greets us, and a small, round woman with a blazing white corona of hair rockets to her feet.

"Mom! " Dominic sounds stunned, but a broad grin is melting every hard angle of his face. Dominic's attention is completely arrested, but even through the confusion I feel another's eyes on me. I face the sculptured blonde across the table directly.

She whispers “uncanny” under her perfumed breath, as Dominic holds out his arms to the white-haired woman. She stands by the seat she sprang from, her fingers gripping its high, cushioned back.

“Dominic.” She braces herself between the chair and table. “Do you know who I am?”

“You’re my mother.”

“You remember? From yesterday?”

“From my whole life, Mrs. Maeve Gonne O’Shaunnessy.”

“My maiden name!” The tears welling in Maeve’s eyes give them a preternatural gleam in the warm firelight. “I didn’t mention it yesterday. Are you . . .”

“I’m fine. Completely myself again. My memory came back last night—”

Maeve launches herself at her son. “You didn’t know me! Didn’t know my first name! We looked at photo albums. I brought them from . . . Oh, Dominic, I’m just so glad!” Arms full of soft, shaking woman, Dominic smiles over her head at me, and beyond me to Dysart, who stands awkwardly beside me.

“Mom”—Dominic gently unpeels her from his chest—“I’d like you to meet Olivia.”

Tears flow freely down Maeve’s smooth cheeks, but she turns her clear blue eyes to me with a brave smile.

“Hello, Olivia,” she whispers.

The emotion is too much for me. I was strung out when we got here. Now, with Maeve still clinging to Dominic and Dysart shuffling uncertainly, I start to giggle. “My boyfriends’ mothers usually don’t start crying until *after* they’ve met me.” It’s a stupid thing to say, but Maeve smiles deeply, and I know she sees me as I have never been seen by a woman before.

“I’m sorry . . . joking,” I whisper.

“Not at all. *I’m* sorry, my dear. I’m new to this. Dominic has never introduced me to a girlfriend before. I’ll try to do better next time.”

“There’s not going to be a next time,” he says softly into her wild hair.

“No,” she says. “I didn’t think so.”

She turns her face up to look at him, pats his cheek with a wrinkled hand. Then she turns back to the table and sits down again, looking completely at ease. She’s the only one.

“Yes, well . . .” Dysart clears his jowly throat. “A few more introductions here. Dominic, I know you’ve already met our quaint hotel’s celebrity guest, Madalene Wright.”

The queenly blond woman across the table from Maeve, who is still searching my face, smiles cordially and raises a glass. “I believe I may be the only person here they both already know. Of course, there’s my professional connection to Dr. O’Shaughnessy, and Olivia”—Madalene’s keen eyes scan my face hungrily—“is like a daughter to me.”

Dysart beams across the table at Madalene. “I believe everyone in the world knows you. Or wants to. Right. Only one more person for the kids to meet then,” he exclaims, wedging himself behind his vacated chair and Madalene’s to rap briskly on the swinging door behind him. “He’s listened to us all fretting about you for hours now, our miraculously generous host—”

The kitchen door swings open. Beside me, Dominic’s intake of breath rasps like a sword unsheathed. The *G* is on both our lips, but the old man stops us with a glance. “Gaehod,” he says, “the innkeeper. So lovely to meet you both.”

His rolled-up white sleeves and pin-striped trousers are partially covered by a crisp white apron. He hands an impressively populated cheeseboard to Dysart and pushes a loose tendrill the color of snow and blood back from his face with a familiar impatience. “I’ll just clear a spot on the table, Francis . . .”

The table is actually two of the B&B’s three dining tables dragged into a central column. Covered with a patchwork of white tablecloths, it is littered with opened wine bottles and emptied bread baskets, which Gaehod collects as he speaks.

“I’m so glad the two of you could join us. So nice to have young people tonight. I’m rather old-fashioned, you see, and fond of the old rites and rituals. This is Walpurgis Eve, the night before May Day, and I am long in the habit of marking the occasion in the old style with whatever guests my humble establishment has collected for the evening. I hope you’ll join our feast?”

Dominic and I continue to stand, silent and confounded. We nod, all our questions in our eyes.

Maeve jumps up to take the wine bottles from Gaehod’s hands, and he gestures for Dysart to put the massive wooden platter into the cleared spot. The table rearranged, he turns his calm eyes back to us and smiles. “It would appear you got caught in one of our sudden April showers. You’re both quite bedraggled. Francis, do you have something Dominic might wear? Madalene, I’m sure you could assist your goddaughter?”

Madalene's eyes are blank only a moment before a surge of movement sweeps Dominic and me from the table. Madalene and the professor escort us apart—me to Madalene's room, he to Dysart's.

“Is this color too much?” Madalene holds a deep red silk dress out to me from a narrow closet.

“No,” I tell her truthfully. “It's perfect.”

She peels the tattooist's plastic from my back without comment, and tenderly washes the no-longer bleeding skin. It's sore where she touches it, but her eyes meet mine in the mirror, and we both smile. She zips the dress over the bright black lines and turns me full to face the mirror. Crimson flows across my body like a living thing, pouring over my breasts in subtle pleats, and lying flat against my belly. It both molds and reveals me, and the color is divine.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

Madalene fusses over me for half an hour, but I enjoy it. I feel like an American stereotype—a homecoming queen, or a bride. I tell her I don't wear foundation, but she proves herself a magician in her preferred media, applying a weightless patina of blended neutral hues and contouring shades to my pale skin. “It's going to take a little getting used to,” she says, holding my eyes in the mirror. I walk downstairs on her arm.

Dominic makes a funny little noise—a sort of strangled gasp—when I reenter the dining room. Even if I hadn't enjoyed Madalene's ministrations upstairs, Dominic's reaction would have made it worthwhile. Rising to greet me, his strong, capable hands touch the tablecloth, clasp before, and then behind him. He clears his throat.

He's wearing Dysart's jacket, too tight across the shoulder, too short in the arm, and swinging around his lean body like a cape. His blazing eyes leave no doubt he desires me. My gaze, meeting his, is as hungry. Twinned, our desires claim and are claimed.

His eyes touch both what is his and what is mine. As mine do. In a perfect balance of lover and beloved, a knot of interwoven freedom binds us. I hold out my hands to him, and he takes them gratefully, twisting his strong fingers into mine.

Dysart has dragged up two more chairs, which he points to from his spot in the back corner. “Now have a seat, and let’s all catch up on each other’s stories!”

“Yes, all right,” Dominic agrees, and we sit down together, our hands still clasped beneath the table.

“The last time any of us saw you,” the genial doctor chides Dominic, “you were in the hospital recovering from a nasty head trauma. They were starting you on a new thiamine protocol overnight, so I was eager to see you, but when I arrived at the start of visiting hours, the charge nurse said you’d checked yourself out against medical advice. Dominic, there’s so much we could learn from your recovery . . . tests we should run, assessments . . .”

“I know. I wasn’t thinking like a scientist, I guess.”

“No.”

“I was just grateful you’d left word for us,” Maeve interrupts.

“I . . .”

“Darling girl, that—Clare, was it—the nurse?” She glances across the table to Dysart, who nods confirmation. “Clare. She gave us this number. Said it was where you had been staying.” Maeve burbles on, “But Gaehod told us, when we phoned, that you had been missing for almost a week. We drove out hoping to find you here. Or along the way.”

“We?”

“Dr. Dysart was kind enough to drive me. I’m just terrified by the roads here! They’re so narrow, and all unmarked and confusing.”

“The roads *are* different”—Madalene nods—“they’re really all tunnels through stone or grass. And I don’t think I’ve used my rearview once!”

“No,” Dominic agrees, “because it’s to your left. But I thought you were leaving for New York, Madalene?” Something in Dominic’s voice lilts Bengali to my ear.

“Not till Monday,” Madalene purrs back.

Gaehod returns from the kitchen with a heavy, steaming tray, and Dominic springs to help him. In the chaos, while fragrant plates are passed around the table, Madalene excuses herself to take a call from someone with a cat’s name.

When everyone lands again, Dominic has dragged the room’s last table up to make space for all the food, and Dysart has moved eagerly from Gaehod’s right to his left beside Maeve. As plate after plate of food is passed around the table, everyone relaxes and begins to float on the smells and tastes, the light and promises of the night.

“I don’t know how Gaehod does it,” Maeve marvels, looking at the loaded table. “He must have been cooking for weeks, and I can’t imagine you can buy dried morels locally.” Gaehod waves the praise away, but the food is truly sumptuous, gratifying to look at and delicious, and the wine weaves the tastes and people together in easy loops. Under the table, my legs press against Dominic’s like roots around rock, anchoring me. I am ready to be alone with him.

The room is filled with the warm glow of wine-flushed cheeks, candles, and conversations allowed to wander and twine. When dessert—a delicious rose-infused cake—is finished, Dysart

sets aside his wineglass and pours burgundy into his water tumbler. He climbs a little blearily to his feet, glass raised. “To love!” he declares.

“Yes,” Gaehod says, looking across the table to us. “To love, because we are powerful in love, especially on this night, halfway between perfect balance and the longest day. Love reinvents us tonight. Makes us angelic, titanic.”

“Here, here!” Dysart roars and bumps his tumbler to Maeve’s glass. Gaehod salutes Madalene with his teacup, and Dominic’s deep eyes hold mine as we raise our wine to one another. But Dysart reaches across the table to clink both our glasses and then to Madalene’s, and what began as a simple toast becomes a tangled dance of arms as we each find every other glass to touch.

“To love!” Dysart cries. “Logarithmically!”

And we all drink.

Dysart fills his tumbler again, and surveys the small room. “You have quite the full house tonight, Innkeep. Will you have a room for all of us?”

“I believe so. If Dominic and Olivia will share a room?” His shrewd eyes hook mine and I nod. “I’ll open the third floor. The room up there doesn’t get used much, a bit old-fashioned, really, the bridal suite, but it will have to do. Shall I show you two up?”

Dominic and I rise to follow our host, but Dysart, despite the fact that he’s slipped his chair much closer to Maeve’s, begins a slow, ironic applause, grinning.

“Weren’t you the man just toasting love?” Dominic asks archly.

“I was. It’s true. But pure, true, undying love and ‘going upstairs’ are two very different things, my boy.”

“They don’t have to be.” Maeve speaks so quietly I scarcely hear her, but it silences the room. “Good night, my dears,” she says.

Her words slip under me like the tiny, washing waves on a pebbled shore. I slip my hand into Dominic’s proffered elbow and follow Gaehod upstairs, floating on the smiles and waves of Dysart and Maeve standing beneath us.

Gaehod stops on the second landing and touches my hand. “Olivia, I’m expecting a significant uptick in new arrivals at my hotel in the coming year. I wonder if you’re looking for work?”

I am dumbstruck. “I lost . . .”

Dominic’s blue eyes flicker from Gaehod’s to mine. “I could get a job at St. James,” he says.

“They’re doing such important research there.” Gaehod’s voice is soft, but it holds Dominic completely. “Potentially very beneficial to so many, I think, here and elsewhere.”

I watch the two men, eyes locked like dancers. “You might both split your time,” Gaehod suggests, “between Cashel and Dublin, if Olivia consents to work with me.”

Gaehod and Dominic are watching me closely, and I see myself reflected in their eyes. I was invisible when I entered the hospital. Is enough to have met the terms of Gaehod’s test? Light that feeds a leaf can kill the root. “I’d like that,” I say.

Gaehod ushers us into a small, pitched-roof room whose sole window offers an unobstructed view of the rock. Dominic and I stand together, looking out at it, holding hands. A small rain falls faintly through the starry, blue Irish night, against the illuminated Rock of Cashel, on the graves behind the abbey, and into the dark, swollen Atlantic. Dominic rubs between his eyebrows.

“Can you see that?” he asks me.

I follow the tilt of his chin into the partial dark between the electric lights illuminating the rock’s stone towers, and our snug room. Ophelia stands under a dripping tree, in the hungry grass, her pale throat elongated and hideous, her tiny body obscenely distorted by a belly so distended it pulls her body toward the ground.

“What?” I whisper back.

“The lilacs growing under that tree?”

I look again. Ophelia has become a hungry ghost, faded so thin she has slipped from the crypt that imprisoned her, and now steals into houses and shops, breeding sinners, an immortal, howling emptiness creeping over lives. Nothing in this world can fill her.

“They’re violets, I think,” I say.

Lightning cracks the night, open to the heavens.

Look up! I psycast to my bat-winged, baby-faced sister.

But she's climbing down the bell tower wall, feet facing the moon, and her black hair, pulled tight as a violin strings, whispers back to me *I need the light to hunt by*.

"Olivia? Dominic?" Gaehod says quietly. We turn around. He is standing in the doorway, his face almost obscured by the two white-wrapped packages he holds.

"Your things," he says simply, and places them—one long, shallow and light, one compact and heavy—on the bed, like offerings on an altar. "Give them to each other."

Gaehod leaves, and we stand motionless, staring at the bed.

My wings and Dominic's life vitae.

Dominic bends down and picks up the heavy box. "Olivia?" he says softly. I meet his clear eyes as he puts the bound stack of scroll, tablet, and sheaf in my hand. "You should have these."

"I can't read them."

"I know."

I hold it against my beating heart with one hand and pick up the other package. It weighs nothing in contrast.

"I didn't know these survived," I say, "but I don't want them anymore."

He takes them reverently. "I can't use them," he says.

“I know.”

Then he kisses me.

Standing by the window, holding my freedom, his life tucked against my breast, he kisses me. His mouth is strong and soft, and eloquent, and I am keenly aware of how my flesh imprisons me, creates a barrier between us. His strong kiss deepens and hardens, feeling it too, trying to eat it away. I slip my hands under Dysart’s borrowed jacket and slide them up the hard, broad landscape of his back. His hands travel from my shoulders down my spine, and I wince. He looks into my eyes questioningly, and I touch his proud face with my fingertips, tracing the worried lines that score it.

“Your back?” he asks.

“I got a tattoo today,” I say. “It still hurts.”

“Will you show me?”

And suddenly I—who have been looked at forever, who has fed on the hunger in the eyes of men and changed to please them—am terrified of being seen. He searches my face. I turn my back to him, and he pulls the zipper of my borrowed dress down. His trembling fingers feel too large pushing open the dress halves, and I am frightened. He slides my dress forward, and the exquisite red silk falls from me in a stiff puddle on the ground. I am naked now.

“Wings,” he whispers.

“Over a very old scar,” I say.

His fingers trace the fresh lines with wonder. “They’re perfect,” he whispers.

“They don’t work as well,” I tease, but I turn to face him.

My exposed body throws a shadow against the wall behind him, but it mingles with his to form a single dancing darkness on the white plaster. He looks momentarily simpleminded. The sound he makes is something between a whimper and a growl, savage and awed.

He undresses, and I run unashamed eyes over him, tracking the twining strength of his masculine arms and legs. He should always be naked. His body was created for this. He comes to me, circles my waist low, beneath the unbleeding, black ink wings, and pulls me hard against him. I gasp at the feel of his bare flesh on mine. A thousand centers of sensation burst throughout me. No wonder man is so helpless in this.

His mouth finds mine again, and even our exploring hands fall still in the pure communion of our mouths and skin touching. His lips are caressing, but the force of his restraint sends tremors through him. He is afraid of hurting me, afraid for me, and I am afraid, too. But fear is grown familiar, and this is all so new.

Our kisses are a feast tasted, but not consumed. Every mouthful makes the hunger grow, and I feel it—not in my gums, not in the hollow places of my mouth—but in all the full and swelling places of my body. At the peaks of my shuddering breasts and the depths of my pulsing sex, a flameless fire licks me. Although desire stakes me to him, my body begins to twist.

Finally, I break the kiss, gasping. But his lips burn down my throat to engulf a shivering nipple, and my sex ignites. My breath comes in tiny pants through kiss-scorched lips showering slow sparks down my body. And all my awareness is caught in the storm flashing from my suckled nipple to deep between my legs. When his strong fingers take my other breast I cry out, and he takes his lips and hands away.

He lies on his back in our bed and pulls me to him. I straddle his strong hips with my knees, and the hard tower of his cock stands shockingly vertical from the landscape of his body. I'm uncertain what to do, and lean over him, knowing his kiss will guide me. But I don't need it to. My flaming nipples graze his chest, his fingers make strong circles on my ass, and his cock touches a focus of sensation that almost blinds me. This is the sister locus of the inferno in my sex, a sentinel of pleasure—precise, minute, and raging. I scrape it against the shaft of his straining cock and sob with wanting more.

But he will not rush this. Although his panting chest moves swift and hard beneath me, although I see the agony of his restraint in the rigid cords of his shoulders, he does kiss me again. My living sex shudders. I feel coiled too tight, and every twist of my writhing body, pushing cock against sex, breasts against chest, no matter which direction I turn, only tightens the spiral. It is wound both ways, and there is no loosing it save the final torque which will release and launch and fragment it.

He kisses me, and my blind hips answer the slow suck of his summoning mouth, pulling my back into an arch and curling it forward again, dragging the opening of my searing sex and its twitching sentry along the pulsing length of his cock. His lips move imperceptibly against mine, no longer kissing, whispering, praying.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I say. And I do.

He kisses me again. “I will love you forever.”

“I will not live forever.”

“That's life, I guess,” he says, smiling. And it is.

“I will always love you,” I say. This is my immortality and my immutability.

I wind my hungry body under his strength. He moves over me until the tip of his stone-hard cock kisses the mouth of my liquid sex. He does not move, but I slowly raise my willing hips to him. His body plunges into mine, opens me. His hard arms are trembling, and his eyes, gazing into mine, are fringed with fear for me. It does hurt. The wings on my back against the mattress hurt and the inexorable advance of his cock into my sex hurts, but I want this.

He holds his pulsing body still inside mine and drops his seeking lips once more to my full and swollen breast. His warm mouth there raises a radiating heat in my stretched-wide sex, and I let the desire mount in me until my helpless body convulses, clutching at his rooted cock. My sex sucks at the flesh that chokes it, pulls in more than it can hold, and his body answers, pushing hard.

Every place his body touches me ignites. He tries to kiss me, but our breathing comes too quickly, our bodies drive too hard. So he looks at me, eyes in mine, as his flesh is in mine. I grip his arms with human hands and wrap my clay feet behind his back. I am time and timeless, freedom and surrender, body and soul.

His perfect face is twisted, focused on me, but mindless, and I am caught as well, release and restraint, the orgasm climbing higher. His cock is ruthless now, no longer striving for gentleness, but only for reunion. And I grind my sex against him. I want everything and nothing else. My body summons his invading sex, my breasts lunge toward the crushing chest.

Our breathing is tortured and entwined. The pleasure climbs through me, balances—and for a moment I am dying—locked in a rigor of agony, mortality made too real too soon. Pleasure grips my belly in a cruel fist, and a glory of trembling takes me. I can’t breathe, am howling, have found the perfect totality of sensation, and scream to be released. My sex spasms, pleasure leaps. Dominic cries out. Another seizure takes my sex, washing me in the pure free-fall of orgasm flying through me.

This is love. This is how mortals live with our too-few chances to bridge the rack we’re stretched on. This is how we look death in the face. With no Heaven I can ascend to and no God to cast me out, I stand, briefly, for a moment, in the love of a man and the joy of our bodies.

Then I am falling. I am falling and see everything, always, one last time, falling into sleep. Dominic and I will buy a house between Dublin and Cashel. We will be happy there, living and working together. But right now, my secret sisters, safe in their places underground, are welcoming our first new guest. I notice she looks like me.

Dominic's mother and Dysart drink whiskey in the bar, while Madalene puts a call in to her son across the ocean. Outside my window, Ophelia's ghost whispers filth into the Irish night. But Alyx, high above her, sleeps peacefully at last. And Gaehod, below us all, in the owner's cluttered deep basement suite, writes to the undiscovered damned of the twenty-first century: *My darling ones, Reborn and Undead, Damned, Cursed, and Misbegotten—Hell calls her absent children home.*